

News Release
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Rock Island County Forest Preserve District appoints Lee Jackson new director of Niabi Zoo

ROCK ISLAND, III. (April 19, 2016) – Niabi Zoo has a new leader. After an extensive national search, the zoo’s oversight committee on Tuesday recommended the Forest Preserve Commission appoint Lee Jackson, a veteran administrator and zoo handler, as the new director of the zoo.

Lee most recently served as a curator at the Smithsonian National Zoo in Washington, D.C., and has extensive experience at multiple zoological institutions across the Midwest, including the National Mississippi River Museum & Aquarium in Dubuque, Iowa.

“I’m thrilled and honored to become part of the Niabi family, and I am very excited about working with such a dedicated, talented group of professionals,” said Jackson. “Niabi has tremendous potential and I have no doubt that it will be a leading regional institution soon. On a more personal level, I am also very excited about moving back to the Midwest and being closer to family.”

Jackson will begin June 6 and replaces interim director Dan Meates, who has led the zoo since September 2015. Meates will continue to be integral to the Zoo leadership team, reallocating his time to more daily engagement with the animals.

“Throughout his career, Lee has been very committed to public education and raising awareness of conservation issues. He believes strongly in the role zoos and aquariums can, and should, play in conservation,” said Forest Preserve District Director Jeff Craver. “We are excited for him to re-establish roots here in the Midwest and begin working with the rest of the Niabi team to help us continue our mission to educate visitors about wildlife and enhance conservation efforts.”

In his most recent post as curator at the Smithsonian National Zoo, Jackson managed a large and diverse collection of animals and plants and was responsible for many managerial duties, including the hiring of new staff, the development of new job descriptions and the setting of departmental priorities.

Prior to his work at the Smithsonian National Zoo, he spent more than 11 years working as the Director of Living Collections at the National Mississippi River Museum & Aquarium in Dubuque. While there, he served as a member of the construction committee, coordinating the activities of architects, engineers, contractors and artists in the creation of animal exhibits and life support areas. He also developed, acquired and maintained an animal collection of more than 250 species of fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds, mammals and invertebrates. He played a pivotal role in the facility becoming accredited with the Association of Zoos & Aquariums (AZA) in 2008.

Jackson has also held positions at St. Louis Zoo, Indianapolis Zoo, the John G. Shedd Aquarium in Chicago, Brookfield Zoo, and the University of Dubuque where he taught a course in zoo and aquarium biology.

He earned his bachelor's degree in Biology and Anthropology from Northeastern Illinois University and currently serves as interim chair to the AZA's Freshwater Fish Taxon Advisory Group Steering Committee.

"The oversight committee, established last fall, set its first major goal to find the best director for Niabi Zoo," said Joe Taylor, chairman of the Niabi Zoo Oversight Committee. "The extensive search has met that goal in the selection of Lee Jackson. Lee has a broad range of direct zoo experience ranging from Dubuque to DC. He has a strong background in Midwest zoos – and a particular passion for Niabi. He is skilled, approachable, competent and knowledgeable and will be an asset not just to the zoo but to the entire Quad Cities community."

The Niabi Zoo Oversight Committee was created to assist the Forest Preserve Commission implement the strategic action plan that was approved in 2015. It consists of Craver, Taylor and three other community leaders with experience in not-for-profit governance, fundraising, animal management and veterinary sciences.

Niabi Zoo, which is governed by the Rock Island County Forest Preserve District, opened for the 2016 season on April 11. It provides visitors from Quad City and beyond an opportunity to explore more than 40 acres of animal exhibits, including over 330 animals in more than 140 species from around the world.

For more information about Niabi, its exhibits and upcoming events, visit NiabiZoo.com.

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About Rock Island County Forest Preserve District

The mission of the Rock Island County Forest Preserve District is to maintain and acquire lands and facilities in Rock Island County with the intent to restore, conserve, and protect the waters, forests, and prairies for the purpose of conservation, education and recreation for its residents with fiscal responsibility. The Rock Island County Forest Preserve District is governed by the Forest Preserve Commission. Today the Rock Island County Forest Preserve Commission governs six forest preserve sites totaling 2,529 acres. For more information on the Rock Island County Forest Preserve District please visit www.ricfpd.org or call (309) 795-1040.