

From a 9.0 Earthquake and tsunami to an orphan Baby Mongoose?

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Editor's Note : In the previous article we related how the world's zoos and zoo employees stepped up to the plate when Japan's zoos and aquariums suffered damage due to one of the most severe earthquakes and tsunamis in centuries. In this article, it is amusing as well as touching how an orphaned baby mongoose in trouble could capture so much attention from so many individuals over 3 continents. Most of them were zoo people!

One day in April this year Ms Lynne Ainscough, Conservation & Education Directorate Secretary in charge of Guest Services at Chester Zoo in Great Britain got an urgent email from a British gentleman named Simon. Simon and colleagues had been working on a pipeline in Gujarat, India when they came upon a mongoose 'nest' with a tiny but living baby inside. Thinking the mother might return, they left the baby mongoose alone for some time. The baby mongoose cried for its missing mother for six hours but mama didn't come back. The softhearted pipeline engineers, working in a remote corner far from zoos or animal care centers, collected the baby, rightly thinking that it would be prey for other animals if they left it alone. "None of us have a clue how to feed or care for it" wrote Simon. "We have been feeding it milk with a syringe for the last six days and it appears to be surviving well, and has become very active & inquisitive. Its teeth haven't come through yet. We must be doing something right, but what next!" The adoptive parents wanted advice on what solid food they need to feed it when teeth appeared.

Lynne wisely forwarded this urgent technical request to the zoo nutritionist Dr. Andrea Fidgett who jumped right on her computer, first congratulating Simon and his team on their mongoose parenting skills and praised the multiple photos of the baby. She also forwarded the request to some zoo-keepers who took care of mongoose at the zoo and collected information. She could tell Simon that mongoose mostly eat insects, small crustaceans, and earthworms – definitely solid food but can you imagine a team of pipeline workers running around chasing bugs and worms for their adopted pet. She also contacted a vet at Assam State Zoo.

Presently Andrea wrote Simon again with more advice. She had caught up with another of her colleagues, Penny Rudd, the zoo's long term nanny,



Infant Mongoose being fed by syringe

having hand-reared hundreds of small furry mammals, including the famous field mice that were part of a systematic reintroduction programme conducted by Chester and some other zoos a few years ago. (Yes, even field mice can become endangered.)

Penny wrote back : "This baby looks pretty well developed so they just need to keep it on milk (from goats is best, followed by buffalo – avoid using cow's milk if you can but any changes should be done slowly, over a couple of days) and then slowly introduce some insects and some very finely minced/chopped meat (with a bit of beaten raw egg to moisten it at first if that helps) once its teeth come through. My guess is that it will be pretty well weaned within the next 6-8 weeks or so."

Andrea was still worried. Where would these guys get minced meat and raw egg yolk in the boonies while working on a pipeline? She sent another mail to me at Zoo Outreach Organisation

"Do you have any zoo or wildlife contacts in Gujarat that might be able to assist with this email query? It came via our zoo's website, after Simon put 'baby mongoose' into an internet search engine and found a press release from last autumn about the birth of dwarf mongoose at Chester Zoo. They have been caring for the mongoose for ~10 days and it has imprinted on its human wet nurses already, so suggestions for long-term options would be most helpful."

¹ ZOO, ² British Engineer working in Gujarat, ³ Indian Zoo Director and Vet, Ahmedabad, India; ⁴ Staff of Chester Zoo.



Monty Mongoose after some days - well developed!

My suggestion was for Simon and other fathers to hand over the baby mongoose to a zoo as soon as possible, since it is a crime to possess wild animals in India without a permit. It is doubtful that the wildlife department would take punitive action in this case, since the pipeline crew were so obviously of good intent, but they still couldn't keep the mongoose for the long term, both because of the law and because of their own situation.

I wrote back and suggested "Dr. R. K. Sahu" who is a vet and director at Ahmedabad Zoo who agreed to get in touch with Simon over email and do "whatever they could."

About the same time we had another chapter from Simon, who wrote "*Monty (the baby mongoose) is doing fine, so much so he freely wanders about the offices, actually Portacabins, and follows us about. Everybody has had to adopt a shuffling gait to avoid treading on him. There is no food problem since he has learned to take solids ... 'Scrambled-egg a la Moth' is a favourite meal as he is more or less off Buffalo now. My reaction was not good : Buffalo ! what happened to the crustaceans! And Monty ! they named it ... baaaaadd sign! ... it usually means the animal has been turned into a pet!*)

Simon continued : The biggest problem we have is what to do with him during the day when we are out and about on the pipeline. We tried taking him to the 'field' for a run about to see how he reacts, but he just follows us around and appears to be fearless of bulldozers, excavators and trucks! Not the best play-toys for a tiny animal.

One of the local lads said his father has a farm with 'partially' tamed mongooses living in and about his home. We are going to take him there and see how he bears up... fingers crossed. In addition to photos, I've attached a few other details of the pipeline for your info. Monty was found towards the end of the pipeline near the Bhogat Terminal. Thanks & Regards, Simon."

We thought that was end of story, and a very good end actually, but the next day Simon wrote that he was going back to UK for a couple of weeks and would update us when he got back. In the meantime Will Condliffe, Press Officer of Chester Zoo wrote to me to discuss an article on 'how an international network of zoo's came to the aid of Monty the mongoose'?! Knowing the soppy sentiments of the British about animals (God bless them! the Brits ... I feel that way about animals too...I thought it a good idea. I told him about Simons trip to UK and the potential new home for "Monty", speculating that we might not have a dénouement for the story for some time yet.

Will and I agreed that the most spectacular aspect of this story is how agitated so many adults over three continental areas over a baby mongoose ... in a good way.



A very young monty waiting for his dinner. His savours did very well with him, wearing sanitary garments and keeping his feeding implements clean.



Monty is old enough to have his own bowl ...no more bottles.

Madras Crocodile Bank Trust's New Director

We take great pleasure in introducing Colin Stevenson, the new Director of the Madras Crocodile Bank, who joins us this month. An Australian, Colin has been involved in crocodile conservation through the Crocodile Specialist Group for the past decade. Whilst in Australia, he owned and operated a zoo in New South Wales, as well as running an education-based reptile exposition, introducing school children to the world of crocodiles and other reptiles through his *Crocodile Encounters*. He continued *Crocodile Encounters* in the UK, whilst also getting more involved in CSG-related activities. He combines the qualities of an experienced administrator and educator, with an emphasis on crocodile conservation and a serious interest in scientific research, precisely what the Croc Bank needs!

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