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Tons of Fun
at the Zoo!

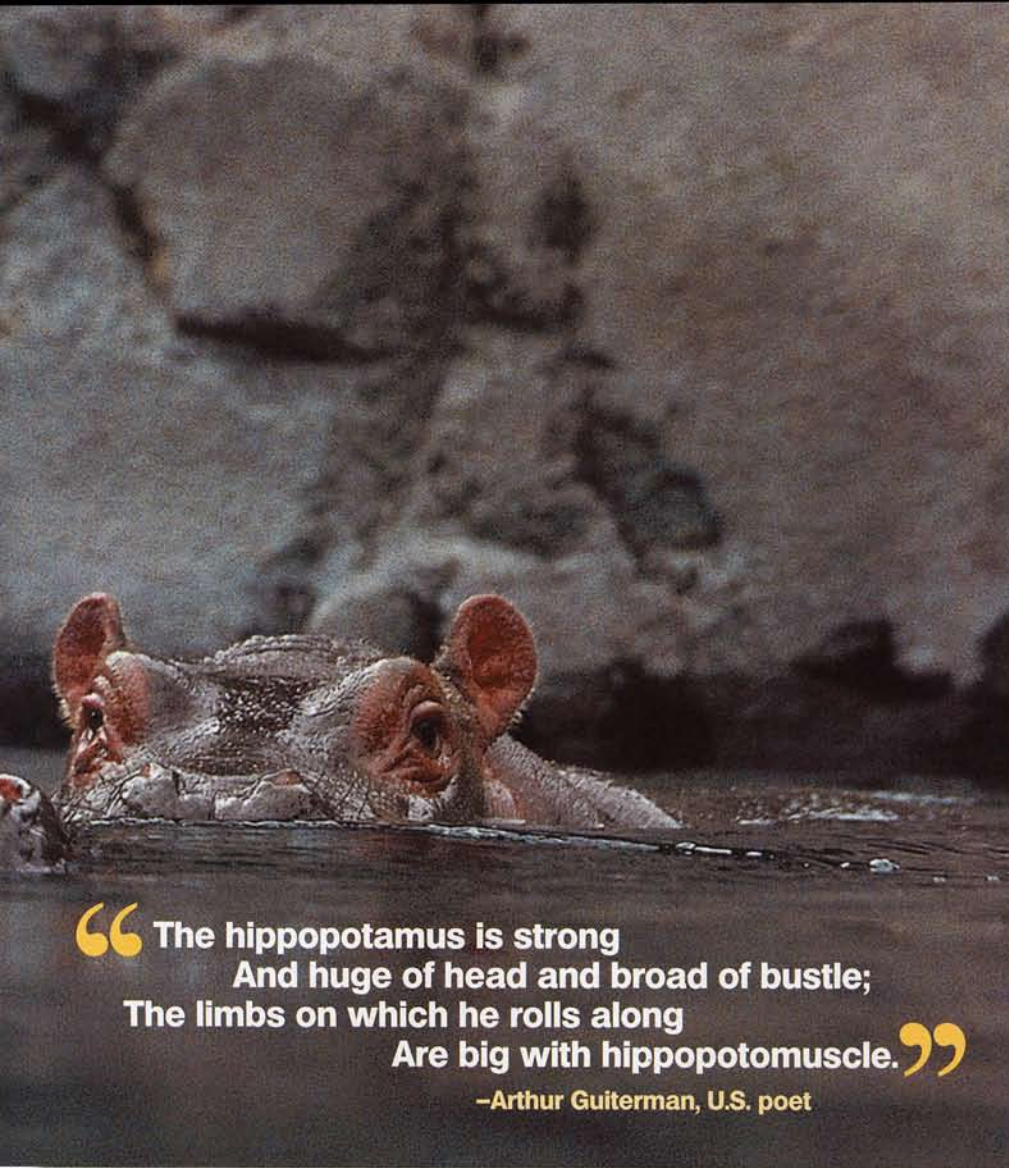
Heartily HIPPO



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BY LYNNE FRIEDMANN While camping along a river in Senegal, Africa, Carmi Penny, curator of mammals at the San Diego Zoo, had a near-hippo encounter. “We found a nice, gentle slope and pitched our tents,” he recalls. “But we soon realized the slope was one of several hippo haul-out areas.” River hippos are very vocal, so during the night the campers were riveted by every grunt. They repeatedly awoke with a start, wondering, “Are they going to haul out?” Fortunately, the hippos remained in the river, but there wasn’t a lot of shut-eye for the group that night!

These behemoths of the African plains have been both feared and revered since ancient times. They are represented in Greek and Roman art and play a somewhat sinister role in Egyptian mythology. A passage in the Book of Job in the Bible describes them, and a hippo named Obaysch caused a sensation in Victorian society when he came to the London Zoo in 1850. Hippos have been featured in books, cartoons, songs, and films, and they even have dedicated fans on the Internet. In fact, it’s hard to imagine who hasn’t heard of a hippo!



“The hippopotamus is strong
And huge of head and broad of bustle;
The limbs on which he rolls along
Are big with hippopotomuscle.”

—Arthur Guiterman, U.S. poet

A LARGE PRESENCE

River hippos once ranged in Africa, throughout the Middle East, and in Europe as far north as England. Today they are only found in East Africa, south of the Sahara. They live in groups of up to 40 animals, referred to as a pod, herd, school, or—imaginatively—a bloat.

The river hippo and its cousin the pygmy hippo are the only two species remaining from the many hippo-like ancestors that once roamed the planet. The more diminutive pygmy hippos, found in West Africa, tend to be solitary and inhabit streams and rivers in forests. They are so reclusive that reports of them didn't appear in scientific literature until the late 1800s.

Despite the many fanciful depictions of endearingly chubby hippos, these powerful animals can be dangerous. Statistically, river hippos are known to kill more people in Africa than predators like lions. But why is that, since they're herbivores?

River hippo males are highly territorial, and females protecting calves can be aggressive. They will chase other animals down and overturn boats that come too close. Even with their tremendous girth and short legs, hippos can outrun a human on land, at speeds of 18 to 30 miles per hour. The good news is they can only maintain these bursts of speed for a few hundred yards. Curator Carmi Penny remembers that “One of my closest brushes with a hippo was on a ranch in Australia. The hippo didn't like us being there and let us know it.” Penny characterizes that chase as “partially on foot; partially in vehicle.”

Pygmy hippos are forest animals and more solitary than river hippos. They also spend less time in the water and, unlike their bigger cousins, have almost no webbing between their toes.

THE LARGE AND SMALL OF HIPPOS AT THE ZOO

If you would like to have a close-up experience with hippos without having to run for cover, the San Diego Zoo has both: colossal river hippos in Ituri Forest, and petite—by comparison—pygmy hippos in Monkey Trails and Forest Tales.

Jabba and Funani are the Zoo's river hippo pair. Jabba, a 24-year-old bull, and Funani, a 23-year-old cow, came to San Diego in 1995. They're middle-aged by hippo standards, since hippos can live 40 to 50 years in zoos. Funani's name means “I love you” in Zulu. Jabba's name is less romantic, although entirely fitting. “He's named after Jabba the Hut in *Star Wars*,” said keeper Jama Kasowicz.

Their female calf, Jazi, recently moved to a new home at the Ellen Trout Zoo in Texas. Her birth four years ago came as a surprise to keepers. Funani's massive body kept the pregnancy secret, with few visible changes. Then one day, Funani became overly aggressive toward Jabba—so much so that keepers had to separate them. Half an hour later, Jazi was born.

Because male hippos can be aggressive toward juveniles, the mother and calf remained apart from Jabba. Keeping the adults separate also prevents the birth of more baby hippos for the time being. “You don't want to breed hippos unless you



River hippos spend most of their day in the water and are quite at home with their aquatic existence. They are capable of remaining underwater for up to 30 minutes, but it's usually less than that. Long enough to take a nap, though, as Funani and Jabba demonstrate in their Ituri Forest exhibit.

have a place to keep them," said Sue Averill, Ituri Forest area supervisor. Funani and Jazi were taking turns in the Ituri Forest pool with Jabba on a 24-hour rotation, but now Funani and Jabba have the place to themselves.



IT'S A WATERY WORLD The river hippos spend most of their time underwater, often so still they seem like statues. A head bob to the surface typically every three to five minutes raises their nostrils, positioned high on the head, above the water for a breath of air. Submerged, hippos use tiny muscles to clamp their nostrils shut and press their ears flat to keep the water out.

Hippos look improbably buoyant when viewed in their aquatic home. Could this have inspired the Walt Disney ensemble of hippo ballerinas in tiny tutus, performing gravity-defying dance numbers in the 1940 animated film classic *Fantasia*?

Despite their seemingly effortless underwater abilities, an eye is kept on the animals' weight. At the moment, 5,200-pound Jabba is on a diet. "The last time he got on the platform scale, he cracked the frame," said keeper Kasowicz. To pare pounds, Jabba isn't given less food but rather a diet higher in fiber and lower in calories: alfalfa and Bermuda hay, romaine and iceberg lettuce, and herbivore pellets formulated to mix roughage and protein with measured quantities of vitamins. Watermelons and cantaloupes provide a special treat—the hippos chomp them whole.

HIPPUS HAVING A BALL "Hippos are fun to work with," said Kasowicz. "We think of ours as big dogs—they are very docile with us." Like canines, the Zoo's hippos like to chase and push objects. This gave keepers the idea to introduce a Boomer Ball® into the exhibit for environmental enrichment. Made of non-toxic polyethylene, the ball has rigid sidewalls that are resistant—but not impervious—to chewing. The giant 31-inch object floating in the exhibit was an instant hit, but it proved problematic as the hippos enthusiastically pushed the ball against the viewing glass—and scratched it!

River HIPPO

River hippos *Hippopotamus amphibius* live in the rivers and lakes that can accommodate their hefty size. As one of the largest land mammals, along with elephants and rhinos, an adult male river hippo can weigh up to 7,000 pounds and measure 11 feet in length. No wonder they spend most of their time buoyed up by water!

Pygmy HIPPO

Pygmy hippos *Hexaprotodon liberiensis* are smaller and rounder than their river cousins. They weigh up to 600 pounds and are about 5 feet long—positively dainty in comparison! They spend more time on land, and their compact size makes it easier to travel through the forested areas they inhabit.



