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After Ratings Slip, Animal Planet Turns to It's Wilder Side

Animal Planet, long regarded as a gentle wildlife channel, is shedding its cute and cuddly image.

The 11-year-old channel, owned by Discovery Communications, is one of the best-known brands on cable, but its ratings have stagnated for several years. On Feb. 3 the channel will start programming specifically for adults, scrapping its previous "something for everyone" style.

"It made us unimportant to everyone," said Marjorie Kaplan, who became general manager of Animal Planet last year.

If the old Animal Planet was defined by a voice of God narrator – Ms. Kaplan mimicked it in a recent interview, putting on a serious dace and intoning "the lion is walking through the bus" – the new Animal Planet will emphasize predation programming (a friendlier term for animal death action), pet shows and immersive storytelling.

"Escape to Chimp Eden" will feature chimpanzee rescues in Africa; "Groomer Has It" will test amateur and professional animal groomers; and "Whale Wars" will cover the controversial practice of Antarctic whaling.

"We're not looking to be a natral



history channel. We're looking to be an entertainment destination," she said.

The network's most popular shows – "Meerkat Manor" and "Orangutan Island" – already reflect the new strategy. Before "Meerkat Manor," "there were these unspoken rules that you didn't put names on animals and you didn't give them human characteristics," said Vicki Lowell, the channel's senior vice president for marketing.

Animals may be reliable and, when necessary, replaceable stars, but the channel's prime-time ratings averaged 537,000 viewers in 2007,

down from 595,000 in 2006.

"The numbers are pretty disappointing for a network of their size," said Derek Baine, a senior analyst for the media research firm SNL Kagan, who estimated that Animal Planet earned a "pretty low by comparison" \$191 million in revenue last year.

Even Animal Planet's recognizable elephant logo will be replaced by bold lettering that allows animals to peek in and out. A new tagline ("Same planet, different world") and fresh musical tracks will also make their debut next month.