

Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo and Aquarium

Post by "Joshua" of March 8, 2023 at 10:04 PM

Omaha is 100 miles south of the city I grew up in, and its zoo is consistently ranked as one of the best in the nation. It was also a feature of my childhood, and we went several times a year. Among its other achievements--the largest nocturnal exhibit, the largest indoor swamp, one of the largest indoor rainforests and desert domes in the world, the largest glazed geodesic dome on earth, and so forth--was an orangutan who could pick locks.

Every night, zookeepers would close and lock the great ape enclosures and then lock the building they were housed in. Every morning, when they opened the building, they found all of the orangutans loose inside. This went on for some time, until at last they discovered that Fu Manchu, a Sumatran orangutan, was keeping a length of wire along his gumline. When the zookeepers went home for the night, Fu Manchu would set to work with his wire, and pick the lock on the entrance to the orangutan enclosure.

Not only did he grasp the concept of locks and how they work, he also understood that his wire was "contraband" of a sort, and that it needed to stay hidden when not in use. And he understood that his mouth was a good place to hide it--he would always have it with him, and no one would suspect!

The head zookeeper was on the point of firing someone for carelessness before they discovered the real cause.

We were discussing Helen Keller on the chat this evening, and how she came to learn not just superficial things about her environment, but achieved a fully aware understanding of abstract concepts and principles. It seems to me that the brain is thirsty for information, and given the right stuff it finds a way. I can imagine a future intelligent supercomputer being as confused about the human understanding of mathematics as we are about Fu Manchu's grasp of the principles involved in lockpicking.