

Alderman has Calgary Zoo's back

By DAVE DORMER, CALGARY SUN

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The city needs to fight back against negative publicity directed at the Calgary Zoo, one alderman said yesterday.

"I've had it up to my teeth with these special interest groups targeting and trashing the reputation of the Calgary Zoo," said Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart.

"We can't turn this into another tar sands issue where these people get way, way ahead of the communications plan and everyone remains silent and don't stand up for the zoo," she said. "We need to put a stop to it."

Zoocheck Canada has been critical of the facility in recent years following several animal deaths and other incidents.

In 2007, a hippo died after being improperly transported by truck from the U.S. Then, in May 2008, 41 cownose stingrays died due to a lack of oxygen in their tanks. Two more died in March 2009.

A baby elephant died of a viral infection in November 2008 and in June, a gorilla was seen holding a knife left in its pen by a worker.

Last week, a worker was suspended for two days after a female South American capybara -- part of the rodent family -- was crushed by a hydraulic door. "It's kind of like death by a thousand cuts," said Colley-Urquhart.

"One animal dies, then you have a group of stingrays that die and they keep track of this on a scorecard then clump it all together and say 'look at these people, they're running a bad business.' This is unfair and it's unacceptable."

In an effort to silence the critics, Calgary Zoo president and CEO Dr. Clement Lanthier announced Saturday he will ask the two bodies which accredit zoos -- the Canadian Association of Zoos and Aquariums and the Association of Zoos and Aquariums -- to do an independent audit of its policies and practices.

The zoo brings worldwide acclaim to the city, said Colley-Urquhart. "It's one of the greatest assets this city has," she said. "We can't have the solid reputation of the zoo, that has been garnered over many, many years, targeted in this way and we need Calgarians to stand up for the zoo."

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