Zoo eyes possible airport expansion with uncertainty

By STEVE CULPEPPER
Advocate staff writer

When consultants for Metro Airport scoured the woods and waters around the airport for endangered animals who might be threatened by a proposed 8,200-foot runway, they found none.

That's because nobody counted the 31 threatened and endangered species that live and breed inside the protective boundaries of the Greater Baton Rouge Zoo.

If the runway is ever built, the zoo would be 5,000 feet from the runway tip and just 500 feet from the flight path centerline.

An environmental impact assessment of the airport's expansion plans—which include buying out nearly 600 homes, building a large new midfield terminal and the new runway—concluded that the expansion "will not ... adversely impact any public park, recreation area, wildlife or waterfowl refuge of national, state or local significance.

The LPA Group of Tampa, Fla., the consultant hired to do the environmental assessment, asked both the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the state Office of Wildlife and Fisheries to scout out any possible threatened or endangered species in the area of the airport. Both agencies responded in the negative, because under current procedures neither agency is set up to consider endangered and threatened species living inside zoos.

However, the closeness of the zoo to the proposed runway seems to be nearly unique in this country and now, after the consultant's environmental assessment is complete, both wildlife agencies say the zoo and its animals probably should be considered after all.

In response to the environmental assessment, Charles B. Voll, acting associate regional director of resources management for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, recently wrote the consultant that the scope of the study should be expanded "to include noise impacts on the Greater Baton Rouge Zoo."

Voll wrote: "It is especially important to thoroughly evaluate noise impacts on the zoo since the zoo houses 31 threatened and endangered species and participates in 22 Species Survival Plans. Species survival plans are carefully planned blueprints for the survival of selected endangered species in captivity."
A pair of Ed's Deer, native to Burma, peer out of their confines at the SR Zoo.

Zoo

Dr. David Hamilton, director of research at the L.S.G. School of Veterinary Science, reported that the increased use of jet airliners and threatened species of animals has led to a dramatic increase in the number of bird strikes at airports. Hamilton emphasized that this phenomenon would begin affecting commercial flights when

Dr. Hamilton agreed that a more extensive environmental assessment needs to be done on the project, at least as it concerns the air.

A similar analysis was conducted by the airport's noise management department. They noted that the jet noise is becoming a major concern for the airport's birds. The studies indicated that the noise levels are significantly higher than those of the short takeoff and landing (STOL) aircraft, which are more common in the area.

In response to this trend, the airport has implemented a new noise management plan aimed at reducing the impact of jet noise on wildlife. The plan includes the following measures:

- **Dusk and Dawn Rules**: Flights are restricted during these times to reduce the disturbance to birds.
- **Flight Altitude Adjustments**: Flights are diverted to higher altitudes to reduce the noise footprint on the ground.
- **Noise Abatement Procedures**: Flights are guided through specific altitudes and speeds to minimize the noise impact.
- **Airport Bird Monitoring**: Regular surveys are conducted to assess the effectiveness of the noise management strategies.

These measures are expected to significantly reduce the disturbance to birds and help protect their habitat. The airport has also collaborated with local wildlife organizations to ensure the long-term conservation of avian species in the area.

Endangered species of birds are currently under threat in many areas, and urgent action is needed to prevent their extinction. The public is encouraged to support initiatives that aim to protect endangered species. Together, we can make a difference in preserving the beauty and diversity of our natural world.

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**Zoo Update**

- **Endangered Species Program**
  - **Species**: Greater Raton Rouge Zoo has been successful in breeding programs for many endangered species.
  - **Conservation Efforts**: The zoo's efforts have contributed to the survival of several endangered species, including the black-footed ferret, whooping crane, and American bison.

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**Staff Notes**

- **Photo**: Photograph by Bill Johnson

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**Quote**

"I feel sad to see this beautiful animal," said a zoo visitor. "I hope something can be done to protect them."