

# Dhaka Zoo ... now Bangladesh National Zoo ... a casual inspection

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## Background

My 10th visit to Dhaka Zoo was inspired by the news that Dhaka Zoo had ordered **another** large consignment of animals from South Africa. A couple of years ago the zoo had ordered such a consignment and I was informed that many of the animals died in a relatively short time. I flew over to Dhaka shortly after hearing this news and it was confirmed by management that that was the case. A few weeks later virtually all of them but one or two had died. It is hard to get information straight in such cases as the management running the zoo at that time, is long gone by now and the new management denied the previous deaths.

As Director of the South Asian Zoo Association for Regional Cooperation SAZARC, I was asked if Dhaka Zoo was a member of WAZA or of SAZARC. A pair of African white rhino calves had been purchased by the zoo but had to be a member of WAZA or a regional association in order to get a permit. I did not claim Dhaka Zoo as a member in good standing but they told that they were members and got the animals anyway. Dhaka Zoo should never have been permitted to get those animals without having gone through extensive training and study of their needs at all levels, and also without serious changes in the zoo infrastructure, none of which they had done.

I had not seen the zoo in over a year and a half so I again visited Dhaka Zoo to see if any improvements had been made either in infrastructure or staff knowledge. The zoo curator extended an invitation as they have done in the past and requested "suggestions" of what they should do in the zoo, which usually are ignored.

I carried out a spot inspection of the zoo, to ascertain if any significant improvements had been made since my last visit.

## Inspection of Dhaka Zoo

On 18 & 19 June I spent some hours at Dhaka Zoo inspecting the veterinary hospital and the grounds, cages, etc. First day Curator/Director accompanied me. In Bangladesh the post of Curator is actually what other zoos call Zoo Manager or Director. It is the highest post in the zoo. On 19<sup>th</sup> I went around accompanied by a young veterinary doctor saw the zoo again and got a different perspective in some aspects from the vet.

## Various enclosures

### Crocodiles

The Crocodylian enclosures are relatively new but the style dates way back: concrete, chain mesh, very little water, etc. One is acceptable with a large tank and an area for sunning with grass and sand. The Crocodiles and Gharials are said to be breeding, according to the Curator. One of the enclosures has protective sides two feet in the ground but the crocs dig large holes and two feet may not be sufficient to keep them from tunneling out. A great deal of improvement is required for these aquatic reptiles...in husbandry, in enclosure design, in animal welfare and in education.



### Unsuitable crocodylian enclosures

### Lions and Tigers

These felids are housed in separate but similarly constructed enclosures with a large outdoor area surrounded by a moat, chain mesh and large empty concrete indoor enclosures. Only one animal can go out at a time as zoo heads are afraid they may fight. The indoor enclosures are open at the back where public can view and tease them and a middle room that provides privacy.

There is no enrichment inside anywhere. The animals don't get much time outside where they have to go one at a time. The one lion observed as close quarters was without spirit and in indifferent condition.



The tiger observed outside was pacing around the entire moat and back up to its cage repeatedly, indicating stereotypy. I pointed this out but Curator said the tiger was running. None of the cats looked fit.

### Hoolock Gibbon

Hoolock Gibbon is a Critically Endangered species in Bangladesh with small populations scattered in different places numbering under 100 individuals. These hoolocks are in a double iron & chain mesh cage with little to remind them of their former forest home. Out of the three that were brought to the zoo by animal trappers some years ago, at least one and maybe two have died. There are three animals there, one of them could be an offspring. It is possible they replaced an animal with another wild one. This took place some years ago and was a big issue between officials and this writer. They insisted at that time that they "rescued" the animals by taking them from the trappers, but other staff told me they ordered them. The animals currently looked to be in very poor condition. I asked to see their medical history but was told there was no history.



### White Rhinos

There were two young rhinos from South Africa, recently procured. They are there less than one month and still in good condition. I was surprised as I thought they need a nod from WAZA or their Association. I asked Curator about this ... how they came without permit and he said "they just sent them". Now, there is evidence that Curator "just told them" that they were members in good standing of SAZARC.



### Leopards

I was told there were two leopards, male and female. I could not find the female as we did not go to that part of the zoo. The male is in a four-sided cage with thick iron bars and open to viewing on all sides with no privacy at all, nothing to hide behind. A couple of dead trees have been propped up in a pathetic effort at enrichment. The male leopard spends most of his time lying in the middle of the cage, which is farthest point from public. At the risk of anthropomorphizing, I say this leopard is in despair which the photo below conveys. Zoo authorities are afraid to put the pair together because the animals might fight.



### Hippo

There are 8 hippos, six having been born in the zoo according to Curator. They have a nice environment relatively speaking, e.g., a very large tank with lake water coming in daily and a suction pump to remove dirty water. Curator hopes to exchange the hippos for animals from other zoos.



**Six hippos under water (above) and (below) two hungry hippos.**



### Gayals

There were some good outdoor natural enclosures and some relatively healthy-looking animals, such as Spotted deer, Gayals and Impalas. There are 5 gayals and 2 impala in the same enclosure. There are trees providing some shade. I could not get a photo of the Gayals.



### Indian rhino

The female Indian rhino is very old, no doubt, but India rhinos can live to advanced age without looking shabby. This rhino has been sick for a long time. Her ribs show as can be seen in the photo of in the water. Curator said she had endometriosis and pyometra(?) which they had tried to treat but could not cure.



### Leopard in total despair

### Veterinary hospital

The new facility is an upgrade of an old building with serious new machinery in three rooms, an x-ray room, operating theater, and "mini-lab". There is no dedicated operator for this machinery it seems. Curator has informed that he would manage the machines.

### Various admin & infrastructure issues



### Staff

Dhaka Zoo is about to lose 3-4 of their most experienced and important staff, e.g., two of their good veterinary officers there for five years and another person who has served as Assistant Curator who does most of the animal work. These people will be replaced by others who have no experience with zoos or wild animals.

As it is, in present circumstances, the senior person at the zoo, Dr. Shahidulla is completely engaged with arranging places for animals which are about to be delivered and trips abroad for his senior colleagues to see zoos. With new people coming in and in the

absence of Curator and even more valuable the young vets etc. who are leaving, the future for the consignment of new animals does not look good.

**Zoo Act**

The Ministry of Animal Husbandry, etc. has completed the writing of the Zoo Act and are in next few days sending it to Parliament. The first meeting of the 40 person advisory committee was held and agreed the document is ready to send. A neutral person or persons should check the document to insure that that changes have not been made in the Act that are meant to work to the advantage of the human beings involved instead of the zoo animals and zoo activities.

**Smoking**

Smoking is banned at the zoo as per these cheery "Tobacco Free Zoo" placards.



**North Lake**

A big portion of a very large and beautiful lake abuts the zoo and is part of it. In this lake Curator reported the zoo was "conserving" fish both native and non-native species. The zoo permits fishing by fee and Curator related that there was a limit of 10 on the number of persons who could fish at the same time or same day.



**Trash**

There was a great deal of trash all over the zoo that looked like an accumulation in several places. One expects trash in the regions zoos as public is indifferent to signs etc. but this was too much. The photo below illustrates literally hundreds of such piles of litter throughout the zoo and in some areas there was a bad smell coming. I was told that they cleaned up every 10 days.

This is not dry trash but leftover food that attracts vermin and possibly other creatures dangerous to human health. This kind of trash needs to be removed at the end of every day, if not throughout the day. My opinion on this did not go over well however.

**Visits with Senior officials**

This writer meets officials in the Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock which controls two zoos in Bangladesh, the Dhaka Zoo and the Rangpur Zoo every time I visit. I talk about the same things every time, e.g.

- changing the frequent transfer system of senior zoo personnel,
- Zoo legislation and regulation, e.g., the Zoo Act,
- training for all levels of staff for months, not weeks with refresher training from time to time,
- permitting staff to rise in the hierarchy rather than being transferred out
- the need for a very senior and experienced zoo manager to work in the Dhaka Zoo for some years and demonstrate the things that must be done and how to do them in the long term,
- deficiencies in the zoo now that could be fixed immediately such as the trash problem, need for enrichment in enclosures, construction of simple barriers so pairing of animals can be attempted, etc.



**"Bangladesh National Zoo" ... NOW !!**

Dhaka Zoo may be officially designated as the National Zoo of Bangladesh but as a National Zoo, it needs to be a very correct model for other zoos in the nation. The current state of Dhaka Zoo does not deserve this designation. Sensible people attending a meeting of the Advisory Committee recommended waiting until the zoo was in better shape to name it the National Zoo, but they were over-ruled. The Curator has explained in one of his press moments that the zoo was always the National Zoo but people "popularised" it as the Dhaka Zoo.