

## Acceptance speech To the WAZA conference delegates, Taipei, Taiwan — Heini Heidiger Award 2004.

### Colleagues and friends :

I am particularly happy to get an award named after Heini Heidiger because his book *Zoo Biology* was one of the first and most valuable I read when I became ensnared in this field. Many people do not know that I actually worked in a zoo and with animals in India. I spent six years at the Mysore Zoo doing every sort of job from tending and taming tiger cubs to raising a chimpanzee baby, organizing training, conducting education and going to government offices and pleading the case of the Mysore Zoo on various issues. I was trained in zoo management in India at an Indian zoo, as I had hardly even visited a zoo before one day in June 1991. That explains why my perspective is often different from many of you.

I went to the zoo in response to a news report of new tiger cubs which were "ready for handling" and I wanted to handle a tiger cub. Coincidentally I met the zoo vet at a party that night and she said that was a mistake but if I came to the zoo, she would see that I got to handle a tiger cub. I went the very next day and did get a tiger cub put into my arms. And from that day to now June 1991 to November 2004 almost 25 years, not a single day has passed that my primary concern and activity was anything except wildlife and zoos. Today, in the zoo world, we don't let visitors handle animals and I support that trend, but I wish there was a way to duplicate that experience. We need thousands more people who think of nothing but wildlife, zoos and the environment for 24 years !

The then Director of the Mysore Zoo, Mr. C.D. Krishne Gowda was zoo man's zoo man and it is he who should get this award instead of me. Krishne Gowda had a knack and a flair for zoo management and he made the Mysore Zoo quite something, particularly for its day. It was a very old zoo but brought up to a modern standard by this talented man. He could be a too straightforward, however, particularly with certain other professionals in related fields, and this was why he has never received appropriate credit for his excellent work . Krishne Gowda is the kind of zoo man who took full rounds at least twice a day and every day I was trailing behind him. He saw every hair on every animal, every protruding nail in a construction; he is amazing.

In those days I didn't attend international conferences and there was no email so in my work as "Girl Friday" at the zoo, all I had was books and Krishna Gowda saw to that Mysore Zoo had a good library ... Heini Heidiger's books, the International Zoo Yearbook, AZA Zoo Management Fundamentals, zoo society magazines, etc. were all referred. So in the Friends of the zoo two decades ago in India we were trying to teach a chimpanzee mother who rejected her offspring to "hold the baby" using a case study from the International Zoo Yearbook. The world's literature on zoos can be immensely useful if zoos have it and refer it.

There are too many people to thank ... Nan Schaeffer, Devra Kleiman, John Sidensticker, Chris Wemmer all visited the zoo during those very early years and gave me much reinforcement and encouragement. Later Dr. Ulie Seal and Tom Foose were much my mentors and CBSG staff, particularly Onnie Byers, even now. My husband, Dick

Mortensen, supported me first financially then emotionally. This is particularly impressive since I chose to stay in India with the zoo than return to America and stay married to him ! We divorced but stayed close friends and he was very proud of my work here. Sadly he passed away this week itself – I wish he could have known of this award.

My parents supported me emotionally and financially throughout – my father is an animal lover and my mother, although she doesn't prefer animals in the house, can't bear to see or hear of an animal being mistreated.

There was a time when I would have had to leave India, probably for good, if not for Mr. and Mrs. Rangaswamy who were officers in Zoo Outreach Organisation, and the rest of the Coimbatore Zoological Park Society who invited me to help them with their zoo. They and the industrialists of Coimbatore kept ZOO and its publications going until we could find our feet and still contribute to our activities.

I could not have done anything without my staff in India. If you drop in for a visit late in the evening – 7:30 – 9:00 pm – you would find 15 people still working, not because this is required but because they want to. Their hard work and sincere interest makes our activities possible.

I should especially thank officials in South Asia not just for tolerating a very strange and unusual type of diplomacy from a foreigner but involving me on many committees and task forces and permitting me to contribute to this region's zoo and wildlife community. I have made terrible mistakes in speech and in action over these years and it is due to the great tolerance and generosity of spirit of Asians that I could even remain here. I learned so much from zoo personnel in Asia; most of the things for which I am credited for promoting and achieving were simply recommendations that I found in old government files which they themselves had forgotten !

There is one thing I wish to correct : people speak of "developing countries" as "poor"; but these countries are not "poor" countries and nobody should pity them or their citizens. Many of these are doing very well economically in fact. It is just that the rate of currency exchange is unfavourable to most of them, so doing anything internationally costs from 50 – 100 times more than USA or UK. What is required is communication, information exchange – on an equal basis – and a little help with anything that involves western currency. In the activities of ZOO, it is always a partnership. We raise money from western zoos, conservation and welfare organisations for foreign travel, accommodation and other things which are affected by international currency standards. South Asian institutions contribute by providing venue, sponsored local activities and other items. This is a fair exchange.

There are not enough words or time to convey all I feel today or everyone I wish to thank. I feel loved and appreciated by our whole community today – **thank you all.**

**Sally Walker**