

Zoo Management (including Conservation Breeding) and the Policy of routine Transfer of Officials

This is the fifth in a series of opinion pieces by Editor Emeritus which normally accompany a reprinted article or document of considerable merit on an aspect of conservation breeding.

This month my article of choice got derailed because I could not get permission to reprint it in time for this issue. You can read it in this year's International Zoo Yearbook however. It is called **Sustaining the Ark: the challenges faced by zoos in maintaining viable populations** by Carolyn Lees & Jonathan Wilken from the Australasian Regional Zoo Association and Auckland Zoological Park, New Zealand published in the International Zoo Yearbook, (2009) 43: 6–18, Zoological Society of London.

It is an excellent article about the sustainability (or rather, lack of sustainability) of captive populations in zoos in today's difficult world. The authors highlight the fact that the world's leading zoos, while intending to counterbalance the forces (primarily human activities) that threatened the sustainability of *in situ* populations, has in fact largely failed to apply sufficient management to its own *ex situ* wildlife populations. The paper reviews the herculean efforts of the international zoo community in the past quarter century.

Readers beware! If you are part of the South Asian Zoo Community, for which this magazine and its articles is intended, don't think for a minute that you have succeeded where the global zoo community has failed. You have just made the barest beginning in the last 2-3 years ... but a beginning it is (finally) albeit very fragile, like a new born infant. The most Powerful threat to this particular and well-organised beginning is a **devil, an evil obstacle, an enemy** that has beleaguered all aspects of zoo management in the South Asian region since the Colonials left you with their system of bureaucracy. As I have said, so unkindly, so many times, the Brits have gone on to something better while you are still mired in their old administrative system.

Your writer here has been writing about zoos for three decades with this theme -- **mandatory, routine transfer of officials** -- running through most of the 300 plus newspaper and magazine articles written by yours truly.

Some years ago even the Central Zoo Authority realised that this was an impediment to progress, particularly in zoos, which are one of the most complex, complicated and (in this century) critical of institutions. Zoos not only hold the world's rare animals and try to breed them for conservation, they also conduct or fund valuable research on wildlife and its habitat, and perhaps most potent of all reasons, zoos attract the largest captive

audience in the world and have the potential to teach them priceless lessons which should impact their attitudes and behaviour which could help save our Earth and its denizens.

A zoo director said to me recently "...we have all failed to impress upon our policy makers and superiors in government that zoos or *ex-situ* wildlife conservation is so very important in today's scenario". I agree and disagree both ... it is true that many policy makers have little knowledge of the potential of zoos and even the presence of advanced science in every aspect of the leading zoos. Some must think zoos have potential or the generous funding being given CZA and some of the State's zoos would not be forthcoming. Zoos have a far better image and position today than some few decades ago.

What we have not done successfully, however, is to convey the need for continuity in service in zoos, and also for the need for genuine interest ... indeed, passion and belief in zoo conservation as part of the job description. All who know me know that this has been a pet peeve of mine since I came to know of this destructive convention. This topic itself is complex because there are always instances which counter our claim that zoo personnel, if they have interest and ability, should be continued in the field. Someone can always bring up the odd municipal zoo whose director and vet have been there for 20 years and the zoo is below substandard! There are many reasons for bad zoos, but in our region, one of the very important reasons that our zoos have not progressed much, compared to many others in different parts of the world, is the lack of continuity caused by the mandatory transfer of officials.

The only people who stay at the zoo are zoo-keepers and some administration staff. They are in no position to train the new zoo director or vet. Nearly all the important posts are transferrable ...director, vet, and even some curatorial positions. It takes years to learn the basics of good zoo management and often before the new director or whomever, has understood the myriad subtle aspects of zoo biology, he is transferred and a new man starts.

This policy applies in the Central Zoo Authority itself. We've had only very good officers in CZA Member Secretary post so far and they did their jobs well, but in the last 10-12 years, the wrongs with basic zoo management have been and are being addressed. It was only about 2-3 years ago that some of the very essential activities and skills of *ex situ* conservation management could be genuinely taken up and provided with the infrastructure to make them possible.

Some of these fragile and unfinished activities are:

- Finalization and approval of more than 170 zoo master plan which will provide a framework for a systematic developmental process in the whole country - a first.
- Initiation of a systematic, scientific conservation breeding programme for over 70 identified Indian species with assistance from senior experts from the global professional zoo community
- Membership in ISIS, the International Species Information System by more than sixty Indian zoos and institutions.
- New and ongoing research programmes and studies in zoos and related institutions.
- Training for in-service zoo personnel from India
- India's bid for the 2014 Annual IUCN SSC CBSG meeting and WAZA conference
- Recent initiative of creation of state-wise rescue centers

These initiatives have now got the attention of the zoo world which is now full of expectations for CZA. Every one of them represents a quantum leap for the Indian zoo community

It has been known for a long time that frequent transfers and replacements jeopardize the functioning of institutions generally and zoos, one the most sensitive of institutions, in particular.

By now you will know my rant is directed at a particular transfer, that of the Member Secretary of CZA. I know that in the Forest Department everyone is well-trained and of a superior quality, however, just as it takes time to learn the ropes in zoos the first time, it also takes time to learn the myriad details of the running of Central Zoo Authority. In the two years of learning period these particularly important projects may be stunted. It is very probable that replacement of Dr. Sharma will disrupt and delay execution of all the ongoing activities and processes.

Why do I care ?

Why do I care so much about this particular year and this particular Member Secretary? It is not the year or the individual ... it is the activities, which any MS/CZA might have done but only Brij Sharma, apparently, had what it took to get it done.

I myself used to try and get zoos to join ISIS as long as almost 30 years ago, even before Zoo Outreach! ISIS used to contribute the materials (in those days, ISIS was paper, not computer) and I used to go by train on long journeys to visit zoos that had signed up and try to teach them how to fill the paper forms. Due a misunderstanding at the distributing agency, sometimes the zoos would not have the books or the forms! and sometimes the director who had signed up had been transferred, taking some of the material with him. It wasn't easy!

When the Zoo Act was passed and the Central Zoo Authority was formed, even before the first meeting, I went and met the Environment Secretary and demonstrated ISIS and its products for him on my portable computer. I explained that it was a way for all zoos to cooperate, a way to have "one world one zoo", if you will, and a way to get animals without taking them from the wild. He was impressed but when I asked if we could put this on the Agenda of CZA he said ... "no, it's ok. We'll develop it our own". The whole point was lost and a lot of money as well in trying to develop a clone of ISIS!

Another time CZA agreed to have a species coordinators' meeting at the same time and venue as a PHVA workshop for Lion-tailed macaques that ZOO/CBSG, India had organised to take advantage of the presence of Dr. U.S. Seal and others. It was during that meeting that the D.G. Wildlife announced that India didn't want any animals from any zoo outside India to enter back to India, in the presence of dozens of zoo personnel from USA and Europe who had spent enormous amounts of money on these animals, thinking that India would want them for starting their own breeding programme without having to take them from the wild. They weren't looking to sell them, only to be part of Indian's conservation effort ...only to help the species. In those days there was much misunderstanding and much suspicion.

Today, there is an entirely different atmosphere in CZA regarding cooperation and collaboration. No zoo can do without it, no country can do its best zoo conservation without cooperation with the global zoo community. Brij Sharma made it happen.

The initiatives recently introduced will insure India's entrance into the international zoo community and the growing skills of Indian zoo personnel, only IF there is no lessening of momentum. Also, the Ministry of Environment must wake up and understand that zoo management is way up there with rocket science. It is as complex and as advanced from the perspective of the new conservation sciences with systematic *ex situ* population management inclusive of genetic and demographic planning.

Zoos have come of age here now but to stay of age and to progress, a vastly improved administrative system needs to be put in place, with careful selection of zoo personnel in the first instant, continuous vetting throughout their posting, and wise decision-making about when to release them. Zoo personnel should move from zoo to zoo as well as forest to forest and never have to waste their hard earned skills on transfer to unrelated posts. Indian wildlife, both *in situ* and *ex situ*, will benefit by a specialised cadre. We can hope that someone in government will be able to make this happen.

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