

Editorial: Zoos helping Zoos is the last ditch effort for improving ALL zoos Sally Walker*

This Editor has visited many zoos in developing as well as developed countries multiple times over a 35 year zoo obsession. Throughout I have been struck with the paucity of species in the collections even of the better zoos in developing countries. In some countries, they can't (or are not supposed to) get animals either from the wild (due to the law, which is a good thing) or from developed countries' zoos due to a vast range of beliefs and questions about developing zoos' ability to make the animals safe and comfortable, among myriad other issues.

While developing zoos may be lacking expertise in a number of subjects, there are, nonetheless, dozens and perhaps hundreds of them that are close to managing their animals as well as any zoo could do, particularly under the difficulties that beleaguer most developing countries and/or regions (such as Asia which will be used as a model here). One of the difficulties in many Asian countries is that high level government officials make decisions about zoos that they have no business making. Even Prime Ministers get a bright idea to bring some animals from abroad that are not appropriate at all, such as polar bears for a tropical zoo.

Zoos in many countries of the Asian region are under the hand of their government at some level. Government in charge of zoos but without knowledge of what zoos need will often:

- a. select higher level staff such as director including length of tenure,
- b. provide and fix the budget,
- c. suggest, approve (or refuse) the animals to be procured, etc.

a. Wise selection of higher level staff: Why this is a problem is that higher level zoo staff in many Asian zoos are often foresters, domestic veterinarians, and the like with scant interest in captive wild animals. They may grow into the job with time, but they are more likely transferred before they have a grip on the complexity of a zoo. Also they may be transferred in a few months or less or doomed to stay even if they are not competent or interested in their work. A relatively well-running zoo can be practically destroyed if the wrong people are selected. AND the wrong animals, as well.

b. Budget and local currency: Zoo managers need expensive items, such as medicines (often imported), equipment for modern medical knowledge, etc. The budget may seem enormous if you look at numbers only, but the rate of exchange between Asian and western countries' zoos (US, Euro, & Australia) is vast ... a modern xray or scanning machine might eat up the entire budget in a South Asian zoo. Currently India's currency is 60.7 rupees to 1 dollar. Roughly that's *like* paying \$120 or even \$200 for an ice cream cone!

c. Wise selection of animals: Approval of animals to be acquired is often given or suggested in the first instant by a very senior government person, even a Prime Minister or Governor who has no idea what needs to be in a zoo. Without knowledge they may pick the most costly and least likely to survive animals and then blame the zoo personnel for their deaths. Thus developing zoos frequently lack means to obtain the appropriate animals to make their facilities more interesting and educational for the public and also to select the right sort of animals.

Another problem of developing countries is that if by chance they get a windfall of animals, they will go on breeding them to the same mates over and over. In a relatively short time, the animals become weak or worse due to inbreeding. The other zoos in their country often don't have the same species so there are no unrelated animals to keep the species going. This is a very big problem.

These are just a few reasons why many developing zoos do not have sufficient animals to make their facility exciting, educational and attractive.

Conversely, developed zoos might have many surplus and unrelated animals but they are very wary of sparing them to the developing zoos. They have heard bad reports of developing zoos and they are afraid the animals may not be treated humanely or that they will not have appropriate care. Appropriate care in developed zoos is vastly different from that of their developing colleagues, and it is almost impossible for the developing zoos to catch up. Here is why ...

Over the years, the developed zoo community has raised the bar exponentially on every belief, knowledge, skill, or activity regarding wild animals, creating significant expertise in every possible aspect and demanding very advanced medical instruments, machinery and procedures. The developed zoos have become so much skilled, etc. that developing zoos in other parts of the world have been completely surpassed, such that if they should get an opportunity to train or study in the developed zoos, much of it goes over their heads due to language, geographical manners and ethics, and lack of experience. Yet, it is expected for them to go back to their country and become dynamic animal managers. There are some improvements in enclosure design, education, and other aspects of zoo-dom, but the ability to keep the animals alive and healthy for years and decades together, for the most part, is not happening in a great many developing zoos.

Among reasons already mentioned for that, is the inability of the zoos to procure additional animals of

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the same species of an unrelated blood line, or even to begin a new line with different species, thus improving the diversity of their collections for the interest and education of their public. Those of us who are associated with either or both developed and developing zoos need to acknowledge this unfortunate situation and act for change. How do we do that? How do we help developing zoos really improve.

The older zoo directors that are still alive, will remember how it felt to lose an animal, and they apparently did lose some. Over the years of their career they learned to maintain the animals, partly due to exposure to books, their colleagues, etc. but mostly because they could work through their doubts with their animal collections, as it was easier to procure animals then. The old zoo directors did lose some animals **but they also retained the lessons of loss.**

Today, many developing zoos find it nearly impossible to procure, breed and retain enough animals in their zoos to interest either the public visitors or even the staff itself. Since developed zoos have succeeded in learning to breed animals that are genetically distant and to cooperate with colleagues from other zoos to continue respectable bloodlines, they opt to kill the animals that don't fit the profile. With regard to developing countries requesting animals, developed zoos are loath to hand over "good" animals to them, fearing (with reason) they will not be able to maintain them. On the other hand, they do not want to send genetically spent animals for fear that they might spread weak genes among zoos globally. So, the majority of zoos in developing countries do not have interesting collections or sufficient expertise to care for them and scant hope for the future.

Many individuals and zoos in the so called world zoo community, for the most part, want to be a genuine community, but when it comes to the hard parts, they shrink!

What has been described in this Editorial are some of the hard parts. Developed zoos need to take developing zoos under their wings. They need to take some risks with the developing zoos and their need for animals and other things as well.

In the current scenario, steps are being taken to merge the developed zoos and developing zoos in an association but it is not enough. Opening the doors to the World Association of Zoos and Aquaria (WAZA) to many developing zoos is a giant step, but it requires more interaction and more ... yes! ... generosity.

My belief is that generating generosity, rolling in risk and making a tool of trust between what is now, in fact, two zoo communities is the pathway to coming together as one.

Bishan Bonal and the Central Zoo Authority are good examples of this ... Bonal has created an impressive collection of formal partnerships with zoos in South Asia and zoos and/or scientific institutions in a very short time. The trend began earlier than Bonal but he has fleshed it out and made it a habitual success.

Let us appeal to the developed zoos to cut developing zoos some slack, help them understand how to manage animals and gift them your surplus animals for which they, the recipient zoos, will and should pick up the travel cost. We are aware of the staggering difficulty of doing so, and also of the hideous red tape and other complications to be endured. Even many of the animals may suffer but if managed correctly, they will pave the way to better lives for those following them and the western zoo community can take good credit for that.

(If you are interested in this topic and care to comment via email <zooreach@zooreach.org>, or via Facebook - Zoo Outreach Organization (c/o Sally R. Walker).



Kabul Zoo Director, Aziz Gul Sabiq, Dr. Abdul Qadir Bahawi, Veterinarian and Najibullah Nazary, Education Officer visit South India for training in zoo management according to their vocation. After formal training they learned even more by visiting zoos, the ZOO office and other facilities in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka State. Zoo Outreach Organisation organised the training and North Carolina Zoo contributed funds.