The Yak has some scoop on poop today. Animal poop, that is. The Detroit Zoo announced earlier this spring that it is planning for a big biodigester. It’s a green or environmentally friendly machine that puts manure, or poop, to use by digesting it (ewww!) and making methane gas as a byproduct while the manure becomes compost. The Detroit Zoo says the building of the biodigester will mean the zoo will be the first in the country to use this unique machine.

The Yak talked with the Detroit Zoological Society’s manager of sustainability (meaning to sustain, or use that doesn’t destroy, but can replenish the environment), Beth Wallace, on the plans underway this spring. Beth told us that this machine will save money, but more importantly, create fuel to power the Ruth Roby Glancy Animal Health Complex at the zoo. After all, the zoo animals, from the aardvarks to the zebras, all poop. Plenty of poop means plenty that can be converted in the biodigester to fuel the hospital.

Currently, the animal poop from herb-eating animals can be taken away to make compost. Due to the health rules, the manure of the carnivore, or meat-eating animals, can’t be composted.

The biodigester, designed and built with help from Michigan State University, is also unique, says Beth because it will be a “dry” biodigester. Yep, it will bake, or cook, that manure as part of the process. It has four chambers, explained Beth, with one a “holding cell” and other “active” cells where the poop, once baked, is treated with a special liquid to help break down micro-organisms and create compost. As these micro-organisms work, explained Beth, methane gas is released. The zoo will “capture” the gas and use it to generate power for the animal hospital. This way, the zoo will be cutting down on other energy use. In addition, the manufactured compost can be used back in the animal habitats, as well as in zoo’s gardens.

Eventually, Beth says, the biodigester should be able to handle food waste, as well.

So that’s the latest scoop on poop!

Other green notes
Beth reminds the Yak that this plan is just part of many aspects of keeping the zoo green, or environmentally smart. For example, by late 2015, the zoo will no longer sell disposable water bottles. It is a way to encourage guests to bring water in re-usable bottles. There also are “filling stations” throughout the zoo to refill your water bottle.

Enzi’s out!
If it’s spring, there are often baby animals to see and visit. In the Detroit Zoo, the baby Grevy’s zebra, Enzi, born on January 1, is out and about. The Yak saw Enzi nursing with its mom a couple of weeks ago. The zoo reports that Enzi also is beginning to eat some grasses. Enzi means “era” or “reign” in Swahili.

Dino time
The Detroit Zoo is traveling back in time with “Dinosauria” returning May 22 and running to September 7. Animatronic, or robot-controlled, dinosaurs will be in a wooded trail area, which can be toured for a $5 ticket in addition to the zoo entrance fee. See www.detroitzoo.org for details.

By Cathy Collison

Each summer, the animals make more than 17,000 pounds of poop each week!