

Editorial

The Asiatic lion story - far from resolution and a happy ending - is so fraught with human folly and human selfishness at almost every level of the concerned governments, NGO's, scientists, services, departments and other stakeholders, not just within India but also throughout the world. This editorial will only give the few examples which have come to this writer as a conservation activer (activer, not activist) and a hybrid of Indian and American outlook and thinking. I have made mistakes in whatever small works I have done with respect to the Asiatic Lion and will admit these mistakes in an attempt to make amends by way of apology but also to gain the privledge of pointing out what I believe to be serious mistakes of others! These mistakes which I know about from my experiences are probably just the tip of the iceberg but still, it is good to air them at this juncture.

The other material I have included in this issue of ZOOS' PRINT are past history and possible future which may provide food for thought. There is material in last issue also to which I will refer and which might bear pondering.

My first project that involved Asiatic lion issues was in Mysore Zoo in 1983, when Dr. Nan Schaeffer came on a USFWS sponsored trip to demonstrate semen collection to a group of vets in New Delhi. I was running the Friends of Mysore Zoo then and Mysore Zoo had a lot of (hybrid) lions. I knew about the hybrid issue for Asiatic and African lions but not how it came about. When a letter came, offering Dr. Schaeffer's services, to Mysore Zoo I ran to the Director and suggested we organise a workshop, simply for scientific interest and it was done. The day Mr. Krishne Gowda and I were to go to the airport and pick up Dr. Schaeffer, one of our lionesses gave birth to four cubs and there was nowhere to house them. She had become pregnant from one of her last litter with whom she still shared quarters. They were given to a volunteer for hand-rearing (the euthanasia of that day) and we went off to pick up Dr. Nan. On the way I suggested that we ask her to vasectomise our male lions since they had to be knocked down for semen collection anyway, pointing out our space problem and the fact that they were all surely hybrids. Krishne Gowda agreed. And it was done, producing a fascinating workshop and getting the issue of hybrid lions, biotechnology, birth control for zoo animals, etc. in to national state and local press. When certain politicians in Delhi read of this they lost the plot and instead of questioning Parliament why there were hybrid lions in Indian zoos, as they should have done, they instead questioned the procedure "Why is the Mysore Zoo destroying our valuable wildlife?" Telegrams flew back and forth. My bold and farsighted Director was threatened with suspension. Finally we could explain and the then Department of Environment put out the fires.

I admit to this being a mistake of mine as, perhaps with better transmission of information to the Ministries and press, it might not have been so misunderstood. Then again, it might have just been that some politician wanted an issue that day. Nonetheless, my already established reputation for doing good things which went awry got a shot in the arm.

The problem of hybrid lions and the very easy fix of vasectomisation bothered me, because instead of encouraging zoos to stop breeding these hybrids it simply did nothing. Zoos were afraid to vasectomise, partly because of the controversy because Trivandrum Zoo did it later and also generated a Parliament question; partly because management was afraid of an accidental death; and partly because they didn't take sub-species seriously.

Meanwhile the American and European zoos, being seized of the matter of about 300 Asiatic lions (wild and assumed to be pure ones) in a single, somewhat limited in area and highly populated habitat, being rather seriously at risk, were establishing breeding programmes for Asiatic Lions and trying to get founders from Indian Zoos. It seems that Trivandrum Zoo supplied lions to a couple of zoos in USA, which bred them, spread them around and established the Asiatic Lion Species Survival Plan SSP. When the Americans and Europeans discovered that these lions were very likely hybrid (subsequently proven to be very definitely hybrid), they became alarmed. This all took time and by the year 1992 the American SSP wanted a solution. There were simply not enough unrelated pure Asiatic lions in the zoos of the world to start a breeding programme. Dr. Ulie Seal of the then Captive Breeding Specialist Group suggested that a PHVA workshop be conducted in India which could demonstrate the need for certain management scenarios and also create a climate by which perhaps some pure lions could be spared for USA and Europe to start scientific breeding programmes. Having just established CBSG, India, which was the pioneer regional network of the Conservation Breeding Specialist Group, IUCN SSC, I was tasked with organising a PHVA for Asiatic lion in India. This was not a new idea. In 1989, P.P. Raval and I had worked together on a gala event for the Sakkarbaug Zoo's 125th Anniversary where there was a seminar called the Role of Zoos in Wildlife Management. It was associated with an Indian Zoo Directors meeting also. There, the group made recommendations for the management of Asiatic Lion which included, among others, to urge government to establish a second home for the Asiatic lion and to conduct a Population and Habitat Viability Assessment workshop in India in Gujarat in collaboration with the Forest Department of Gujarat. At that time all the foresters from Gujarat seemed supportive of all recommendations.

In organising the PHVA I approached the then Chief Wildlife Warden of the Gujarat Forest

Department requesting that The Department approve our plan for a PHVA and be our partner and collaborator. This is the established policy of CBSG. He refused! He said "we can work it all out ourselves." And this is quite true but I was on a Mission and made what might have been a very bad mistake. I went to another government, the Baroda Municipality, aided by the late great Vijayraj Jajeda, then Director of Baroda Zoo and got the government approval for the PHVA in principle but perhaps not in the wisest way. Wisdom was to wait but powerful people were interested and I simply forged ahead.

The Asiatic Lion PHVA Executive Summary/ Recommendations are included in this issue and you will see that the work-shop covered many important issues pertaining to Asiatic Lion. Current Minister of Environment, GOI, was very interested and immediately acted on the recommendation for an alternative habitat with WII assessing the recommended areas. Committees were formed, activity began, feathers got ruffled.

I began getting calls from some of the forest officers from Gujarat who had attended the PHVA and were in support of the discussion points and recommendations. But it appears that no Gujarat Forest Officer had been made a member of any expert committee regarding the proposed alternative habitat and translocation. I have understood that till today (unless it has occurred very recently) the Forest Department of Gujarat has not been made a partner in any aspect of that Project by the Government of India, which formed the first expert committee, nor has the Gujarat Forest Department been involved as advisors in any of the activities carried out in aid of a second home outside of Gujarat. The Gujarat Forest Department and Government of Gujarat have been deeply concerned about the Asiatic Lion and it survives today due to their efforts. I felt very bad to get this news then as I was reeling under a terrible black cloud of bad publicity which was not true but still had a crippling effect on my self confidence and credibility. (Although I cannot detail it here, this was an example of impatience and selfishness of individuals and institutions from my own country.) I understand than even now it is the case that Gujarat has not been given sufficient importance in the planning of a second home for the Asiatic Lion.

It is for this reason, I believe, that Gujarat took a somewhat perverse view of the 2nd home project, some months after the PHVA. In the Minutes of the early IBWL meeting it is clear that the powerful people from Gujarat were very much in favour of the Asiatic lion having a 2nd, 3rd and even 4th locality outside of their state. Soon after the workshop, and the expert committee and the decision to make Kuno into a second home, one heard frustrated cries from Gujarat issuing from a very wide range of stakeholders, from tourism operators to small nature ngos right up to the Government of Gujarat.

Now, the Government of Gujarat has stated categorically that no lions will be given for the project or any related project but will be protected right in the state.

Although I believe that it is crucial to have an alternative habitat(s) which could resist the onslaught of a crippling disease event, I have much sympathy with the Government of Gujarat. The head of government there has a terrible situation ... on the one hand, the possible survival of the Asiatic Lion could be compromised by retaining all animals in the same or even nearby localities. On the other hand, I have been told that there are individuals and possibly groups in Gujarat whose state pride is so hurt by the threat of multiple populations that they have threatened to immolate themselves or protest by other unpleasant actions. No governor wants either of these alternatives on his watch.

I have a bizarre idea which might make the Gujaratis feel more secure about their continued role in the future of the lion they have loved and tried so hard to protect and that is for the Government of Gujarat, if indeed it is legal or possible to do so, to apply for the patent on the genome of Asiatic Lion. We all know the lion belongs to all India in principle, but if the State which has been responsible for its safety so long has sensitivities about losing it forever, what is the harm in permitting them to hold the ultimate ownership. Along with this, the Government of India should take Gujarat into confidence on all future plans and projects and insure that their unique expertise is utilised in service of saving the Asiatic lion. An apology for past neglect might help too! These measures are intended to make the people and institutions of Gujarat completely confident of their beloved lion and thus more willing to share the individual animals which could insure against a disease, environmental or even industrial crisis that would render recovery impossible.

Yes, I know. The Asiatic lion is a global treasure as is every species. We think like that. But those who do not belong to Gujarat are being just as selfish and prideful as they have accused the Gujaratis of being, if we are not willing to also give up something to insure the survival of this Critically Endangered species.

Whatever mistakes I made in forcing the PHVA when indicators were strong that it was not the right time and in trying to take on tasks that might be better handled by other organisations, I deeply regret. Inaction frustrates me to the point of foolhardiness at times. In these past, current and future issues of ZPM I will try and make information available that will help our readers get a fuller picture of the possibilities and problems of this burning issue.

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