

Dhaka Zoo Improvement Initiative -- a Bangladeshi Professor's outlook during the first Dhaka Zoo Advisory Committee

Recommendations for taking Dhaka Zoo to a world standard

**Proposed at the Dhaka Zoo Advisory Committee held on June 20, 2012
Distributed among members present including Minister and Secretary of Livestock Ministry
Read out to the gathering with permission of the Minister, Chair of the Board)**

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1. A first step should be to develop a vision statement for Dhaka Zoo that reflects the government's commitment to biodiversity conservation and that will guide the zoo's development.

The present government in their historic election manifesto pledged that they would conserve the country's biodiversity. A well run zoo has an important role to play in *ex-situ* (off-site) conservation, primarily through education of the nation and also through rational captive breeding programmes for declining species. In addition, zoos also can play a vital role in *in-situ* (on-site) conservation by supporting various activities taking place within the natural wild habitat of species, e.g. by generating donations from visitors to in-situ conservation projects – e.g. approximately 12% of the total funding available for tiger conservation between 1998 and 2005, came from or through the world's zoos (Christie, 2010). So the government has good reasons to improve the present condition of the Dhaka Zoo. *As such, it is recommended that an activity be undertaken to sit and develop a vision and mission statement for the zoo, which can then guide the handling of this and all future such proposals.*

2. Dhaka Zoo has to build its capacity

Dhaka Zoo should meet the welfare standards required of a world class zoo. Dhaka Zoo also should provide conservation value to the nation. A national zoo is a key component of an overall biodiversity conservation plan. It is our national property and the zoo is there to provide a public service. The zoo in its present form omits the objective of in-situ or ex-situ conservation which is the sole purpose of a zoo.

The wild animals of the Dhaka Zoo has to go to good and expert hands capable of maintaining international animal welfare standards in keeping the animals. In addition, to the welfare of the animals, the management of a proper modern day zoo includes conservation specialists in every aspect of conservation, including providing an environment for animals that will permit them to retain some of their wild characters, and other important services including conservation education skills to ensure that all people in the country know the true value of wildlife, its diversity and environment to the nation.

3. Dhaka Zoo should be given autonomy in order to develop the specialization required to succeed as a world class zoo, on every level - husbandry, veterinary, education, etc.

Dhaka Zoo should have autonomy. It should not be kept under the Department of Livestock Services (DoLS) as the zoo deals with wildlife, not domesticated animals. Let it be a separate autonomous organisation headed by a director general or a director. Only then be possible to develop professional human resources, e.g. zoo curators, zoo veterinarians, zoo managers, zoo keepers for the zoo. Today the officers come from the DoLS and are transferred frequently, even before they fully understand their job as a zoo person. Also many times the zoo actually receives very little services from them before they are again transferred. In reality, so far, the country has failed to develop any expertise or genuine human resource in this field.

Bronx Zoo in New York is run by the Wildlife Conservation Society; London Zoo is run by the Zoological Society of London; Malaysian National Zoo is run by the Malaysian Zoological Society; even the national zoo of Nepal is also run by an NGO, the National Trust for Nature Conservation. Dhaka Zoo is run by the Department of Livestock Services. There is no zoologist, zoo scientist, wildlife specialist or zoo and wildlife educator in the zoo. Zoo employees do not even realise what the zoo requires from them, as they, with very few exceptions, do not get opportunity to go abroad and study how a good zoo works. This needs a serious attention.

4. Independent expert committees on different issues/subjects/aspects should be set up to ensure proper development process and the monitoring of the zoo.

The committees should suggest well-researched sound proposals guided by good science, which also has to address environmental aspects including social and biological. These have to be culturally acceptable and financially and technically/technologically viable and sustainable.

We should not take any decision on an ad hoc basis. So before we take any decision a more complete and detailed proposal/plan should be submitted to the authority first, which must be very carefully reviewed. To support this review process, committees of scientific experts and representatives from the wider conservation community can be formed. The committees should include international experts given the lack of expertise in modern zoo development and maintenance in Bangladesh.

5. A good quality zoo with native species can attract as many, or more, visitors than a zoo with larger, and/or non-native species.

On September 17, 2010, I made a personal visit to the Kyoto Zoo, Japan, which is a cute little garden zoo with a children's park in it. I saw hundreds of children come and visit the zoo along with their parents. The animals are so well presented that the park has become the secondary attraction to the children. The primary and main attraction is the zoo. It is a common misconception that in order to increase visitor numbers, a zoo needs larger and more exotic species. This is not the case ... we do not need large animals but instead we need well-designed zoo exhibits, housing native Bangladeshi species, with strong educative components to ensure our children are educated in their own natural heritage.

6. We do not have skills to maintain the existing animals to proper standards, even the native species, so we should simplify the collection to ensure welfare of the animals and find training opportunities to build our skills.

We have practically no wildlife veterinary skills in Bangladesh, and very limited wildlife management skills. In making plans for an improved zoo, we should reduce the complexity of our existing collection, and focus on the development of enclosures which meet international welfare standards, and provide true educative value to visitors. For example, instead of housing many large or non-native species which require larger enclosures, specialist health requirements, and massive amounts of money to purchase them, we can learn to manage native species, including monkeys, birds, reptiles, and culminating in flagship species including the Hoolock Gibbon and, our national animal, the Bengal Tiger. We should not attempt to house species with complex needs requiring impossibly larger enclosure sizes and specialist attention such as the Asian Elephant. Many international zoos have already stopped keeping elephants, not only due to the recognition that they require large areas of land, but also since there is no realistic prospect of establishing captive-breeding populations (Rees, 2003).

7. This is an opportunity to become an outstanding zoo and attract regional visitors.

We do not have a good zoo in the region. So if this one could be made a world class zoo it would not only attract local visitors but also the visitors from the region.

Literature cited: **Christie, S. (2010).** Why keep tigers in zoos? Chapter 15 in *Tigers of the World*, Second Edition. Elsevier Inc Press and Rees, P.A. 2003. Asian elephants in zoos face global extinction: should zoos accept the inevitable? *Oryx Vol 37. No 1.*

Profile of Dr. Md. Anwar Islam

Dr Md. Anwarul Islam, professor, Department of Zoology, and director, Biotechnology Research Centre, University of Dhaka, studied primates for his master's, and studied birds for his PhD from the University of Bombay under the supervision of Dr Salim Ali (1982-86), did pd research in Department of Anatomy, Cambridge (1992-93). He was the founder head (1988-1991) of the Dept. Zoology, and the director (1995-1998) of the Institute of Life Sciences, Jahangirnagar University.

He was an editor of the Red List of Threatened Animals of Bangladesh published by the IUCN Bangladesh in 2000 and assoc. ed. of the 10 vol. BANGLAPEDIA as well as Encyclopedia of Flora and Fauna of Bangladesh published by Asiatic Society of Bangladesh 4 book and 50 scientific publications.

He has got higher training in museology at Smithsonian Institution, and at the National Museum of Natural History, New Delhi when he initiated the Department of Natural History at the National Museum of Bangladesh. He is principal investigator of numerous species conservation initiatives -- tiger, hoolock gibbon, bear and elephant. He is the Team leader of 'Sundarbans Tiger Project' – jointly with Wildlife Trust of Bangladesh, Bangladesh F.D., ZSL, USFWS and University of Minnesota. This project helped the government produce Bangladesh Tiger Action Plan and now implements this plan with Forest Dept.

Anwar is associated with a number of professional organizations including the Wildlife Trust of Bangladesh, Aranyak Foundation, Governments of USA and Bangladesh, Zoological Society of London. He is a member of the Advisory Board of the Dhaka Zoo. His area of interest is Wildlife and Conservation Biology. Email: anwar1955@gmail.com.