

Cleveland Metroparks Zoo's 1959 flood was a lesson

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By James Ewinger, The Plain Dealer

CLEVELAND, Ohio - Can nature interfere with conservation? Yes and that's exactly what happened in 1959, when Big Creek soaked what is now called the Cleveland Metroparks Zoo, killing the entire reptile collection.

The flooding that closed the zoo on Tuesday is a far cry from the events of 1959 because it shut down for a single day and sustained no damage this week.

The zoo did not fully recover from the 1959 deluge until three years later - or 33 years if you accept the notion that the zoo did not have another permanent reptile collection until 1992 when the magnificent RainForest opened.

That exhibit, which is really a self-contained zoo in its own right, was built in/on the Big Creek flood plain.

According to published reports when the RainForest was opening, some of the planners took that into account and built berms and levies into the landscaping so the only water that gets in is invited.

The sensitivity to nature's mercurial side does not end there.

All construction to occur after the big flood addressed the potential for flooding in several ways: isolating the building, elevating it, or placing it somewhere else besides the flood plain.

Meanwhile, the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District is trying to raise the consciousness of average homeowners by pushing ways to mitigate storm-water runoff.

The zoo and contiguous Brookside Reservation are at the bottom of the Big Creek Watershed -- down stream from seven communities that are home to 175,000 people.

All those sidewalks and driveways, the footprint of each house and commercial building, the parking lots and streets, are covering earth that would otherwise absorb rain, melting snow and storm-water runoff.

So when it comes to dumping water in the Metroparks and threatening the zoo, nature has a hand and so do we.