

The Boston Globe

Two young bears will get new home at Stoneham zoo



John Linehan, head of Zoo New England, after the groundbreaking for Stone Zoo's \$750,000 black bear exhibit. (JOANNE RATHE/GLOBE STAFF)

February 12, 2008

The two black bears were orphaned when they were just weeks old, saved from the north Georgia woods after their mother was killed in 2006. The cubs, named Smoky and Bubba, were taken in by Appalachian Bear Rescue in Tennessee with the hope that one day they could be returned to the wild.

But as they grew into 250-pound adolescents, it became clear that the bears had lost their fear of humans and would be unable to function in the woods. Instead, Smoky and Bubba will move to Stoneham, where their residence will become the centerpiece of a new \$750,000 exhibit at Stone Zoo scheduled to open this spring.

"They will be perfect for the zoo," said Jack Burgin, president of Bear Rescue, which is based in the Great Smoky Mountains. "They are just about the most playful bears I've ever seen."

The 3,000 square-foot exhibit will be on the site that was once home to Major, a polar bear who died in 2000.

The black bear habitat, which is scheduled to open Memorial Day weekend, will include a waterfall, three wading pools, boulders, grass, and several evergreens, said Marshall K. Judges, chief operating officer of Zoo New England.

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