

TOURISM AUSTRALIA *Accessible* STORYTELLERS

SYDNEY ZOO

Jake Burgess

Wearing its western Sydney roots firmly on its suburban sleeve, the all-new Sydney Zoo opened in late 2019 as the first major zoo to open in Sydney in 100 years. With a mission to not only protect species but to educate, the zoo offers educational programs with syllabus-linked workshops for pre-schoolers through to high school students. Sustainability, conservation and accessibility lay at the core of Sydney Zoo's ethos with the entire 42 acres designed to provide maximum viewing, learning and entertainment opportunities.

The zoo was developed over six years with a strong focus on inclusion. Clever habitat design provides a more immersive and engaging experience

than that which traditional zoos offer. Low-level viewpoints are designed to be viewed from the height of a wheelchair. Where tall fences are required for safety or animal welfare purposes, low viewing panels are installed. The zoo is built on level ground which means no hills or steps to negotiate for wheelchairs, mobility scooters and prams.

Managing Director Jake Burgess, a passionate conservationist with degrees in land management and marine sciences along with a background in equity management, is the concept designer behind Sydney Zoo. For the past five years he has lived and breathed every inch of the zoo and finds much satisfaction in seeing the local community embrace the zoo as its own.

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‘A big part of our ethos is providing world-class facilities to contribute to improving the Western Sydney community’s sense of place,’ Jake said. ‘In designing a new zoo, which only opened three years ago, we were in a privileged position to design the zoo with accessibility front of mind.’

Western Sydney locals have embraced the zoo, using it for outdoor recreation, just as they do their local park, with the added attraction of seeing their favourite animals whom they have formed a connection with.



‘We’ve got a strong member base, and there are at least half a dozen members with annual passes who live in the area and come to the zoo every day of the week. It’s such a great place to bring someone with special needs for an hour or two. Seeing them here constantly brings home the importance of what the zoo means in the local neighbourhood context,’ said Jake.

The zoo is home to more than 4,000 animals grouped into five precincts: Africa, Asia, Australia, Aquarium and Primates. Visitors can see Australia’s largest reptile and nocturnal house along with Sydney’s only safari-like experience from the African Boardwalk. A giant Ferris wheel offers a rare view of the zoo while five food outlets are located throughout the park including the Lion Deck Café where lunch comes with a view of cheetahs, lions and zebras. Free Aboriginal cultural talks offer insights into Indigenous relationships with animals and Keeper talks provide photo and feeding opportunities.


Most close-up animal encounter experiences are fully accessible, free wheelchair hire is available, mobility

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scooters can be hired for a nominal fee and Assistance Dogs are welcome (by prior arrangement). Companion Card holders are given free entry.

Regular events provide a convenient local entertainment alternative, some of which are held exclusive for mobility-impaired guests. GLOW 2022 saw more than 100,000 visitors attend the biggest and brightest light festival in Western Sydney, which included an exclusive accessible event for 2,000 guests and a wheelchair-friendly ice rink.

Partnering with organisations such as Ronald McDonald House Charities, Variety, Afford and What Ability disability support service enables scope for inclusive events and accessibility opportunities, with Sydney Zoo offering free entry to partner events.

‘Sydney Zoo’s generosity is making a big difference and helps us bring happiness to lives of people living with a disability,’ said Belinda Woolford, CEO of What Ability. 

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