

# Bear Parks in Japan

David Jones and Ed McAlister

*This report is the result of an inspection between August 14th - 20th, 2005 in Japan collaboratively arranged by the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums (WAZA) and the World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA).*

*The inspectors and authors were 1) Dr. David Jones who is a veterinarian by profession and was formerly Chief Executive of the Zoological Society of London (London Zoo). He is currently Director of North Carolina Zoological Park in the United States; and 2) Mr. Ed McAlister was the President of WAZA at the time of this visit to Japan and currently serves as Chairman of the Animal Welfare committee for WAZA. He is also Chief Executive of the Royal Zoological Society of South Australia.*

*The figures contained in this report relating to details of the facilities, numbers of bears at the parks, projected income of the parks and costs for improvements at the parks are based on observations and estimates by David Jones and Ed McAlister during their visit. They are able to estimate such figures based on their wide ranging experience of managing such facilities worldwide.*

*For further information and any feedback, readers should please contact: WSPA, 89 Albert Embankment London SE1 7TP United Kingdom, <wsa@wsa.org.uk>*

## Background

Early in 2004, following discussions with the World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA) London staff on a range of bear welfare issues, David Jones was asked whether there was a possibility that the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums (WAZA) would be prepared to work with WSPA to persuade the "bear park" owners in Japan to accommodate their bears in more suitable facilities. This is a program that WSPA has been involved in since 1991. Subsequent to that discussion, video material shot at the bear parks by WSPA staff was circulated to WAZA members, to American Zoo and Aquarium Association (AZA) Headquarters staff and to the Chairman of the Bear Tag of AZA. Reactions, as expected, indicated considerable concern about the way in which the bears were kept as shown in the videos. Ed McAlister, as current President of WAZA (2003/05) and as someone with a particular interest in wildlife welfare issues was then invited, along with David Jones to visit three of these parks with WSPA project staff, Justine Smith, Victor Watkins and Kaori Sakamoto.

The history of the Japanese bear parks is that they began as centres to care for orphaned wild black and brown bears from around Japan. Those centres found the young bears to be popular with the public with the result that breeding the animals was encouraged over a number of generations to provide a regular supply of cubs for what was also a profitable enterprise. However, this program rapidly got out of control in the sense that bears, being long-lived and relatively robust animals will survive these poor quality environments to the point where several of the parks are keeping literally hundreds of bears in rows of simple, stark, concrete "pits". Visitors are encouraged to buy food items,

largely plain white bread, or prepared pellets to throw to the animals. Through this means, the cost of other feeding and animal care are almost certainly covered. For the larger bear parks with relatively high attendance figures of 200,000 to 300,000 visitors a year and with other forms of additional attractions for families, the enterprises remain very profitable. For the smaller institutions, that profitability is lower. It is noteworthy that these establishments have largely sprung up in popular tourist areas (mountains, hot springs, etc.) where reasonable attendance is assured. They are though very seasonal and typically close down in mid-Autumn, opening again in the spring.

## Brief Description of the Parks Visited

### 1. Noboribetsu

Noboribetsu Bear Park is situated in southern Hokkaido Prefecture near Muroran on the rim of a spectacular volcanic caldera and approached by cable car from the town below. The facility consists largely of the bear pits themselves, together with a circus amphitheatre, a 'duck racing' arena, a museum and some local human ethnic exhibits. The entry price is about \$25USD for adults and half price for children. Attendance is estimated at around 250,000. Although there are more bear pits in the facility not on view to the public, the main exhibits consist of two roughly 100x150 foot concrete enclosures, one for adult males, the other for adult females (about 25 bears in each). All the bears in these pits were brown bears. The flooring is also concrete, sloping in terraces and with a small number of water pools. All of this in a generally poor state of repair. The wall heights are approximately 20 feet. Public access above the bears is on two sides. Climbing apparatus was minimal. Adjacent pits to these, which were not on view to the public, are much smaller, but were occupied from what could be seen from a distance. It is believed that this facility holds a total of about 150 bears. Many bears were not in outdoor facilities. One junior member of staff indicated that these bears have access to further outdoor facilities out of sight, but we have some doubts as to whether that was the case. When the bears are brought off exhibit, they enter a system of low ceiling, concrete 'boxes', divided one from the other by vertical sliding doors, operated from outside, on the roof. There does not appear to be any assisted fan or other cooling devices for these holding areas, the only air circulation being provided by small vents in the roof, which are covered by steel grills. All the back service facilities that were visible from the public walkways appear to be in poor repair and are generally untidy. Water is continually running over the concrete surfaces in these pits and drains down into the pools, which the bears occupy to cool down. From there, water flows down to the bottom of the slope and out through surface drains. All the bears seen were adults or sub-adults. We were told that they had stopped breeding bears at Noboribetsu last year.

The facility has a small circus amphitheatre in which a young black bear, said to be four years old, but the normal size of a one year old, was displayed, performing a number of circus style tricks in a regular show. The facility has two

retail shops at the bottom of the cable car and one at the top, displaying a variety of relatively inexpensive souvenir items. There were small cafes at both the top and the bottom. The museum, though outdated in its approach and in the materials used, does have considerable educational potential. The whole facility, perhaps with the exception of the cable car, gives a rather run down, dilapidated appearance.

## **2. Showa Shinzan**

Showa Shinzan is also in the south of Hokkaido Prefecture near Muroran. This facility consists of a complex of pits, the largest approximately 120x100 feet, and the smallest 40-foot square. There are also two 30ft x 20ft. roofed concrete cages with barred fronts. Smaller pits containing bear cubs and racoons were also part of the facility. All the bears seen were brown bears. The general appearance of the pits was similar to Noboribetsu Park, but the facility is clearly more recent and in better overall condition with the exception of those for the bear cubs and racoons. Wall heights of the larger pits are a little lower than for Noboribetsu Park at an estimated 15 to 17 feet. There was almost no climbing apparatus in the main pits, only concrete stumps in a few of them. The bear could climb on top of the public feeding facility, a covered flat roofed corridor extending into the largest enclosure, similar to one at Noboribetsu. Visitors could project food into the enclosure through tubes in the wall of this corridor.

This was a smaller overall facility than Noboribetsu with an estimated 150,000 visitors and approximately 100 bears, many again being 'off show' in holding dens. There was a single retail operation, which also doubled as the ticketing area. All visitors pass through this facility going into and out of the bear pit area. An independent shop, near the entrance to the bear park was selling bear meat in cans and cartons, probably from wild hunted animals. Back holding areas for the bears appeared to be similar to those at Noboribetsu with vertical sliding doors and narrow, grill covered, air vents in the flat roof.

## **3. Aso (also called "Cuddly Dominion")**

This facility is located on the southern end of Kyushu island in Kumamoto prefecture and differs from the other two facilities in that it offers a wide range of animal 'exhibits' other than bear pits, including both exotic and domestic animals, many of which can be handled by visitors. This is the largest by far of the bear facilities, having six of the seven bear species (no Spectacled Bears) although mostly focused on Japanese black and brown bears. There are multiple groups of pits in five adjacent areas, plus a row of heavy steel cages and a young cub enclosure, the only one that had any grass. General construction was similar to that seen in the other two parks, but with a much wider difference in dimensions. There was one large enclosure, L-shaped, each of the wings being about 150 ft. in length and 80-100 feet wide. At the other extreme were a number of pits not more than 15 to 20 ft. wide and 30-40 ft. long, nevertheless still containing adult bears. The worst of these smaller pits contained five adult brown bears together (probably 500-700 pounds each in weight) in a pit no more than 35 x 15 feet. In another, a pair of polar bears occupied a concrete pad of no more than 25ft. square with a dirty water moat on two sides to which they had access,

the whole exhibit being not more than approximately 40ft. square and in a very poor state of repair.

The overall conditions of the structures in Aso reflected a moderate to poor state of repair. Wall heights were generally 15 – 17 ft. with typically public viewing from one or two sides. Climbing apparatus was generally minimal and largely of steel construction.

## **Report findings**

### **General Condition of the Animals**

With the exception of Aso park, with six bear species, only 'Hokkaido' brown bears were kept. In Noboribetsu and Aso the sexes appeared to be separated, although Aso did admit to regular breeding and there were cubs on show. In Showa Shinzan, some pits housed both sexes together and they were breeding. General bodily condition of all the bears seen varied from a normal weight to somewhat overweight. Coat/hair condition was fair, however, because bears are relatively tough and adaptable, the appearance of normality does not necessarily indicate good health. The numbers of bears in each pit varied with the size of the pit, but it was not uncommon to see over 30 bears in one enclosure. Severe overcrowding, with all the resultant ill effects was evident in almost all these exhibits.

### **Veterinary assessment**

The most obvious features, particularly in pits displaying adult males, were a wide variety of surface lacerations, mainly claw marks on the lower neck, upper arm and outer thigh. Bite and claw marks were frequently evident along the back, particularly over the neck and upper thorax. Misshapen muzzles and torn ears were also seen in many older animals. In one black bear (Aso) loose incisor and canine teeth were hanging from the lower jaw. Where closer inspection of animals was possible (through binoculars) we frequently observed corneal opacities and chronic conjunctivitis. A number of bears were observed limping and a few with swollen pads, almost certainly as a result of injuries.

### **Hygiene**

In captivity, the psychological welfare of bears is difficult to satisfy, but they are able to tolerate considerable insults in a physiological and pathological sense. The fact that water is constantly flowing across the surface of many of these pits, into pools occupied by the bears and ultimately collecting at the lower end of such exhibits, provides a constant source of potential infection. In some cases the drainage of one pit ran into another one below it. In one facility (Showa Shinzan) a group of yearling bears in a concrete cage were lying in liquid faeces and although staff assured us that these were washed away three times a day (which says something about the volume of faeces being produced from publicly-fed material) that probably still left the bears in great discomfort. Visual evidence of continual bodily contamination with faeces was very clear.

### **Nutrition**

All the facilities sold food items in bags for visitors to throw to the bears. This varied from packs containing slices of white bread (Aso) to bread balls and what appeared to be a specially made pellet (Noboribetsu and Showa Shinzan). These materials almost certainly make up the bulk of what

these animals ingest in any given day at this time of year. We were assured by staff at all the parks that the bears were fed additional items at the end of the day, although it was not apparent what quantities of what items were being fed and how that was done in a way to assure that each animal received a share. There was plenty of evidence (from the appearance of the faeces) that much of the refined, high carbohydrate food fed by the public was passing straight through the animals and that quantities of carrot, where that was fed in the evenings was also not digested. There was no control over the amounts of food being thrown by the public. This will vary considerably according to season and attendance. During the winter, from what staff told us, it is assumed that these animals are in a state of "hibernation" and therefore are not fed. What is not apparent is how they are handled in respect to their nutrition when they are awake and when there are no visitors present.

All the evidence would point to the likelihood of these animals being on a highly marginal diet in respect to their nutritional requirements. They are almost certainly receiving excess quantities of refined carbohydrate, mainly starch, for part of the year, much of which is not being digested. There is nothing to suggest that they are receiving sufficient fibre and their protein and vitamin requirements are almost certainly at marginal levels. Adult bears do not require large quantities of protein, but younger growing animals certainly do and this may explain why some bears, where we questioned their ages, are said to be older than their bodily size would suggest. The presence of a high incidence of eye problems could be due to a number of factors, but there is a likelihood that these animals (bears are known to have relatively high vitamin A requirements) are short of available carotenoids in the diet and this would certainly fit with a likely deficiency in the type of foods being offered.

### **Behaviour**

The presence of climbing apparatus, raised platforms and other fixed structures varied from absent to minimal. Where they were present, they were often in a poor state of repair, frequently constructed out of metal and therefore almost certainly very hot in the bright sunlight. There was no evidence of any form of behavioural enrichment at any of the three parks and indeed one could only describe any purposeful behaviour on the part of the animals as being that associated with begging for food and jostling of position to get that food. It was very noticeable in all the pits observed for more than a few minutes, that when visitors were not present and throwing food, the bears quickly either lay down or performed a variety of stereotypic activity, mostly walking in tight circles. Bears in captivity frequently suffer psychological problems often manifested by abnormal behavioural patterns. Nowhere was this worse than at Aso (Cuddly Dominion) where Polar Bears, Sun Bears and many Brown Bears were exhibiting classic stereotypic movements. Aggressive behaviour at all three parks was constant, especially in exhibits with adult males. Threats of aggression, growling and actual aggression were frequently seen. Most of these episodes related to squabbles over food or for position begging for food. As one would expect there was a clear hierarchy within the most densely populated pits, those at the bottom of the

hierarchical ladder were usually lying around the perimeter of the pit.

A wide range of begging behaviours were seen, varying from sitting on haunches and rising up fully onto the back legs, to a variety of motions with the front paws in a type of invitational movement to attract attention. Such movements were also seen with animals lying on their backs pawing the air. Contrary to the situation provided for visitors, there was minimal shade for animals in almost all pits and in many cases (particularly notable at Aso and Showa Shinzan) the only shade was that cast by the high enclosure walls. This often meant that larger animals had to lie with only part of their body in the shade (a three to four foot shadow). Within these high walled pits, air circulation and any breeze would be almost absent. Temperatures during our visit rose to 90 degrees with relatively high humidity.

### **Circus Acts**

Both Aso and Noboribetsu had circus amphitheatres in which bears were subjected to a variety of standard circus tricks- walking on both front and hind legs, riding bikes, carrying objects from one place to another and standing on rubber balls. At the only one of the three parks where we were able to discuss bear management with senior staff (Aso), we were told that these shows only encouraged "natural behaviour". We wondered how many wild bears in Japan are found riding bikes or coloured rubber balls around Japan's national parks.

### **Breeding**

Two of the parks (Aso and Showa Shinzan) admitted to breeding some bears most years, from 'selected' adults. Usually three or four females would be allowed to mate. However, as no records of any genetic value are kept on these animals, there is little effort to plan this in any scientific way. The excuse given for breeding was that young bears attract visitors and that this is a conservation activity. In the exhibits where we saw bear cubs, there was little evidence that they were attracting any more visitation than the pits containing adults. There is no conservation value in continuing to breed these animals. Wild bear populations in Japan, though threatened, are still more than adequate to maintain numbers and genetic variability, if well managed.

### **Handling and General Management of the Bears**

Because of the overcrowded conditions and severe limitations on staff ability to separate animals, veterinary care is almost non-existent. Only Aso reported that they have a full-time veterinarian. Animal staff numbers appear to be very limited, given that this is a 7-day operation with many bears and difficult facilities to manage. It is almost certain that considerable numbers of bears at these parks are kept for much of the time in small dark back dens and although we did not get access to these, it was not difficult, looking at the structures from the outside to determine the sort of dimensions that each of these units would be and what the probable internal temperatures, humidity and other unsatisfactory conditions were likely to be. Bears kept in these very closely confined conditions would be even more susceptible to fighting and injuries if together for any

length of time. The only way to remove animals from either the open pits or back facilities would be by darting them with immobilising agents. However, that then presents the problem of how to remove the sedated animal and how to prevent it from being attacked by other animals as it becomes uncoordinated. A further complication in this respect is that once an adult bear is removed from a particular group for anything more than a day or two, it is very unlikely to be accepted back again into that group without considerable fighting and subsequent injury. An animal that has been removed for veterinary reasons is even less likely to be able to regain any status within the group.

### **Animal Staffing**

It seemed to us that for a 7-day a week operation and for the number of animals and different circumstances in which they work, the animal staff numbers at the parks are inadequate. At Showa Shinzan, for example, only one 'animal' person was on duty during our visit. These staff clearly have little contact with animal staff from other institutions in Japan or access to international bear networks, literature and sources of up to date information. Knowledge about bear biology and care was lacking in the staff that were questioned. Quote- "we encourage visitors to feed the animals as much as possible so that the females will have lots of babies".

### **Education and Public Perception**

It is an anomaly that a civilised, highly cultured country like Japan would allow its most magnificent wild mammals to be shown to its citizens begging for food in a concrete pit. What message does this convey to people in a day and age when most developed countries are doing their best to reconnect humankind to nature and the stewardship of natural resources? The owners of Noboribetsu, for example, have a number of overseas interests, including other animal facilities and they must know the standards of animal care and education now expected elsewhere. Unfortunately both animal welfare and conservation organisations in Japan are relatively weak and do not receive the hearing that they would get in many other countries. The bear parks, if they follow the recommendations below, have a real opportunity to play a major role in educating the public about the value of large carnivores in Japanese ecosystems and through that the national importance of nature conservation. In fact bear biology makes an excellent starting point for talking about the balance between man's activities and protecting nature. Japan has many unique and attractive natural areas, indeed the bear parks are situated in some of those. Japan's children, growing up in a very crowded country, will need, more and more, to experience wilderness, peace and escape from the cities. Well designed and interpreted bear exhibits, using natural surroundings and materials and providing the animals with adequate space and expression of normal behaviour, will be far more appropriate and attractive to visitors than the present situation.

### **Staff Discussions**

Attempts were made in advance of our visit to arrange meetings with the management of each of these facilities. Aso did oblige and the meeting with the Director there was amicable and straightforward. At the entrance to

Noboribetsu we were met by the site Manager, who presented us with a letter outlining some of their comments to our (previously communicated) concerns. We were declined a meeting by the management of Showa Shinzan. In all three cases we were able to talk briefly to staff in the grounds and that did elucidate some of the more invisible aspects of managing these animals. What came out very clearly from those conversations was a strong need for staff training, especially in such areas as nutrition and ideas for an enrichment program.

### **Summary of the Situation**

What started out 40 years ago as relatively small facilities displaying orphaned wild bear cubs have turned into virtually unmanageable, high density, bear holding facilities with well beyond the numbers of animals required for acceptable zoo exhibits. The conditions under which these animals are kept are entirely contrary to the standards for these species, now expected of responsible zoos. Bears are amongst the most intelligent of all mammals and by virtue of their need in the wild to utilise a wide variety of habitats for a seasonal variety of food items, are great 'wanderers and investigators'. In a captive situation, bears quickly become bored with sterile surroundings. What we see in these parks is the worst possible condition of environmental sterility, resulting in some of the worst welfare situations which either of us have encountered with captive wild animals.

### **The Report**

One of us (McAlister), in his capacity as President of WAZA, has written to the operators of each of the parks outlining our concerns and letting them know that they will receive a copy of this report. The Director of the Japanese Association of Zoos and Aquariums, who was briefed at the start of our visit in Tokyo will also receive the report and it is understood that JAZA will follow up on our visit and report with their own inspections of the two parks that are currently members of JAZA.

### **Key issues and recommendations**

#### **Summary of the Key Issues**

- 1 Severe overcrowding with subsequent stress, aggression and fighting.
- 2 Inadequate nutrition partly as the result of uncontrolled public feeding and partly from a subsequent inability to balance the diet correctly.
- 3 Almost non-existent veterinary care exacerbated by an inability to separate and handle animals in a way that might enable that care.
- 4 Sterile, barren surroundings with no effort at any form of appropriate behavioural enrichment.
- 5 Continued breeding, so maintaining large numbers of animals in inadequate conditions.
- 6 Poorly maintained facilities, generally inadequate shade or cooling and inadequately trained staff.

#### **Recommendations**

- 1 Move towards accommodating all bears in large open forested enclosures (see action note below).
- 2 Work with advisors (WAZA, JAZA and WSPA) to design and implement a comprehensive behavioural enrichment program.
- 3 Review the provision of shade in all enclosures and