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'LU' THE HOMOSASSA HIPPO TURNS 49
~Resident Hippo Celebrates Birthday at State Park~

HOMOSASSA SPRINGS – Lu, resident hippopotamus at Homosassa Springs Wildlife State Park, today celebrated his 49th birthday with park staff, visitors and Homosassa elementary school students. Wildlife caregivers at Homosassa Springs presented Lu with his own birthday cake during two birthday parties at the park.

During his first birthday party, students from Homosassa Elementary School celebrated with cupcakes and a song written by a park volunteer for the occasion. The afternoon birthday party included an alligator/hippopotamus program for park visitors.

“Lu’s popularity continues to grow, demonstrated by the nearly 330,000 visitors to the park last year,” said Homosassa Springs Wildlife State Park Manager Art Yerian. “Lu is a part of the park’s history and has many fans among staff and in the community.”

Lu, an African Hippopotamus, was born at the San Diego Zoo on January 26, 1960. He weighed 90 pounds at birth and now weighs more than 6,000 pounds. A vegetarian, Lu consumes 15 pounds of alfalfa hay, four scoops of herbivore diet and a five gallon bucket of vegetables and fruit every day.

A fixture at Homosassa Springs since 1964, Lu was a movie and television star with the Ivan Tors Animal Actors troupe, which wintered at the park while in private ownership. His credits include the 1960s movies *Daktari* and *Cowboy in Africa*, and television specials such as *Art Linkletter Show* and *Herb Alpert Special*.

For more than four decades, Lu has been a mainstay among the animals at Homosassa Springs Wildlife State Park. When the Florida Department of Environmental Protection’s Florida Park Service purchased the attraction in 1989, the state planned to shift the emphasis of the park to native Florida wildlife and find homes for all of the exotic species, including Lu. Public support, however,

led the state to grant Lu special Florida citizenship in 1991, allowing him to stay at the park.

Located 20 miles north of Florida's newest state park Weeki Wachee Springs, Homosassa Springs is one of the region's most popular attractions. An underwater manatee observatory provides a unique view of Florida's famed sea cows. In addition, a 1,600-foot Wildlife Walk showcases the natural habitats of bobcats, cougars, otters, bears and hundreds of birds. The state park also offers boat tours, hiking trails, picnicking and an interactive Children's Education Center and Museum.

The first two-time Gold Medal winner honoring the nation's best state park service, Florida's state park system is one of the largest in the country with 160 parks which are open 365 days a year. Florida's state parks, which span more than 700,000 acres and include 100 miles of sandy white beach, provide an affordable outing for people of all ages.

From swimming and diving in Florida's rivers and springs to birding and fishing or hiking and riding on natural scenic trails, Florida's state parks offer year-round outdoor activities for all ages. Battle reenactments and Native American festivals celebrate Florida's unique history, while art shows, museums and lighthouses offer a window into Florida's cultural heritage. Florida's state parks are also home to the 2008 Best Beach in the nation. Caladesi Island State Park, located off the coast of Southwest Florida in Pinellas County, was honored with this coveted award.

For more information, visit www.FloridaStateParks.org.