Local zoo not biggest but a good one, says director

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BAKER — It doesn’t have all the frills, but Director George Felton says the Greater Baton Rouge Zoo is one of the best in the nation in terms of the quality of exhibits and personnel.

Felton has put almost 20 years of hard work into achieving that quality.

“This is how I feel about it: If a person likes ice cream, we’ve got the best quality that you can buy right here. But it’s plain vanilla and on a cone,” says Felton.

“If you want a banana split, you add all the extras. But it’s the quality of the ice cream that counts, and we have just as good here as anywhere.”

Since the 100-acre zoo opened on Easter Sunday in 1970, the management and small staff have strived for quality.

“I would never have just a postage-stamp exhibit — a little bit of everything,” said Felton, who has been working with the zoo since the planning stages in 1966. “So what we have, we do right.”

Although Felton denies credit for the zoo’s good reputation, his hard work is reflected in the awards which crowd the walls of his cubbyhole office along with photographs of favorite animals.

Felton recently was elected vice president of the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums, the largest professional organization for zoos in the world. It is a prestigious office and will lead to his presidency of the organization in two years.

“I think the zoo is recognized for excellence by the mere fact that I was elected vice president of this organization,” said Felton. “It’s not me; it’s a reflection on the zoo. If you don’t have a quality institution, you won’t be nominated for such an office.”

In 1981, the association passed a resolution requiring all of its member zoos to become accredited, a process that requires approval on everything from animal care to financial support, Felton said.

The Baton Rouge zoo was accredited by these standards in 1977, and was the 19th in the country to achieve the accreditation. If a zoo does not meet the association’s standards by December 1985, it can lose its permits to import animals or to exchange endangered species with other zoos.

The Baton Rouge zoo also has the approval of the United States Department of Agriculture for importing hoofstock. It is one of only 42 zoos in the nation which enjoy that status.

Much of the zoo’s reputation is built on its excellent hoofstock collection, which is Felton’s pride and joy. The zoo is particularly noted for its success in mixing different species of hoofstock.

“We probably have the best exotic antelope collection for a medium-size zoo in the U.S.,” Felton said.

“But we also have a good cat collection, both large and small cats, and we have a very good primate collection. We’re just starting on our bird collection,” he added, “but soon we hope to have that on a par with our other exhibits.”

Felton said the zoo has had tremendous success with its breeding programs, and all of the 800 specimens here have successfully reproduced, except for the elephants, rhinoceroses and cheetahs.

The Baton Rouge zoo is one of only a handful of zoos in the nation that have successfully bred Siberian tigers, which are on the endangered species list.

Where the zoo is lacking is in a reptile collection, Felton said. That’s a situation he hopes to remedy if BREC, which funds the zoo, gets its tax package passed on April 7.

The recreation commission is asking voters to pass two proposals, one of which would renew a 1-mill property tax and add an additional mill for operation and maintenance. The second proposal calls for an additional 2-mill tax for capital improvements.

The zoo would realize about $2 million from the tax, Felton said, and that money would be used to build a reptile exhibit and to rejuvenate other exhibits.

Felton said the total capital investment in the 14-year-old facility is less than $4 million, including the animals.

The zoo’s animal collection alone is valued at approximately $750,000, the director said. Including salaries for the full-time staff of 30, the zoo operates on an annual budget of approximately $870,000.

A zoo’s viability is judged by attendance. A successful zoo is one which attracts as many visitors as the population of its metropolitan area, Felton said. Attendance was 425,000 at the Baton Rouge zoo last year, far surpassing the East Baton Rouge Parish population of approximately 370,000.

Comparatively, Felton said the zoo in Brownsville, Texas, attracted 301,000 visitors last year. It has an annual budget of $1.25 million and 74 full-time employees.

These facilities are considered medium-sized, Felton said. A large facility, like the famous San Diego Zoo, has an annual budget of about $39 million, he said.

Felton attributes the zoo’s accomplishments to the dedicated staff and volunteers.

Some of the zookeepers, such as elephant trainer Allen Campbell and general curator Ronnie Young, are sought by other zoos for their expertise.

“And we could not operate without our volunteers,” Felton said, adding that the zoo’s docent program provided tour service to more than 800 groups last year.

As cities continue to grow, Felton said, the role of zoos is changing.

“One of our main jobs today is education,” Felton said. “Zoo is going to be the only salvation for some species. And if we can save the animals and make people aware of the plight of wildlife, then we’re doing our job.”