

Day to day at Kabul Zoo - Progress Reports from Brendan Whittington-Jones, Advisor*

Our readers will remember reading about the Kabul Zoo in ZOOS' PRINT and also in the press and on the internet. In the intervening two years, funds raised from a sympathetic public have been used for payment of salaries, food for the animals, construction of animal houses, etc. Yet the zoo has a way to go before it fully settles down.

The Municipality is now taking over more and more of the zoo costs and has plans to increase the surrounding area in future. In order to establish a more consistent regimen of improvements, the Municipality welcomed Brendan Whittington-Jones, who has a background in game management and was in Baghdad, on his own as a foreigner in the zoo for 15 months after the war. Brendon is daily bringing more order to the zoo even as he gets to know its unique problems and potential. The report below are some excerpts from his occasional reports to the North Carolina Zoo and a few people who have remained interested in Afghanistan's only zoo.

KABUL ZOO UPDATE 03-04-2005

My initial view of the Kabul Zoo might have been a bit unsettling but I now have had a few more interesting days after the initial shock and some more pleasing aspects of day to day zoo activity have become apparent. It took only a few hours for the litter which spoiled the appearance of the zoo to be swept up and a reasonable standard of cleanliness established. The new manager is clearly interested in making the zoo look better and this has been done for several areas. The dead snakes have been removed and the bear moat drained in such a way as to water the lawn, which badly required it, and the "extra additives" in the water may well cause the grass to flourish sooner than expected! The keepers are quite happy to clean bits out of the moat and bear area while the bears stalk around them and steal the keepers tools and gloves for entertainment. I was slightly concerned about this from a safety perspective but everyone else seems comfortable so I decided to get on with more urgent tasks! I did manage to confirm that there are 4 black bears and 2 brown bears.

Mr. Akbhary is the Director of the Directory of Culture which is part of the Kabul Municipality, and the Ministry of Culture is a separate entity. The internet issue which was thought to be the responsibility of the Director of the Ministry of Culture by Fazil can, apparently, only be dealt with by the Ministry of Telecommunications which still has no wireless sets available. There don't appear to be any on the alternative market or in normal shops. I was requested to wait for another 2-3 weeks which seems to be the standard "we don't know, wait this long" period.

The administration has no development funds despite the Municipality promoting large scale plans to link the zoo across the river to the Bab Shur gardens a fair distance away, and employing at least 8 more staff to attend gardens between the zoo and the Bab Shur gardens. So there seem to be big plans but no current time frame or means of execution for the project.

The 100,000 AFA (about \$ 2000) which I was told was available for emergencies only (ie: welding broken cages where animals may escape, etc) was used for the fencing and concreting part of the new peacock area. This didn't appear to me to be an emergency but it was explained as "using up the last of last years emergency fund".....and that there isn't money available yet for this year.....and when it is available it will only be for emergencies... until maybe the end of the year when it can be spent on things less like an emergency.

The administrators appears to be quite comfortable with NGO's etc coming and developing the zoo if that is the way the zoo will improve. I saw blue prints today of the intended main building with restaurant and museum, the zoo layout masterplan. I was assured that these were new developments and plans and the US Embassy had promised the municipality the would build these structures.

The plans for this were actually drawn up by Russians in 1975, and although this fact seems not to worry any of the zoo management, I fret that none of it is actually a reality which will happen.

Went to the markets with Fazil today to buy some basic bits and pieces, ropes, brooms etc., which is another aspect of management which needs to be more organised. I am still working on the concept that these are some of the things they should be using their "emergency money" for.

Although I am still getting to know the staff and what each one does, there are, at least a small group who seem keen to carry out most of the daily duties. A handful of the keepers always seem keen to work and I think they just need adequate supervision. One keeper in particular (the macaque island man) seems to make quite an effort to stop people teasing "his" monkeys. I witnessed him thump a young kid on the side of the head with a large stick, which did the job.

The Ministry of Education program to teach basic literacy to the staff seems to be starting as a teacher arrived on Saturday. She spent an hour talking to the cleaning lady as no other staff showed up for the lesson. Nonetheless it is a start.

I asked our Education Officer, Mohd. Fazil to go to the printing shop today to have signs made regarding the teasing of animals. He has some good ideas. The signs are based on the prints he got from his trip to India and Pakistan...so that is paying some dividends. The printers can only make standard A4 sized laminated posters at the moment but it will be a start, And the graphics are better than writing for the visitors who can't read. The signs will be ready on Wednesday and Fazil will get larger metal prints made when the metal man from the Department of Culture returns in "two to three weeks".

* Edited by S. Walker, Editor Emeritus, ZOOS' PRINT.

I have been looking at options for the wolves and the simplest way may actually be to relocate them to where there is one pig (opposite the lions, next to the porcupines). With the concrete area covered with some good substrate, the central pool area which has no water or drainage filled with deep substrate, and a decent fence to surround the area it could be far better than what exists now. The area already has large trees in it, and with the concrete base the wolves couldn't dig themselves out of the enclosure.

I'm currently thinking on where the pig might go. The engineer is coming to the zoo in the next few days so we can discuss potential aviaries, some fencing work and building new public toilets which are badly needed.

Water is an issue which needs some serious attention. At the moment the water pump is not working due to electricity supply problems. It seems the power coming through is single phase while the pump requires triple phase electricity. The electricity department is apparently aware the problem and is working on it.....but the pump hasn't worked for a month now. The direct affect of this is that some areas of the zoo which need water are not getting it, such as the newly built Chinese bear area for example. There is a city water supply which seems to cover some areas near the front gate but is being used for pools which are not sealed. (Sealing the base of the pools using this supply would definitely help).

Regarding diets, the animals are being fed reasonable amounts of food and a bit of variety. I am sure the diets can be improved but doing it on paper may be a lot easier than implementing such changes. There is a room within the main building that with a coat or two of paint, and the electrics and water repaired can be a good food prep room.

I will try send through some pictures when I get a faster internet link. If there are any specific pictures anybody wants, let me know.

20 April -- two weeks later

Daily visitor numbers are still in excess of 500 (although a curious development is the rumour of a 7kg scorpion being on exhibit which has on its own has proved to be quite the marketing tool for the zoo).

Some of us met the Deputy Mayor of Kabul, on Saturday. It was an upbeat meeting, with a promise from him of at least 2 extra staff to work on the development of gardens and general litter clearing. The issue of the 100 000 Afghanis which was being reserved only for emergencies has been clarified and is now available for purchase of basic items needed through the year.

Staff continue to work very well. Moral has improved with the purchase of some basic necessities to allow them to do their jobs, better, and the visible changes we've helped them with in their holding areas. The key is to get management to maintain equipment levels with the 100,000 AFA.

The bear-holding facility was made functional again for no cost and has been disinfected. Bears are now being brought inside quite easily while cleaning outside is done. The macaque holding facility has been scrubbed from black and wretched inside to almost white and disinfected. Great work by the 63 year old keeper!

Loads of soil have been placed in most enclosures. Large changes in behaviour of pigs, porcupines and several bird species as a result.. Extra rubbish bins have been purchased, painted and distributed through the zoo. We are working on implementing regular disinfection to maintain current improvements.

The kitchen renovation is nearing completion for \$250. A few extra items, minor electrical work, fly screens for the windows and one or two extra tables will make the area quite adequate.

I met Dr Sherman today who can give only limited assistance, but nonetheless may be able to assist with logistics of procurement of medicines and materials locally or from Pakistan. I discussed the idea of support from the veterinary college but he feels at this point there simply isn't enough practical experience or knowledge among staff or students at the veterinary college to be of much assistance. He will keep it in mind as the veterinary assistance projects develop. Management all agrees that a new vet is needed at the zoo and are going to see if it is possible to organise this with the appropriate Ministries. Health of most animals appears reasonable....confirmed by Dr Sherman. Skin problems are an issue among the bears, jackals and macaques. It is most likely parasite related.

We need to know if Ivermectin be used for birds or is there a more preferable medication to control parasites? Also need to know if Ivermectin can be administered intramuscularly rather than subcutaneous? How would this affect the effective dose? Is oral Ivermectin paste easily to source outside Afghanistan?

Is there anyway of sourcing a pole syringe for the Kabul zoo? Does someone have a very basic list of medicines, materials which should be found in a zoo vet facility for daily use, or very basic emergencies which I could try source out here? Perhaps some of the Indian and Pakistani animal vets would be good to contact in this regard.

Still waiting for quotes on the wolf development and various small fencing projects, most importantly a chainlink barrier around the bear perimeter to limit the amount of litter thrown in. All animals are now getting multivitamin supplement with their food. Working on finding a secure supply locally.

A new phone should be arriving within the next few days. Dr Ashraf is working on this. British Cimic will bring a software technician with them to get the computer they donated working.