

A Decade As A Zoo Volunteer

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Time and again in the last decade, I have fielded the question: "What do you get being a Zoo Volunteer?" I always say "The pay is nil but knowledge and satisfaction is infinite!"

Zoos can exist and even thrive without Zoo Volunteers, but they are much helped and enhanced by volunteers in a myriad ways, if the volunteers are of good intention and obey their rules. Unlike in the West where the potential of Zoo Volunteers has been realized and utilized to the maximum, in our country the concept is yet to take off fully. Not many zoos in our country have volunteers as they perceive volunteers as a "pain in the neck". I wish to share a satisfying experience of being a Zoo Volunteer.

In 1994, Mysore Zoo conducted an Ornithology course for the college students of Mysore. My friends and I joined because we had Dasara Vacation coming up and thus time to pass. At the end of 2-week session, Mr. Shivanna, Mysore Zoo Manager, said that those interested of us could work as volunteers. Of the lot of about 70 students Somashekar, Vinod Kumar B. Naik and myself started as volunteers. A year later Saptha Girish and Sunil Sonale who came to do an internship also joined. Even later Mrs. Uma Narayan who accompanied her daughter to "Youth Club" stayed on as a volunteer. Then Mahesh and Kumara, enthusiastic bird watchers joined us and we have been growing since then and with every new batch of "Youth Club" we hope to have young and new volunteers.

We do not have a registered organization, for we believe once the volunteers group is given an organizational structure there are bound to be ego-clashes. Since we are here to work and work is being done to everyone's satisfaction, so be it.

Although initially we thought we were the first volunteers at Mysore Zoo as days passed we heard a lot about "Friends of Mysore Zoo", and even met a few of the old members, but, this group became inactive for various reasons.

We helped the zoo with various educational activities:

- ◆ Youth Club: a unique club for the students aged b/n 12-18 years, held only on Sundays for 6 months. About 60 students enroll each year.
- ◆ Summer Camp: A week long camp for the students of Mysore
- ◆ Zoo Outreach: Government and rural schools are visited with a slide show on Mysore Zoo
- ◆ Zoo In reach: Schools students are brought free of cost to the zoo
- ◆ Tuesday Programme: Special children like mentally and physically handicapped, old age home inmates, orphans are welcomed on Tuesday which is a weekly off.
- ◆ Various Competitions: We help the zoo organize various competitions like quiz, Essay, Elocution, Drawing and Painting, Essay etc.
- ◆ Various Projects: We have helped the zoo prepare Checklist of the Zoo Plants, Butterflies, Birds, updating signage boards etc.

- ◆ Workshop/ Seminars: we also help with workshop for the keepers, teachers etc
- ◆ Wildlife Week Celebration: We help organize Wild Life Week celebrations at the zoo

Although we never laid any written rules for ourselves we were always guided by Mr. Shivanna as to "Do & Don'ts" and some of which we realized over time. These are similar to Ms. Sally Walker's "So...You like Animals" published in the Newsletter of Sahabat Satwa, Indonesia. Trust me, these are time tested.

The following self-imposing rules will take any zoo volunteer in an Indian zoo a long way

- ◆ The Zoo should be welcoming for zoo volunteers before you go
- ◆ Know your limits i.e, do not cross the wafer thin line of management and being volunteer
- ◆ Never interfere with management
- ◆ Do Not entertain your friends and family often at the zoo
- ◆ Do not demand for special privileges
- ◆ Do not collect zoo animal products like feather, horn, etc.
- ◆ Help the management with zoo task, clean cages, etc.
- ◆ Never complain
- ◆ Learn "What and Why" of the zoo management
- ◆ Never argue with keepers or officers in the zoo
- ◆ Never compare zoo to natural habitat
- ◆ Never talk against the zoo in public. Support the zoo in every good action; clarify and convey it to the public
- ◆ Never ever entertain a keeper with money/ incentives, for a photo, touch and cuddle of an animal.
- ◆ Be constructive, help the zoo in trouble, take up cage cleaning, gardening, zoo patrolling, collect plastic, educate public, help conduct various education programmes, write articles, check on information board, stop zoo vandalism, organize competition for zoo keepers etc in fact there is a lot one can do if one puts one's mind.

We are lucky that all the directors so far have encouraged us, more so the present Executive Director Mr. Kumar Pushkar who has involved us in various projects. Now we are not only seen but heard too. Every zoo must have at least one person like Mr. Shivanna who has been with us throughout encouraging and guiding us, and lastly the zoo staff who have accepted us one among them, never complaining, but have put with us. Indeed it was a delight when one of the zoo volunteers Somshekar got a job as a zoo guide, thus both he and the zoo have benefited.

We are happy that our work has not only been helpful to our Zoo but also the public and we too have benefited in turn, we are also glad that Ms. Walker from Zoo Outreach Organisation, Dr. Sethuramalingam Scientist-In-Charge; Regional Museum of Natural History, WWF-India Karnataka, Botanists, Naturalist, Environmentalist & other Zoo Directors have appreciated our work and we hope to continue with same vigour and enthusiasm and not only we grow but also the zoo and a new breed of "Zoo Volunteers".

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