

The Amazing Peter Dickinson

Peter Dickinson had been a zookeeper in UK all his adult life and may return to zookeeping. Currently he is travelling around the world, just imbibing the culture and seeing zoos. He spent a couple of weeks in India seeing zoos and cultural sights. His comments on the zoos are honest and forthright but not without sympathy for the difficulties of zoo personnel.

Peter is connected with zoos in another way however and it is huge. He is the person who founded and, even today when he is travelling, manages one of the most extensive web works for zoos in the world. His email list serve, the ZooNews Digest has over 800 subscribers, and his Zoo Biology egroup is also extremely popular. For many zoo personnel these resources are their only means of contact with other zoo personnel in the world.

For those of you who don't know about his sites, we have included instructions on how to join on this page, below, for Zoo Biology egroup and on the last page of his travel report for India for ZooNews Digest. ZooNews Digest accepts news items in addition to the press clippings it displays and announcements, requests, etc. of a more general nature. Zoo Biology egroup is for very specific questions about the management of zoos, animals, veterinary questions, how to obtain zoo products, etc. Zoo Biology egroup is interactive ... it is a list serve. ZooNews Digest is more of an e-newsletter.

Peter's journal is currently going along with ZooNews Digest as a sort of part 2. In his journal he also covers who he meets, the sights he sees, and his impressions of the culture and ethos of the country. We have cut all those parts in the interests of space and have kept only the zoo visits. Peter has moved on South East Asia. We will probably publish a digest of his visit there also. I personally feel very grateful to Peter for his enrichment of the communication which can be accessed by so many levels of zoo personnel in the world.

Sally Walker, Editor Emeritus

Zoo Biology egroup

Zoo Biology is a discussion, question and answer group dealing with the diverse range of Zoo Sciences. The Zoo Biology Group is concerned with all disciplines involved in the running of a Zoological Garden. Captive breeding, husbandry, cage design and construction, diets, enrichment, man management, record keeping, etc. It is specifically a forum for professional Zoo Staff. Exceptions may be considered in the case of students or allied professions. You must be committed to both *in-situ* and *ex-situ* conservation. Do be prepared to receive from 1-30+ messages per day!! The Zoo Biology Group is independent and not attached to any other group, society or organisation.

There are well over 1800 Zoo Biology Group members. The majority of these have between five and forty or more years working in zoos. As a Zoo Biology member you can call upon the knowledge of somewhere in the region of 15,000+ years of practical zoo experience in a range of fields. As a zoo biology member it is hoped that you will both contribute and answer questions on subjects of which you have some experience. Replies to the group are well received and add to the searchable subject archives. Please post replies to the group rather than to the individual who posted the question. I, and many others are interested and can learn from replies.

Zoo Biology members cover the whole spectrum of zoo staff from docent to director, zoo vet to zoo police, education officer to research scientist and everything in between, and more besides. Zoo Biology members may have worked in a variety of roles in their zoo careers, perhaps starting with reptiles and ending with apes and therefore carry diverse knowledge and can contribute from multiple expertise.

To Subscribe to Zoo Biology send an e-mail to: zoo-biology-subscribe@yahoogroups.com Leave the subject and message area blank.

Once you have taken the first steps to join this group send a separate e-mail to peterd482001@yahoo.co.uk giving a brief biography about yourself e.g. your name, collection, work area and interests. All details will be kept strictly confidential. Failure to send this information will mean that your subscription will not be processed. Please mark this 'APPROVE' in the subject area of this e-mail.

Your request to join the group will be held for seven days. Should your biography not arrive in that time your original request will be removed from the process list. Thank you

GOA -- Friday 6th January 2006

I thought today I would visit Bondla Zoo, the only public animal collection in Goa state. This to be my first zoo in my Indian tour. Getting there by public transport would have taken an age from my present base so I thought I would hire a taxi for the day. It cost me £20.00. Pricey, but then it is not every day. I had enquired with a few other people but they all had their own trips to waterfalls and spice farms arranged.

The zoo is set in the Bondla Wildlife Sanctuary through which we drove for a while before arriving at the zoo itself. This varies in sections from lush to second rate jungle and I saw no animal life save a few butterflies.

I was not expecting great things of the zoo and so was not disappointed. It was clean, neat and tidy with some quite stunning attached gardens. The animal accommodation was right for the climate and around twenty years old. I thought the denning areas were a bit dismal and that the cages for the Palm Civets a bit small. Some cages were super sized, that for the Leopards in particular. Sadly that is all it was, a huge big empty space. There were six Leopards in all and I suspect that they could not all be let out at once, meaning the others were confined to dungeon like dens for much of the time. They were beautiful animals though. No, that space was wasted, it could be furnished to become spectacular, some thing that other zoos would be jealous of. Other cages had more in the way of vegetation, notably that for Sloth Bear and Jackal. But then again, bare, boring enclosures for Blackbuck, Axis, Sambar and Chowsingha. The Gaur and Wild Boar pens were naturally attractive in their own right.

Apart from Peacocks, Porcupine, Crocodiles, Caimans, a few Snakes and the education centre there wasn't a great deal left to see. There were a few empty pens whose original uses left me wondering. There were two stunning elephants, one of whom was giving rides. All the enclosures had sufficient informative signage. It needed practical and imaginative cage furnishing and it desperately needed an enrichment programme. I suppose I could be more critical but all in all I did not think it was a bad little place. There was no single thing that jumped out at me and said "Gosh this is terrible". At the same time there was nothing that I thought wonderful, clever or imaginative. The animals were, as far as I could see, in good condition. The Jackal was nervy, but then they usually are. The Sloth Bear was stereotyping, but that doesn't really surprise me. I am constantly aware on my zoo visits that I am there but for a fleeting moment. My experience allows me to partly read the picture for when I am not. As my first Indian zoo however it will become my standard for the others which I visit.

Wednesday 25th January 2006

The Bannerghatta Biological Park (Bannerghatta zoo and safari) <http://www.bannerghattabiopark.org> is set in a national park and is quite a way out from anywhere. It cost me a hundred rupees to get in. The zoo is spread over perhaps 10 acres, the majority of which is under the shade of trees or large stands of bamboo. There were keepers at

work throughout, cleaning and a number of ladies sweeping the whole grounds. And I mean, the whole, I don't reckon any of it will have been missed by noon. There were two toilet blocks, a couple of snack bars and an education centre and cinema. All the enclosures were clean or in the process of being cleaned. The aquarium was a waste of time and on a par with that which I saw in the botanical garden. There are such good aquarium set ups out there that if you can't get even half way there you shouldn't bother at all. Well that's my opinion.

The reptiles were all held outside in walled planted enclosures. What was especially nice was that, in most cases you could see several of the occupants. Mind you I was able to note that one of the cobras was dead and several were in the latter stages of reaching the same state, with that sunken twisty spine appearance. The trouble was that there were just too many snakes in there and all apart from the risks involved there was no obvious way of ensuring each animal got enough food enough of the time. Okay maybe I'm missing something here but this was my interpretation. The three King Cobras were magnificent beasts. I always think they seem more intelligent than other snakes too. The poor unfortunate Sand Boa in its massive enclosure had nowhere to burrow. They are lovely snakes but you rarely see them...because they are meant to be under the sand. Two beautiful Green Iguanas in a bleak concrete enclosure. Clean as a whistle. The space was there but not utilised. This needed branching up so they could move into a three dimensional world. A bit of decoration would make a world of difference too.

The leopard enclosure was large and attractive incorporating as it did the natural lie of the land and some huge boulders. It had real height too. I think its a pity that this was not utilised by including tree trunks and allowing the animals to get up off the ground. I was uncertain how many leopards there were. I could hear at least two in the house. There were five overweight males in the outside enclosure. There was a whole bunch of porcupines (tasty) in a bare concrete enclosure. They had tunnels to hide in and a couple of tree trunks but nowhere to dig. A Porcupine without digging is a deprived porcupine. There were some nice looking hippos. Sadly these were kept in a huge pit with a series of gates and flooding capabilities. It was possibly the worst hippo enclosure I have seen. Clean, well cared for animals, just hopeless design. There was a massive walk through aviary with a great deal of height and room to fly. Species included Pelican, Night Heron, Spoonbill and White Storks amongst others. Many of the Pelicans and Herons were sitting on nests. I liked this aviary.

There was a troop of wild Bonnet Macaques ranging through the zoo. At the time of my visit about a dozen were on top of the leopard enclosure. I can imagine such visitors could be a problem within open topped enclosures. Perhaps though they were just well fed because the other primates I saw were. Both the Rhesus and Assamese Macaques were overweight and one of the Assamese had an eye infection. The crocodilian enclosure were quite nice. I can't recollect ever having seen so many Caiman in

one enclosure before. I particularly liked the use of bamboo as a plant throughout the park. It looks good and what's more it sounds good when there is a bit of a breeze blowing.

I never saw a dirty or green or algae pool in this zoo. This surprised me in view of the warmth and sunlight. It suggests a vigorous cleaning programme.

I know that the Peacock is India's national bird and as such needs nothing but the best in the way of accommodation but I don't believe they should be given more space over and above other species in need. The enclosures here for the Palm Civet and the Jungle cat were drab, unimaginative and too small. The Jackal enclosure was another that desperately needed a serious re-think. The Zebra enclosure was good and yet that for the Blackbuck and Axis was too small. I would have mixed the two and utilised the large empty space between the two pens.

Now it was not my intention for my report on the zoo to be a critique but that is how it has turned out by just putting together my thoughts on how I saw it. In general I liked the place. The staff appeared to be enthusiastic and were paying attention to detail. No, what the place really needs is a bit of a shake up. A bit more imagination with cage furnishings and an enrichment programme. It definitely needs professional input in any future cage design. The hippos for one would be thankful for it.

Neither the Director or Assistant Director were on site at the time of my visit. Next I went on the 'Grand Safari'. I have never been a fan of Safari Parks and have not really liked them at all until 'zoo' people started to outnumber the 'other' employees. That's bye the bye because this was the best safari park I have ever been in. I would not have cared if I had not seen a single animal, but I did. It is always difficult to get a true idea of the area covered when paths criss cross each other but I would say that this area is huge. There are several areas, not all of which we went into. There is an area which apparently holds a hundred or so lions which were rescued from Indian circuses. Then there is the Born Free Foundations European tiger rescues. We firstly moved into the Herbivore area. Dense thick bush, valleys, streams, rocks, lakes and boulders. Massive trees and termite mounds. It was brilliant. We did see Gaur, Axis, Nilgai and Sambar and elephants with mahouts.

There were a couple of dozen people on the bus and this included some Europeans and Americans. All enjoyed the opportunity to photograph but wanted to know more. I think a trained guide would have made all the difference, "this is a spotted deer" or "this is a blue bull" is not enough. It needs info on the trees, birds and termites, it could have been a truly magical adventure. The next enclosure we passed into was the bear enclosure. This too was massive but smaller than the previous, at a guess 30 acres, may be more. It was moated!! We are not talking mini moat either this was a great big thing. It must have taken ages to construct and a small fortune too. Now I did see a couple of Sloth bears, "this is Indian black bear", which I know are ace diggers, but cannot these be kept behind an electric

fence? I don't see why not. It would have saved so much time and effort. It is not that the technology is not being used here because it is. The Herbivore enclosure is surrounded by a huge dry stone wall on top of which is an electric fence. In the middle of the bear enclosure was the bear house. This was a huge great building with something like thirty+ dens. I don't know who designed this but it looked wrong for the climate. I would have liked to have a closer look at it, even a drive around. I puzzled about the necessity for such a construction and the practicalities of its operation. It suggested to me a great deal of 'bear control' was being practiced behind the scenes. In the distance there was a similar, bigger building. I am unsure as to what was being housed there. Next we visited the tigers. A much smaller set up, with much of the vegetation hacked down to ensure everyone got a look. There were four normal and one white tigers in the enclosure and we saw several others and a number of lions in holding pens at various locations. It was okay. I would have set it up differently and I daresay there could be as many ideas as designers.

All in all this was a good 'safari'. The visitors enjoyed it and so did I.

Friday 27th January 2006

In the morning I made my way out to the Sri Chamarajendra Zoological Gardens (Mysore Zoo) <http://www.mysore-zoo.org>. I had informed the Director, Sri Manoj Kumar, through his assistant that I would be visiting and so called in on them first. They were very polite and helpful and offered to show me round. I said I would prefer to go alone but would return after with questions and observations afterwards. In Mysore zoo I saw many similarities to some British zoo, but many differences as well. It is India's oldest zoo, built in the 1890's and one they can be justly proud of. The zoo is situated on the edge of the city. It is walled around its entire perimeter. A great big wall with broken glass and barbed wire on the top to keep intruders out. Meanwhile the grounds are patrolled by zoo security armed with big sticks to sort out anyone breaking the rules (oh how I wish we had something similar in our British zoos). The zoo grounds are neat tidy and well kept. In view of the age of the collection there are some absolutely magnificent trees (mainly labelled) on site. Also in view of how long the zoo has been established there are some horrific outdated buildings which, of course, have preservation orders on them. Happily these are now used as little as possible and then only as temporary holding facilities.

I started out with a quick tour of the kitchens and stores. The quality of foodstuffs being prepared would not be out of place in a top hotel. I had the opportunity to see feeds which had already been made up. It all looked good to me even though some of the food items I was unfamiliar with. You know I forgot to ask how many acres the collection covered but it is a big area. At the end of December 2005 there were 459 mammals, 324 birds and 73 reptiles of 107 species. The collection was for the most part clean, neat and well layed out. Signage was good and mainly in order. The staff were neat, polite and visible. There was a nice little animal hospital with associated facilities staffed by two

vets. The zoo is very popular and there were queues to get in when I arrived and when I left some hours later. I was told that this was a normal day. In the centre of the zoo was a large colony of fruit bats and there were also wild Bonnet Macaques on site. With only a couple of exceptions all the animals were in extremely good condition. The exceptions were, I understand, under veterinary treatment in any case.

What I didn't like was, once again, the aquarium. Sadly another waste of space failing on both educational and conservational scores and looking so dismal lets the rest of the collection down. I didn't like the Hippo enclosures either, though they were marginally better than that at Bannerghatta. I don't know who the architect was who decided they should be kept in pits but I would say that whoever it was had a hand in the design in both collections. By way of contrast the Black Rhino enclosure was fantastic. So too were the enclosures for both the African and Asian Elephants. The Giraffe enclosure was good too.

There were two beautiful big Otters (*Lutra lutra*) in a nice clean neat new enclosure, too modern for my tastes though. What I couldn't figure out was how they didn't get out. Every otter I've ever worked with would have thought the enclosure was an invitation to escape. The enclosures for Chimpanzees and Gorillas were at least as good as most I've seen with the added bonus of huge great big living trees that they are actually allowed to climb. One of the chimps was completely bald and put me in mind of a similar animal in Twycross. The male Gorilla was on his own. Why? Is there not an animal out there in the zoo world that could join him? I feel disgusted that he should be alone. It would be a nice gesture as well as common sense to rectify the situation. None of my business I know but then I don't like seeing single animals. The zoo were proud that their keeper, Sri C. Sankara was amongst the first to receive an International award from 'Gorilla Haven' and there was a sign up to say this.

The bear enclosure was goodish, the Dhole enclosure nice and the Nilgiri Langur pen was fantastic. I probably liked that best of all, though there were others nearly as good. I didn't like the reptile house. Both the design and arrangement was well past its sell by date. The outside reptile exhibits were better but even they needed a little work. The director and his staff were first to admit that they have a long way to go in the enrichment field. They are aware that it is a problem though and are investigating and addressing it. I believe it would be a great gesture and of tremendous value to zookind if some zoo, chapter or individual were to send books or dvd's on enrichment to this collection. Even better sponsor your enrichment officer to visit the zoo to give demonstrations to the staff.

The cat enclosures were okay although some of old fashioned design with some puzzling features. Nice animals though. Though I am not into freaks of nature there was an especially beautiful leopard which was described to me as 'honey' coloured, which I think describes it perfectly. Talking of honey. In the Muntjac enclosure there was a large tree which had no less than 27 bees nests suspended. Most were at least two and a half feet across. The

group of Asian elephants with calves were a joy to watch. There was some work going on in the African enclosure so two bulls were chained up. One a quite magnificent beast. I'm not sure what sex the third, loose, animal was.

I was given a copy of Mysore Zoo Newsletter Vol.3 No.2 August -2005. Whereas I found the whole of this little publication of interest the leading article from the Director's Desk entitled 'A Day in the Life of a Zoo Director' is a real gem. Not only does Sri Manoj Kumar have to deal with your 'standard' zoo problems but other quite unexpected ones too. A good read.

Saturday 28th January 2006

I spent the morning at the Karanji Lake Nature Park. This 90 acre lake is over the road from the zoo and is managed by them. I spent a really happy couple of hours moving round at a snails pace. The lake has several islands which are used for nesting and there are a few reedy boggy areas that people cannot get to. This serves to make it an ideal getaway for birds. There are no introduced species here. I had a horror thoughts before I arrived that I may meet legions of domestic geese and ducks, but no. What I did see included Kingfishers (2 species), Woodpecker, Cormorants (2 species), Egrets (2 species), Pelicans, Coots, Bank Mynah, Herons (4 species), Moorhens, Crows (the sound of India), Painted Storks, Parakeets, numerous Kites and of course there were the golden yellows, the chocolate browns and the little greyey brown guys who I could not identify. Little birds with big voices, big birds with little voices. If I had brought a decent pair of binoculars I daresay I could have added more. My favourite was the Darter which just seemed to appear like the lady in the lake when I least expected it. About half way round was an observation tower from where I got a good look at the Pelicans nesting on one of the islands. There was also one fishing the edge of the reedbeds below me with moderate success. There were several signs saying 'beware of snakes' but I saw no reptiles at all. I saw another mon-goose. This one was up a tree but descended quick enough when it saw me. There were dozens of three banded palm squirrels and the inevitable troop of bonnet Macaques.

At the end of the walk around the lake there was a bridge to 'Butterfly Island'. And it was too! As I was half way across the bridge I could see a cloud of them. The ground here had been planted up to attract them and was working well and there were numerous individuals of seven different species (I saw another three species off the island). I thought it was a great show and easily as good as most tropical butterfly houses I have visited. Also within the Nature Park was India's largest walk through aviary. This was 60 metres long, 40 metres wide, 20 metres high. Yes it was huge, and spotlessly clean, polished and manicured and sorry, I didn't like it. To me an aviary of this sort should be a jungle of vegetation. Birds should be hard to see, fun to spot, able to hide, escape within the confines. A magnificent aviary wasted. There was a couple of Great Pied Hornbills and at least one Common Grey Hornbill. The rest was made up of Black Swans, Guinea Fowl, Peafowl and a few white rabbits.

Monday 6th February 2006

After a rather interesting curry breakfast I caught a rickshaw to Coimbatore V.O.C. Mini Zoo. It turned out that it was very little distance away from my hotel. I was due to meet the zoo director Dr. S.Thirukumaran and Marimuthu from the Zoo Outreach Organisation at 10 a.m. Just three Rupees to get in. As I was a little early it gave me five minutes to assess the entrance to the zoo. First impressions were good. It looked clean, neat and tidy and well shaded by mature trees. The first thing visitors see is a large information board explaining, politely, how to behave in the zoo. Next to this was an explanation in laymans terms as to 'Why Zoos?'. I had scarcely digested this before my companions arrived. Marimuthu I had been corresponding for some time and it was as much a pleasure to meet him as it was the very keen and enthusiastic director. There are currently plans to move the zoo to a much larger site about 40km away. They advertised for planning tenders in the local press without any response. Until the pipe dream materialises they are going to put up with the original very 'menagerie' 1965 buildings. Whereas the bricks and mortar have stood the test of time the wire is on the way out and scheduled to be replaced very soon. Like all the zoos I have visited the animals all appear healthy and in good condition.

The biggest problem with the Coimbatore zoo was the lack of cage furniture...ie Primary Enrichment. First among these was perching or climbing branches ...there wasn't any or they were simple metal angle irons or concrete reinforcing rods. Wholly inadequate. At a guess branches have been tried in the past and the parakeets chewed it, it rotted and fell down etc. Practically every one of these exhibits needed just branching. Everything from primates to peafowl could have a change of life with just a few hours work. At the same time the appearance of exhibits would be enhanced to say nothing about improved coat, beak and foot health. The reptile 'house' here was the best I have seen in India so far. True the glass needed a good clean and the exhibits tarting up but from an overall management point of view they were good. I am making a distinction here between 'house' and 'pits' because the Bannerghatta pits were good and those here very poor.

Once again the poor little Palm Civet or Toddy Cat seem to be getting the raw end of the deal. Drab unimaginative boring little concrete box. Hopefully this will be changed with some thoughtful branching up. The Jackals too. Too close to the public, nowhere to hide, nervous to begin with they must be on the edge of breakdown all the while the zoo is open. There was ample scope here for increasing space for all apart from the herbivores through doubling up and creating mixed exhibits. Budgies and cockatiels together, tortoises on the bottom etc. I really wonder too if it is really necessary to keep so many Cobras, Black Kites and Ring-necked Parakeets. Moving the Jackals into the empty lion enclosure would be a brilliant idea. The zoo was neat and clean. Very good paths and the signage exceptional.

Marimuthu arranged a ride on the back of a motorbike and I met up with him at the headquarters of the Zoo Outreach

Organisation. It was a real pleasure to actually visit the nerve centre of this incredibly important group. A genuine delight too to meet the very happy little team which keep things running so smoothly. Each and every month they produce two magazines of importance as well as printing 'T' shirts and other items and providing an all too valuable information and advice resource. I for one have been reading their 'Zoos' Print' magazine for a number of years now and count it amongst my favourites. All the people in the office were so genuine and friendly. This along with multi-tasking and teamwork is undoubtedly the key to their success. The building was extremely well laid out with areas dedicated to particular tasks. Much better than many a zoo office. Sadly, Sally Walker was not there, she being on family business in the States. She was though talked about with genuine affection by her team, whom I believe she must be justly proud of.

Wednesday 8th February 2006

Took a taxi over to Thrissur Zoo. It is never a good thing, but due to little tales I had heard, I had already had some idea of what this collection was like. Thrissur was the former capital city of Kerala so I suppose the zoo superintendents guess at the zoo being around a hundred years old would not be far out. Taking this on board it explains the Victorian menagerie style of the majority of the enclosures. It is very, very old fashioned with big metal bars being the rule rather than the exception. In many instances the appearance of these has been worsened by affixing chain link on top of this. The aviaries are not much better to look at being made of heavy gauge small mesh chain link in the first place. As with this style of Victorian animal architecture the very breath of a carnivore needs thicker bars, thicker walls and a much more dungeonlike appearance.

The general structure for most cages here is barred dens, holding pen, adjoining pen and then a roofed wall less house built over the top. This provides shade and that all important circulation of air.

There are plans with this collection too to move it to a new bigger site outside of the city. I believe this would be a pity because its present location is fine. There are some impressive shade giving trees and it is walking distance from the town centre. No, I reckon the collection itself should be re-assessed and planned and, with the space that is already available start a steady build/demolish/rebuild throughout the collection. This would be less disruptive, more easily managed and cheaper. The zoo was, for the most part, neat clean and tidy, particularly where animals were present. I do have this thing though about dirty empty cages and there were several of those. Healthwise most looked well. Several overweight primates, a tiger with curvature of the spine and a few skin problems but nothing of huge concern.

There was a black leopard here which had been trapped near to Cochi some 14 years ago which I thought unusual. There was a huge number of Axis deer and judging by some of the females an increase in the population is just days away. They are not in a position to release and as they do so well in captivity it is unlikely any other collection

will want them. They are tackling the problem by vasectomising the males. Thirty have been done so far but there must be that number and more to do again. It is not going to be easy. Surprisingly I saw only two Blackbuck. Both males with horn problems and both in separate enclosures. The great hippo pit phenomenon continues. Just who was that designer because I'd like to give him a big kick. Here though there was a large outside enclosure with a pool at its centre. I saw two hippos, one outside and one in the pits. These along with the Sambar are held at the other side of a road which divides the zoo. This is accessible by a bridge. Once again too the poor little 'Toddy Cat' gets the worst of accommodation. Bare concrete, no perches. Very sad. The Jungle Cats and Small Indian Civets were equally badly housed. The peacock enclosure was nice, so too was that for the pelicans. The single porcupine had somewhere to dig (but nothing to chew) but sadly the wild boar were on concrete. The Himalayan bears appeared to be restricted to their back holding pens. The spacious and attractive outside pen didn't look like it had been used for some time. Two older Victorian bear pens were empty but looked like they were being painted and repaired. It only cost 6 Rupees to get in. That is around 10 pence. Less of course for kids. Just inside is a noticeboard "Attention Please - Any visitor who is apprehended teasing or feeding the animals can be punished with a fine or imprisonment under the wildlife protection amendment act 1991". Actually though, all the visitors I saw were extremely well behaved. Just as well really because the barriers here are close to none existent. They just would not work in a zoo in, well Wales for a start. The signage was very good. All hand painted but extremely informative. Most broken down into name, scientific name, local name, size, habitat and distribution, distinctive characteristics, food, nesting etc

The most impressive animals for me were the Mithun or Midhun (*Bos frontalis*), the hybrid, semi domestic Gaur. I don't recollect seeing them before. I won't forget these. I'd hate to ever get on the wrong side of one. I once had a flying lesson from a Cape Buffalo. A Mithun would put me into orbit. The reptile house was very old fashioned but functional. It was actually a building which you entered and viewed from the inside. The majority of the glass fronted exhibits lined the walls and got natural heat by a wire grid to the outside. Most of the units were small and so just had one or two occupants making feeding and husbandry that much easier. The central cases of the building were empty. The cases held the usual cobras, rat snakes and sand boas. There were a couple of pythons in outside cages.

I would like to thank the zoo superintendent Mr. Sasidharan for his cooperation and for listening to me. I can imagine just how annoying it must be having some stranger turning up and telling you what you need to be doing. I do try to be as constructive in my criticism as I possibly can. It is the easiest thing in the world to say you need to do this, that and the next. Doing it is another thing altogether. For the most part Indian Zoo Keepers are just doing a job. The 'vocation' side is not part of the formula. Creating an incentive to do more than is absolutely necessary is very difficult. Money is always a problem, even just a tiny bit of

money. It is easy enough to say "give the animals a cardboard box to play with". Some people literally live in cardboard boxes. Last night at 10 p.m. I walked through the streets of Thrissur. I have never seen so many people sleeping on the pavements...many without as much as a sheet of cardboard to lie upon. The 'problems' in Indian zoos are not going to go away by tomorrow. Happily we do have the Central Zoo Authority and the Zoo Outreach Organisation which are doing their very best to tackle the recognized problems.

Tuesday 14th February 2006

Walked out to the Trivandrum zoo. I did not initially let anyone know I had arrived simply because I did not come across the zoo office till I was leaving. Marimuthu had kindly informed the director Mr. Unnikrishnan that I would be visiting. This, on the whole, was an attractive and interesting zoo to visit.

Much 'modernisation' has taken place in past five years and continues today. There are some truly horrible Victorian menagerie type cages which are now being utilised for species for which they were not originally intended. I can't say that they are any better for those than the original occupants... or maybe just a wee bit. These old buildings are classics though and have real architectural value, beauty and interest in their own right and it would be a big loss if they disappeared. In a peculiar sort of way they are some of the best preserved examples of Kerala building in the Trivandrum area. Perhaps someone will build that much dreamed about zoo museum and move these buildings there. Much of the new construction here is 'Hagenbeck Ha-Ha Moat' type design. It works, it looks and is good. The only criticism that I would make on this is that when it is in the planning stages it should be looked at from the visitor viewing perspective. The blind spots and slip ups in the contours detract from the overall picture. I could actually believe that the Indian Rhino and the Asiatic Elephant were in the same enclosure for half the viewing but it then became obvious they were not. Just that extra little bit of work and thought would have made all the difference. Both of these enclosures were large, attractive and interesting. I only saw one animal in each and the Elephant was chained. The first enclosure you meet on entering the zoo is for Lion-tailed Macaque. I only saw one, but noted another in an off show exhibit elsewhere. The enclosure was exceptional. Big and wild and full of trees.

Close by one of the older heavily barred enclosures, now with mesh attached was being used for King Cobras and Pythons. It didn't really work for me and I could hardly make out the snakes. On later reflection though I reckon if you are going to use those cages for anything at all then they had made the best choice. This choice was not maintained by using them to house birds of prey like White-bellied Sea Eagle and Cinereous Vulture. It just about worked for pheasants and parakeets though these needed tarring up. Sadly it failed again with the collection of Herons, Storks, Pelicans and Ibis. It could possibly be okay if all the dividing caging were removed and it utilised as one large mixed unit. I was especially taken by the very striking Black Necked Storks.

The large open enclosures with artificial rock work on three sides with wet or dry moated fronts was continued around the collection and used to house Capuchin, Rhesus Macaque, Common and Nilgiri Langurs, Indian Black and Sloth Bears, Lions and Tigers. All were lushly planted and contained large and/or mature trees. All were very generous in terms of space and were a pleasure to look at. None of these enclosures were overstocked and with the exception of the Capuchin appeared content with their lot. The two male Capuchins were stereotyping. The enclosure was brilliant and even included a small pool and waterfall. Their behaviour suggested many previous years in inadequate housing. However a bit of clever enrichment or even something simple like random scatter feeds may be a solution.

The Hippo enclosure was a joy, big and open with a huge pool. Sadly they were locked away somewhere whilst cleaning was carried out. The Jackals were a touch better off with an earth based enclosure. Still I thought just too small and too close to the public. It would be easy too to believe that Indian Jackals have short tails because most of those I have seen have around nine inches missing. The main tiger enclosure looked to be one of the older of the new designed and possibly the model used for the new enclosures, very nice, but sadly there were tigers locked away in Victorian Menagerie set ups too. The leopards were the same. Really nice enclosure but 'surplus' locked away in the 'dungeons'.

The grounds themselves are attractive. Beautiful big trees. Due to the tropical and much more humid environment of South Kerala the vegetations much more green and lush. The barriers of a metal bamboo type design were attractive and seemed to work. They would have been inadequate in a UK zoo though (sadly). The paths here were a bit dicey in parts but for anyone familiar with the death trap which is your average Indian pavement, then they were a positive example of safety. There was more rubbish here than the other collections I have visited. Not everywhere, but in parts. The labelling was inconsistent throughout. The information provided was good but each enclosure seemed to provide a new style. I didn't care for that.

There was a huge and active Fruit Bat colony in the centre of the zoo. I was glad I was wearing my hat. Not that would have been any protection from the huge branch which fell and just missed me by inches when I was watching the Rhino. I looked up but could not figure out why on such a still day such a limb should fall. Mill seconds later and it would have had me. Spent some minutes in the open meditating on what could have/would have been. I was pleased to see the Palm Civets had not been shoved in some totally inadequate enclosure. That's maybe because I did not see any Palm Civets at all. Here they were replaced with Giant Squirrel and Jungle Cats. Totally inadequate housing. It was towards the end of my visit that I saw my first sign for the zoo office and so called in. I went wrong at first and though he didn't say his name, I think I was talking to Mr. Gopala Krishnan Nair, the zoo superintendent. He pointed me in the direction of the Directors office and I gave a courtesy call. Again a nice guy and I think justly

proud of what is, on the whole a very good zoo. I rambled on a bit about the value of environmental enrichment on the much neglected mental health of animals. I didn't pursue this because I don't want to jump into that all too easy role as critic unless it really needs it. This is a good zoo that is getting better. There was a large attractive looking Zoo Hospital but sadly I did not get to look around this.

Wednesday 15th February 2006

I hired a rickshaw this morning to go out to the Neyyar Dam in the Neyyar Wildlife Sanctuary and visit the Crocodile Protection Centre and Lion Safari. The Crocodile Centre was established in 1977 and is devoted entirely to the Mugger (*Crocodilus palustris*). The set up, I thought, was ideal. It consisted of around 35 pens of varying sizes. Each pen was walled up to just over a metre in height. There was a roofed cage which rose another metre. Half of the caged roof was shaded with palm leaves. The single padlocked door led into a grass pen. The centre of the pen was a concrete pool with one sloping side. The size and depth of the pool was determined by the size of the pen. In all there were about 58 crocodiles held singly or in pairs. All appeared to be in good health. I understand they are fed a varying diet with feeding taking place on alternate days. There was a single pen containing a python which had been caught locally several years before. It was a truly magnificent specimen and the cage more than adequate. The same could not be said for a single adult Bonnet Macaque which was being held in a tiny dirty cage. Nor for the thirty or so Ring-necked Parakeets being held directly opposite. Their housing was dirty, cramped and totally unsuitable. One wonders why they were being kept at all.

I then bought a ticket for the Lion Safari. Without question this was the most expensive entry ticket I have purchased so far. At 350 Rupees it was three and a half times what I paid for the combined Bannerghatta zoo/safari ticket. I could get a 20 hour bus ride, seven decent meals or several hundred miles on a train for the same money, and that was without the cost of getting out to the park in the first place. Okay, one hundred of the entrance fee was, according to my ticket because I was a foreigner. What I cannot see is how any average local person could ever afford two hundred and fifty. There were five of us in the bus (may be I paid for everybody). We left the Crocodile Breeding Centre and drove around the reservoir for about ten minutes before approaching a large garage which we drove into. The door behind was locked and the roller door in front of us slowly rose. At a guess we entered an area of around 20 acres. It was surrounded by a twelve foot weldmesh fence which was set into a concrete wall. The top of the fence was dressed with barbed wire.

The actual enclosure was brilliant, very natural and appealing. We came across a male and two female Asiatic Lions sitting in the road. They were in beautiful condition though a bit overweight. One of the females had a severe fresh wound to her right fore paw. This had been bitten half way through and I could not see this healing easily. Both driver and guide noted this and reported it to a keeper. A little further on we came to a large holding pen in which I saw another two lions. I was told there were nine animals

altogether (3.6.0). That was it, about half an hour in total... Back to my rickshaw. A bit of a swizz I thought but then I suppose my curiosity would have made me pay double that amount for a look see. I certainly was not going to pay the extra to take a photo.

Thursday 16th February 2006

This morning I intended to visit the Aquarium at Sankumugham. According to the 2005 road guide to Thiruvananthapuram "This aquarium is considered to be one of the largest and most up-to-date in Asia". To be honest I'm not sure whether I reached the right aquarium though I much doubt there are two in the same area. A mix up of not really knowing the name of the place. What I did get to was the 'Vizhinjam Research Centre of the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute'. This was without a doubt the best aquarium I have seen in India so far but still a long long way from the standards set by 'Blue Planet' or 'The Deep'. It is not that they didn't have clean water or healthy fish because they did, and some real beauties too. No, what they lack is that someone with a flair for setting up an aquarium to look attractive and interesting... even when empty. The fish should be the bonus. As most of the tanks were marine and one of held a fantastic display of living corals, then they clearly have the water chemistry down to a tee. They had good information signs and some excellent display boards too. So it wasn't bad at all, but the best in Asia? I'm sorry that must make all the rest pretty dire. A months work by a display specialist and a bit of nifty work on the tank surrounds could make this very good indeed. The aquarium is divided into four different rooms which you pass through. Each contains a varying number of tanks. I suppose the largest must have been 8' long by about 2'6" by 2'6". Mostly they were plain blue backs with a crushed coral base though some had a few rocks chucked in for good measure. There were fish mixes which went quite well. Nothing really special. I have always liked the puffer/porcupine fishes best and these were well represented.

There were five, possibly six species of puffer in one tank. I think I like this group because they are not only the most intelligent of fishes but the most affectionate too. Outside were a few plastic tubs and a pool containing turtles. The off show area contained numerous large fibreglass breeding type pools held under shade. I suppose this is where the real work of the Research Centre takes place.

One of the display boards detailed the life stages of the Cuttlefish (*Sepia pharaonis*) and the success they had rearing this species in captivity. It did not say if they had actually bred them though. One of the other projects they had going was seeding oyster with small images, like Ganesh or Shiva which were then coated with mother of pearl.

Friday 24th February 2006

This morning I visited Chennai/Madras zoo. My friend Marimuthu had, once again contacted the management team to let them know I was coming. Once again though I was misdirected on arrival and did not end up in the offices till the end of my visit. In many ways though this is preferable as I can move at my own pace. The disadvantage is

that I don't get to see behind the scenes. The Chennai/Madras zoo has a claim to being the oldest in India, having being founded in 1855. I don't believe this is a claim that they can hang on to. The zoo was moved the 31 km from the city to its present site at Vandalur in 1979 and opened in 1985. As well as a new location has a new name. It is now the Arignar Anna Zoological Park <<http://www.aazoopark.com>> so in every way it is a completely new zoo. Now it may seem that I am being a bit picky here but it is important because this zoo does not have the problem that the others have. It does not have any Victorian menagerie type exhibits. It is a modern zoo, a good zoo. It is also very large and covers an area of around 602 hectares. The area is served by some really good tarmac roads which run through the park in a series of loops. There is a zoo bus and it would be possible to see a good part of the collection without leaving this. The park is entered through an artificial mountain and waterfall. Just inside there is a restaurant. There are toilet blocks at convenient locations all the way round. The vast majority of species are held in large moated 'haha' type enclosures. They are of differing sizes but most are much more than adequate for the species in which hold. They are big. There are 75 of these! The enclosures all contain trees and/or bushes which provide shade as well as somewhere to play and hide. Some also have lush vegetation. The Jackal enclosure was a joy to see. Massive, plenty of room, ideal. Okay I didn't see any Jackals but, to be honest, I really didn't care. Attached to the collection was a fifteen minute 'Lion Safari' which I did not go on. If this was just half as good as the moated enclosures then it would be very good indeed. I also missed the 7 hectare lake which is used as a resting area by migratory birds. This is a big collection housing in the region of 51 mammal species, 66 species of birds and 30 of herps. I really needed more time here and I hadn't allowed for this. 31 km from Chennai is one thing but 31 km in a rickshaw is another altogether.

They were using the same excellent CEE signs that some of the other collections had employed. I really like these but feel they could be improved by the inclusion of a distribution map. The colour though is restful, the artwork brilliant and the information interesting. It is better than hard repetitive fact.

The large elephant enclosure looked fantastic. Big trees, chest high grass and bushes. The elephant was chained, with its mahout. Further along another elephant chained then in another enclosure a very young (rescued) calf with a mahout. There was apparently another animal but I didn't see it. Now I know nothing about these animals or their history so I am not really in a position to even suggest alternatives but in modern elephant husbandry we are moving towards free roaming groups which is just what should be happening here. Okay, chain for an hour a day for necessity but move away from this being the norm. What these mahouts need to see is a video of Chester zoos elephants in their paddock and being worked by their keeper or they should go up to Mysore see the elephants there and talk to the mahouts there. The management styles are as different as chalk and cheese. Just because something has always been done one way does not

necessarily mean it is the right way. Knowing the elephant keeper mindset someone is going to have a job on their hands if they ever decide to modernise their practice. I was surprised to find a nocturnal house because I hadn't seen one in any of the other zoos. Sadly it wasn't up to much because I could hardly see anything at all. The lighting was all wrong. They need the advice from Sharjah who do it so very well. The one animal I could make out was the Palm Civet... and it was up! It had a branch! It needed more but at least this exhibit was on the right road.

The aquarium was different. It is in the body of a huge concrete shark. The shark sits in a moated pool. Access and egress is via the gills. All the tanks are fresh water, all clean, subtly lit, nicely decorated but sadly all very much the same. Practically the only difference from tank to tank is the fish species it holds. Once again they are all fish that could be picked up from your local aquarist supplier. So, the aquarium is good and Mysore, Ooty and Bangalore could all learn from it but the whole could be turned around to outstanding with a bit more imagination in the set up. I thought some companions for the fruit eating piranha would be nice along with a bigger tank.

The exhibits I liked least here were those for the parrot like. The mesh was just too heavy. Perching was a bit erratic and one was back to the old metal perching. Perching in general was poor. The Koel had none at all and neither did one of the Blue Peafowl enclosures. I thought some of the aviaries too dark also. Shade is especially important here and I suppose it is largely a case of getting that balance right. No, definitely new aviaries should be a high priority. The existing ones let the collection down after the excellence of the moated enclosures.

There were two huge attractive and active walkthrough aviaries with many birds (Hérons, Ibis etc) nesting. I believe one of the Indian White backed Vultures may have been nesting as well.

The bear enclosures were great. The hippo enclosure was marvellous... even having more than one pool so they never went short of water when a pool was being cleaned. The Pygmy Hippos were even better off having even more space.

Nice leopard and Jaguar cages but still at fault by providing the height but no means to utilise it. There were some nice reptile pits and a good collection of crocodilians. The reptile house was quite nice but in spite of the 'Quiet Please' notice was absolutely deafening due to the presence of a school party. The exhibits here could be improved 100% with imaginative décor and clean glass. Glass was a letdown elsewhere in the park too. The otter enclosure was novel. I didn't really care for the design. There was a hint of similarity between this and Mysore (which I didn't care for either) but what really let it down was the state of the glass.

There was a large staff presence which was good. Those I spoke too were informative and helpful. At the end of my visit I went to the offices and had a short chat with Dr. Manimozhi and the Assistant Director. Both nice guys and

very up to date. Like all the collections they were only too aware of the problems. After 21 years the zoo was in need of essential maintenance. Sadly the cash to carry this out was hard to get hold of. So, Vandalur Zoo? Mainly good I thought.

Saturday 25th February 2006

Eventually we arrived at the 'Madras Crocodile Bank Trust' where I was lucky enough to be shown around by the very pretty and proudly enthusiastic Ms. Seema Mundoli. The collection was busy and there were queues to get in. Without a shadow of doubt this was my favourite collection in India so far and ranks in my top ten of best collections ever visited. Although not large, the professionalism shone through. This little place is a conservation success story, it educates, it entertains and it actively researches, publishes and participates in '*in situ*' and '*ex situ*' programmes. So successful has been many of its breeding programmes that they now concentrate on the rarer crocodilians, turtles and tortoises and only breed others to order. The Centre is a long oblong shape with a series of planted walled enclosures of varying sizes. They are all different and to my mind all practical but attractive too. Where crocodilians and turtles mix, this is done and sometimes topped off with the inclusion of fish and amphibians too. The Centre is a natural attractant to bird life and a large number of species have been recorded. There is a huge breeding colony of wild Egrets and Herons at the lower end of the collection. The reptile house here is the best I have seen in India. It looks attractive and the snakes appear to like it too.

They have one especially large Estuarine croc who at 35 years old is sixteen and a half feet long. I was lucky enough to catch some of a puppet show which forms part of the zoo education programmes. It was being enjoyed by its young audience.

Also housed here are a large number of local poisonous snakes ie Cobra, Krait, Russels and Saw Scale. These are caught and publicly milked of their venom during the day. Snakes are later marked and released back into the wild and further snakes caught. This is educational and useful but also provides employment for the snake catchers whose families have been doing this for generations. Once they would have killed the snakes they caught. Now they let them go again. It may not be huge but I would put this place high on your list of places to visit in India. I'm sure you won't be disappointed and if you like Crocodiles you will love it. Chantal the crocodile Goddess would have been on cloud nine.

Sunday 26th February 2006

The Chennai/Madras Snake Park was a real joy. I had read some rather grim descriptions of the collection. All I can think is that whoever wrote them was an 'anti zoo nutter' in the first place or that there have been some drastic changes since the write ups. It was a nice little place, clean, tidy, well decorated and managed with nice healthy specimens on display. Most of the trees had labels on them and all the exhibits did. The species labels gave all the necessary information and included that all too important distribution map. I thought that perhaps one or two of the

crocodilian enclosures could do with being a touch bigger, because then more vegetation could be included and enhance the overall appearance. There was a good keeper presence and the visitors were behaving themselves.

There was a small aquarium, which was better than most I have seen but they have plans to improve upon it further. What was special here were the sea snakes. Not something one sees too often. Or at least I don't. The collection first opened in 1972 and there has been some recent modernisation. It is set within the Guindy National Park which is within greater Chennai itself. There are meant to be wild Axis deer here. There may well be but those I passed were in enclosures. The snake park houses 47 species in total, most of which are Indian snakes. These are housed in attractive exhibits in which someone had

given thought as to the public's perception as well as the comfort of the occupants. It was nice to see three Monitors, Bengal, Water and Yellow. There were seven crocodilian species as well, the Gharials being beautiful specimens. Before leaving I called in to see Dr. Kalaiarasan. A very pleasant guy who with eighteen years in the collection has considerable knowledge and expertise. He was kind enough to answer my questions and tell me of their publications, research and outreach programmes. I was also treated to a powerpoint display by the education officer. His particular interest was sea turtles and he had started his career in the marine aquarium which I had visited down in Kerala. Within the snake park is an excellent little book shop specialising in publications on reptiles of the area. It was nice to see that all it sold and none of the junk that one usually associates with zoo shops.

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