

Editorial: Dhaka Zoo, 12 Years Observation and a Personal Rant by ... Sally Walker

My first visit to Dhaka, Bangladesh was in 1999 to invite the Curator, Dy. Curator and others to the first meeting of South Asian Zoo Directors which was organised by Zoo Outreach Organisation and Central Zoo, Nepal. The objective of this meeting was to see if South Asian zoo personnel would like to come together in a Regional Zoo Association. At that time and even now, only India had a national zoo association but very much in its own style.

The Bangladeshi's were delighted with the idea and agreed to attend if they could get permission from their government. The Curator, Dy. Curator and their gracious staff took me around the zoo where I was, even then, somewhat disappointed as I had read some history of the Dhaka Zoo and my expectations were high. Nonetheless, 4 zoo personnel from Bangladesh were able to attend the meeting that approved the start of SAZARC, the South Asian Zoo Association for Regional Cooperation. They were Serazul Islam, Dhaka Zoo, Shitol Kumar Nath, Chittagong Zoo, Dr Mohammed Shahidullah, Dhaka Zoo, Narayan C. Roy, Rangpur Zoo.

Since then the Bangladeshi zoo personnel have been some of the friendliest and most hospitable people I've met in South Asia. They were always interested in the training we provided at the Annual Conferences as well as various workshops and training which we organised with Wildlife Trust of Bangladesh in Bangladesh. I visited Bangladesh every year at least once and often more as we conducted more and more events.

The Bangladeshi's were the first to pick up on my suggestion of zoo legislation that I promoted to all of the countries. The 3rd Annual Conference of SAZARC was conducted at Dhaka Zoo itself and the staff attending formed a special Bangladesh working group and laid out the first cut of principles of zoo legislation for Bangladesh. It was the first attempt for Bangladesh and it was impressive because the zoo personnel themselves were interested in regulating themselves. I was impressed and pleased as I had been involved in the promotion of Indian zoo legislation (passed in 1991 and 1992) for many years.

How I became involved in zoo legislation was that after 20 years of living in India and about 12 years of working with Indian zoos, I was convinced that little in these zoos could be achieved without the discipline that legislation imposes. This turned out to be very true of India which has turned around their zoos dramatically, so one of my primary motivations for starting a regional zoo association was to have a platform for lobbying zoo legislation.

The Bangladeshi zoo personnel were also some of the most passionate about their zoos. They faced difficulties such as very short tenure at the zoo ... from six months to maybe 2.5 years. During that time, a person could pick up some zoo management skills if he had a genuine mentor. That was a problem as there were and even now are no experts on zoo management in the whole country. This situation makes for very poor work not just for the employees but even more so for the animals and other programmes zoos need to have. Dhaka Zoo has been run by the Livestock

and Animal Husbandry Department since its inception. Running a zoo is very dissimilar from running a chicken farm or a dairy. The management of captive wild and domestic animals are two completely different disciplines with only the most basic similarities. Although senior staff had been through veterinary training which lists special courses devoted to zoo and wildlife management, they did not run the zoo systematically and seemed not to have the facilities, funds, or knowledge to do so. There were many things wrong from the start and instead of improving like many zoos will from year to year, Dhaka Zoo seemed to be deteriorating, and in fact it is deteriorating today, despite the dramatic about-face taken by F&AH Ministry recently.

The condition of the Dhaka Zoo seems not to have been an issue in the Animal Husbandry department except very occasionally, when something so terrible happened that it could not be ignored. Many bad things had happened which are reported in an article by Sarah Pappin who researched the last decade of Dhaka Zoo very assiduously referring many magazines and newspapers. Readers can see this article reprinted in this issue. Whatever your ideas about the press and its reliability, you can take this article seriously: I was in touch with Dhaka Zoo during much of the time described and believe the article is right.

Whenever I visited, very few Ministry officials seemed to know that the zoo was in terrible condition. The Animal Husbandry officers who have been deputed to the zoo as Curator, Vet, etc. worked as if they have not been given any zoo training. They do not realise what all needed to be done in a zoo because they have never worked in a fully functioning institution. Despite the presence of a respectable Curriculum in the AH Department which lists elements needed to treat wild animals, etc. apparently, teachers of this subject are without experience or skills and can't pass on anything but didactic lectures to their students.

Moreover, the Ministry officials, both political and administrative, seem to have had a blind spot where the zoo is concerned. Funds for day-to-day management of the zoo are very short, dangerously so as the basics for animals are "extreme basic" without any amenities. Whenever I visited I would meet the new D.G., and Secretary and often the Minister to discuss the problems I saw in the zoo but with little or no result. It was clear the zoo was not a favored project as its superior officials in the Department and Ministry could not see that it was dying along with the animals.

There is money in the Ministry. When an event comes up, there is money to rent a lavish auditorium or take the whole department out to dinner with a foreign guest; however there are no funds for zoo personnel to go for training even to nearby foreign countries even in South Asia where training would be most appropriate. In the many times I have discussed this with Secretary, or D.G. and occasionally Minister, they agreed training was important but would not pay for it. They always asked me to pay. Even last month a very senior bureaucrat asked me to help

them with funds for the new zoo by interceding with WAZA and the western zoos.

A paucity of funds in government departments is possible, of course, but the problem in this instant is not lack of funds ... it is lack of *initiative* to spend money on the zoo and its personnel. Perhaps they think it is not worthwhile since officers are transferred so much. If so, this is a real "Catch 22" or conundrum. They won't give funds for training because officers are frequently transferred and they won't modernize the transfer system so training will be useful for years to come.

Not all Ministry officials have a blind spot regarding the Dhaka zoo and I salute those who have come out of their seats, ranting and raving about its condition, when I announced my purpose there. Yet, somehow, even they have been unable to act and bring about permanent change for the better.

Regarding the Zoo Act, a committee had been formed and there were several meetings, including a review meeting at SAZARC where all the countries formed national groups to discuss zoo legislation. Bangladesh had a document and we had invited Dr. Kris Vehrs, herself a zoo lawyer to work with them and point out necessary corrections to the document.

Soon after this conference I visited Dhaka and met a Secretary to Government who was very enthusiastic about improving the zoo, but he had not been appraised of the pending Bangladesh Zoo Act which was languishing in the Ministry. When I told him about it, he called for the file but was transferred soon after.

Both Nepal and Bangladesh immediately took this project seriously and in both cases zoo legislation is in the last stages before either being passed into law, or trashed. But on that day, in Bangladesh, it became clear that ministry elves or ministry mice might have deliberately kept it from the Secretary for reasons of their own or that of other superiors.

Now, finally cutting to the chase, it seems government has realised just how bad the Dhaka Zoo has become and is prepared to release funds for improving it. This is laudable but I have problems with the way they are going about it. I, an American, probably have no right to judge but having invested 35 years in the regions zoos, I am taking my shot :

1. One of the first activities of "improvement" has been to take sometimes very large groups of mostly senior officials to foreign countries to see zoos, such as England (that was for another project which thankfully died), Australia, Canada, South Africa, Malaysia, etc. It is hard for me to understand how most of these officials are relevant to creating a better zoo. Many of them will be transferred, just like the zoo Curators and Veterinarians, in a short time and others' interest is scant at best. In context with this massive travel bill, it is also hard to understand how the zoo could have been in decline so long without government thinking of sending Dhaka Zoo personnel for training. If selected Dhaka Zoo personnel could be given a mandate to stay at the zoo for some goodly number of years, then such trips might be useful in their understanding of how good zoos

function. This is first on my list of the many ironies that accompany the behaviour of senior government officials.

To be sure a renovated and rebuilt zoo is potentially a great idea, yet, I worry. If there was no expertise in the country for zoo design and zoo management, etc. before, how is it that all of a sudden a big chunk of the government people are now experts, leading to the 2nd issue in my shot:

2. The Ministry of Architecture has students already working on the design, but a zoo is not a business complex or a housing development. Zoo Design ... the first steps toward making a new zoo... is an art and a science. There is no one in the entire region of South Asia that is a truly creative and professional zoo designer. Why do Indian zoos engage zoo designers from other countries? They are better than anyone in country at present, is why, and they are much more clued in to 21st Century zoo directions.

Although the Dhaka Zoo initiative is laudable at a basic level, there is every possibility it will not live up to the dream. The powers that are guiding this initiative have forgotten some basic home truths in dealing with a complex project such as a zoological garden, e.g.,

3. The prestigious Zoo Advisory Committee which was recently appointed by the AH Ministry and consists of 7 Secretaries, 7 Parliamentarians, and 26 others - Ministers, D.G.'s, other ranking individuals and government reps, NGO's, etc. To make this point, I propose a question : how many (good) things can a committee of 40 important people do? **Answer : ZERO!** I polled a few people on this topic of a 40 person Advisory Committee and all but one said (essentially) "how are 40 people going to agree on anything". When I think of our dozen on the National Zoo Advisory Board of India and how crazy that got, the "40" for this project

Under "good" things I mean good things for the animals in the zoo and for the visitors who come to see the animals and for the health and well being of both animals and humans. I don't mean things like trips to Europe, Australia, South Africa, South East Asia, etc. I think many of our zoo personnel could substantially improve a zoo if given even a portion for working fund of what those trips and Advisory Committee cost.

4. The powers that be which are guiding this project in government are of the same ilk of those who refused or neglected to arrange extensive training for all of the zoo personnel at every level on annual or semi-annual basis. If the zoo staff has never worked in a zoo before, which is the situation we are dealing with here, then they need to be trained extensively in the area which will be their specialty and but also generally in the subject of overall zoo management, including animal husbandry and veterinary management, animal welfare, visitor relationship to the animals, visitor education, ethics, such as management of finance in the zoo and procuring animals at great cost both to the government and to the individual animals themselves, etc. There is a lot to learn. The Dhaka Zoo has made some good attempts but they have never come up to a decent standard in any of these management requirements or if they did, they could not sustain it.

5. Now, plans are going ahead for masterplan, design, etc.etc. but to do so the *before* there is a staff of trained and experienced people within the zoo who can monitor the plans and insure that good zoo management accompany the plans all the way, is not wise. It condemns the project to the same problems it has suffered for so many years. A facelift that makes the external zoo look better is not what is required here : What is required is a quantum leap from dysfunctional 19th century zoo management to dynamic 21st century zoo management at all levels of the infrastructure.

6. One of the reasons the plight of the zoo has come to this is the basic fact is that Animal Husbandry or Agricultural Departments cannot be guaranteed to do a good job on a zoo. Perhaps some have achieved success but many have made a colossal mess. The thinking is that the AH or AG departments know about "animals" (e.g. domestic animals looked after by human beings), therefore they automatically know about wild animals in captivity. The worst managed zoo in India, for example, was the Nagpur (or Maharaj Baug) Zoo which was founded and administered in 1894 by the veterinary department at the agricultural university. It was here while on an inspection duty for the Indian Central Zoo Authority that I saw a Mugger crocodile floating in its own excrement in a fenced circular pond which was not as wide as the length of the Mugger. That was only one instance of serial cruelty which played out daily at this zoo. The zoo managers and senior people at the college were shocked at my response to such things ... they had not noticed that they were perpetrating the worst animal cruelties in their zoo. The anomaly of such situations is that it is simply presumed that a batch of farm and dairy veterinarians know how to keep wild animals. This is fantasy ... they (with the very occasional exception) do not know unless they have undergone extensive training in wild animal medicine or have learned from expert zoo managers running good zoos, or have a remarkable intuition and "touch" for zoo management personally. Ironically, in Bangladesh, there are veterinary colleges which offer somewhat extensive courses in zoo and wild animal medicine and also intern training at the Dhaka Zoo. This is not to say that only veterinary and agricultural institutions make mess of a zoo ... the forest department, wildlife wings, city or municipal corporations, government ministries, etc. all have made a mess of a zoo. Dhaka is not the only example but should learn from its own past experience as well as that of others.

Seven. Acquisition of animals for exhibition. In the next article, mentioned earlier there is a review of wild animals ordered every year or other year by Dhaka Zoo. Year after year I would ask the zoo personnel why they kept ordering these exotic animals which they have not been able to keep in good health or even alive for the past few years. Always the same answer ... this time it will be different... Of course, it is not the zoo personnel who are so keen to get these animals. It is the Ministry people who want to insure that the public has new treats for their eyes and targets for their frustrations in life. A big order of animals apparently is thought to be helpful at election time also. One perhaps doesn't know who exactly is the primary culprit who insists on another ark of animals but it is clear that the officials on down the line of bureaucrats to zoo staff must go along.

Dhaka Zoo has not improved even a small bit since the last load of animals were delivered to their zoo a couple years ago. I remember when they started dying one by one ... it was in the press and I also got informative emails. I was also informed by zoo personnel that the animal dealer who organized and delivered the consignment was shocked when he saw the conditions of the zoos and stated that they really needed to change many things to keep the animals alive. I corresponded with the same gentleman who described to me how he and his colleagues drew up diet sheets for the exotic animals for the Dhaka staff to follow as of course they didn't know how to take care of African animals. There were certain things they were told about diet ..."if you don't procure certain food, the animals will start dying off", they said. The zoo didn't bother to procure these items and the animals died off. This should have been a lesson for those in higher echelons of government as well as the zoo staff itself. With their administrative, economic and professional constraints, they can't manage African animals. All this is nothing but a big group of important people expressing a group ego. The zoo staff is the victim, not the villain. When the animals die this time, staff will be transferred or punished in some other way.

In the meeting of this 40 member Advisory Board, my friend and colleague, Dr. Anwarul Islam brought a paper discussing some of these and other aspects and was permitted to read it to the Board. We have, with his permission published it in this issue. It is after Sarah's paper.

Also I felt constrained to do a casual inspection of the zoo in the light of the most recent animal shipments both delivered and pending. A summary and a toned down version of my Report with some photographs is included after Dr. Islam's paper.

The Government of Bangladesh needs to examine their own motives and behaviour in respect of the zoo. The path chosen is not a rocky road for *them*, only for the zoo staff and the animals, as well as the bystanders who care about the animals and those who must look after them in such unfortunate and impossible conditions.

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Author (the one with her mouth open) leads a Training session at Dhaka Zoo (circa 2003) with other zoos of Bangladesh also represented.