

Heini Heidiger and his visit to the Shimla Zoo

Exerpt from an autobiography in German of Heini Heidiger; first published in *Back When ... & Then ? Vol.III, No.I, April 1999*

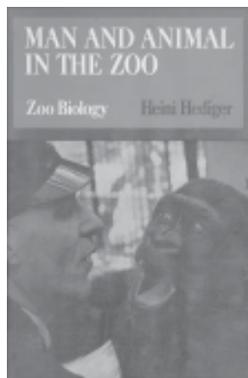
Heini Heidiger - author of the famous *Man and Animal in the Zoo* - is considered by some zoo pro-fessionals as the father of modern zoo management.

However, not many people know that Heidiger visited India in 1969 to advise the Himachal Pradesh Forest Department on a design for the Shimla Zoo.

His visit there has been remembered by him in his autobiography. The autobiography was published in German and translated for Zoo Outreach Organisation by Christien Schmidt, Director of the Frankfurt Zoo. The account which follows has been taken from this translation.

The plan given by Heidiger following this visit was never used. Ironically, at least two planning exercises afterwards were held for the same zoo. Even I was called to see a remarkable site for a zoo in a dramatically sloping alpine forest in about 1982. Some mention was made of Heidiger, but the plan seems to have been forever lost. This is a pity as the subsequent plans and sites left much to be desired. Here is the story, a translation of Heidiger's report.

Sally Walker



In March 1969, I was surprised by a task from the Pro-Helvetia Foundation. The Game Warden (sic) of Shimla, capital of the Indian State Himachal Pradesh, K L. Mehta, had the idea to create a "National Himalayan Zoological Park" and wanted me as advisor. There are many very interesting animals in the Himalaya, which are neither represented in the prominent Indian zoos such as Delhi, Bombay, or Calcutta, nor in the great zoos of the rest of the world. For example, the huge wild Yak -- in contrast to the smaller domestic Yak -- has never been shown in any zoo. A Himalaya Zoo would have been able to show many other species and to contribute to their conservation, e.g. the blue sheep, the mighty ibex, the huge Nian, a wild sheep of a donkey's size, the Kashmere deer, the musk deer and many others.

The task was extremely challenging. I envisioned a zoo with selected specialities, of course without any bars. The zoological park was projected in a wonderful mountain forest with cedars and rhododendrons, and it was aimed to be the nucleus of a future National Park.

It had to be considered that the zoo should not be too expensive. Shimla in those times had a population of about 100,000 inhabitants, most of them poor hill farmers, hardly any Europeans and about 50,000 tourists each year, who wanted to escape for a while from the heat of the lowlands. During the colonial age, the Viceroy of India used to move during the summer with his complete administration from the hot Delhi city to the cool hill town of Shimla, as many may know from Rudyard Kipling's nice book "Kim".

So I flew mid March 1969 in an official mission via Karachi and Bombay to Delhi, where I was received by K.L. Mehta,

the head of the Game Department of Himachal Pradesh, and brought to the most luxurious hotel !

The garden of the hotel in Delhi housed numerous amphibians and reptiles, and during an evening walk I met for the first time a free living mungoose. The large Delhi zoo with wonderful vegetation had been designed originally by Hagenbeck, but was now of course under Indian directors.

After a few days, Mehta and I left the fascinating metropolis in an old car. We had only a little time at Chandigarh, the capital of Punjab, to see the university, built by Le Corbusier. A little later we entered the mountains on a more and more adventurous road. To my astonishment, at Shimla I was taken to the former residence of the Viceroy which was now empty since year. It was a huge metal roofed palace, in front of which was an armed guard. A servant guided me into a cool, hall-like sleeping room, where an enormous -- the viceroial -- canopy bed was prepared for me. I felt like an exhibit in a museum. Only the old servant, who followed me like a shadow, seemed to live somewhere in the vicinity. Next morning a heavy noise on the metal roof woke me up. They were rhesus monkeys, which every morning, as I found out later, inspected the roofs and towers.

Then we visited the site of the projected zoo which was extremely varied with hills and valleys. The narrow road sometimes was so steep that the jeep had to perform risky manoeuvres. A few animals were already present in primitive enclosures and cages.

I used to spend the mornings outside on the site, while I designed the future enclosures and their dimensions in the afternoon. In addition I had meetings with representatives of the various forest and city authorities. Once I gave a talk to officers of the Forest Department, another time at the Rotary Club. Finally, a first layout was finished and a net of orientation posts was put on the site-at least for the first phase of construction and financing.

It was not easy to destroy the favorite idea of Mr. Mehta and his colleagues: a large enclosure for polar bears in the center of the zoo. In spite of all understanding of the need for some exotic animals. I could not agree on polar bears in an altitude of 2400 m in the midst of cedars and rhododendrons.

My resistance to the polar bear project was also based on financial consideration. Enormous amounts of concrete, steel and glass would have been necessary. And not only the material, also the transport of it into this remote mountains would have afforded large sums. Such a project I could not recommend and warned seriously that they should not pursue it.

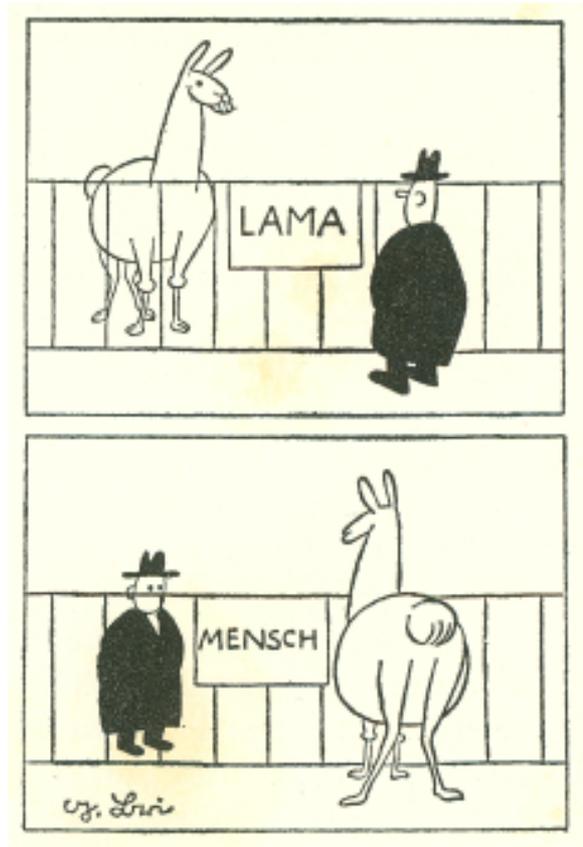
One afternoon, when I was occupied with my final report at the desk of the ex-viceroial room, such a wonderful spring sun was shining outside, that I opened the window as well as the fly screen. Suddenly, when I looked up from my papers, I was confronted with a huge rhesus monkey, who just was going to take the flowers out of the flowerpot, which my servant had put on my desk. Although I love primates like all other animals, this close visit was too

much for me. Instead of fleeing, the monkey threatened me and showed his strong, sharp teeth. Should I flee? I shouted at the unwelcomed guest and imposed at the best I was 'able to do. After a critical second, the rhesus left the flowerpot and the flowers and disappeared through the window. On our way back we stopped again at Chandigarh, where I gave a talk at the university. At the institute of the famous anthropologist Chapra a sensational discovery had been made: Chapra had the skull of the fossil hominid Gigantopithecus, which he kept in the safe of the institute. I had the honour to see this extraordinary rarity and to hold it for a few moments in my hands.

In Delhi, my program was so condensed that I was able to accept an invitation of the noble Indian R.D. Jain only for breakfast. Jain belonged to a wellknown religious community whose members take extremely care not to harm any animals. Therefore they have professions, that avoid the risk of destroying even unintendedly any worm or beetle. In parting, Mr. Jain presented me a picture with twenty four illustrations of various animals such as fish, crocodile, duck, porcupine, goat, elephant, and others, all of which could be incarnations of humans.

In Indian zoological gardens it is striking to observe how respectfully visitors approach animals. As an European zoo director, I wished that kind of disciplined behaviour for my own visitors!

Heini Hediger (1990) Ein Leben mit Tieren im Zoo und in aller Welt, Werd Verlag, Alle Rechte vorbehalten, einschließlich derjenigen des auszugsweisen Abdrucks und der photomechanischen Wiedergabe, Werd Verlag, Zurich. ISBN 3859320440



What does man mean to the animal ? What does the animal mean to man ? Cartoon from Heini Hediger's book, Man and Animal in the zoo.

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