

WAZA Mid-year Meeting at Sri Lanka

Sally Walker*

The World Association of Zoos and Aquariums WAZA conducts a Mid-year Council meeting in a different country and region every year by invitation of a local zoo or the regional association. This year the National Zoological Gardens of Sri Lanka and SAZARC collaborated to invite WAZA to have their Mid-year meeting in Mt. Lavinia, an area near Colombo. The meeting place was a 200-year old hotel also named Mr. Lavinia, in a locality right on the beach which was also near the zoo. SAZARC Director profiled this venue at the mid-year meeting at Al-Ain and Council agreed to meet there. The invitation to WAZA was issued by the Secretary, on behalf of the Hon. Minister, Ministry of Sports and Public Recreation, Government of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and the National Zoo. Additional Secretary of the Ministry, H.M.B.T. Herath who is the nodal officer from the Ministry to see to the zoo coordinated the event.

The National Zoological Gardens of Sri Lanka is an old zoo with a very rich history. It was earlier called the Colombo Zoo (for the city) or Dehiwala Zoo (for its locality) and the Zoological Gardens of Ceylon until 1972 when Ceylon became Sri Lanka. But its history goes back to 1926 really, when John Hagenbeck opened an 11 acre animal dealership which he permitted the public to see for a fee. It was named Zoological Gardens Company. John was the brother of Carl Hagenbeck who was known for his innovations in zoos such as moated enclosures, predator-prey exhibits and naturalistic layout. John made a bigger profit welcoming visitors than he would have made selling the animals, but in 1936 his company was liquidated and another expat, Major Aubrey Weinman, convinced the government to buy the site and collection. Weinman had himself started a small zoo in the Colombo Museum where he was librarian. Weinman involved himself with this new project and served as director for a decade and odd. Yet another expat, a professor by name of W.C. Osman-Hill kept a large private collection of local and imported animals handed over to him by other expats when they left Ceylon or tired of keeping them. Osman Hill left Ceylon in 1946 and turned over some of his collection to the Colombo Zoo.

Weinman was an effective director and even publicist as the Colombo Zoo became famous internationally. By 1954 it covered 21 acres and was described as one of the "best zoos in existence" by International Zoo News which carried news of this zoo in almost every issue. He kept the zoo on a path that was ahead of its time... with moated enclosures for big cats, a comprehensive guidebook, unusual (for zoos of that time) exhibits such as invertebrate displays, and a butterfly

house. His success in breeding animals was such that birth control was employed in the zoo in the 1950's. In 1960 there was a children's zoo, pets corner, a conservation exhibit, and zoo farm – all very unusual for an Asian zoo. Weinman increased the number of indigenous animals feeling them to be particularly important. He created a conservation exhibit mimicking a national park so visitors without funds or interest to travel to one could get an idea of what such a park was. This anticipated the direction of the most progressive zoos of late 20th century zoos.

When Weinman retired, the assistant director who was a member of the Sri Lankan wildlife service, became director. W.L.E. de Alwis had served in this post for several years and took the zoo to its peak performance. He made the zoo even more naturalistic and replaced old cages with large naturalistic enclosures. He constructed an aquarium which is still good today.

By 1973 zoo attendance was over half million and by 1999 this had increased to 1.2 million per year. Government appointed an expert committee to work with Director de Alwis to prepare a master plan to renovate the zoo for the 21st century.

In 1982 Government also passed legislation with regard to the zoo to prevent spurious facilities from coming up. Private zoos are not permitted in Sri Lanka. The National Zoological Gardens Act and the Wildlife Conservation Act are the main legislative acts related to wild animals. The Fauna and Flora Protection Ordinance prohibits the collection of animals from the wild and the introduction of animals into the forest. The NZG Act, which was the first national zoo legislation in South Asia, covered the administration of the NZG including the duties of the director, financial matters pertaining to the zoo, zoo advisory committee, and the zoo property. It also provided regulations concerning the safety of visitors to the zoo. It also listed rules of behaviour for visitors to ensure the animals' safety such as prohibition of feeding the animals, playing of radios, teasing/disturbing any animal on exhibit, bringing other animals inside the zoo, parking and selling items in the zoo. This Act was the first genuine zoo legislation in South Asia. It covers all other government-initiated zoos and prohibits private facilities. The Act is now 3 decades old and does not reflect the modern practice of including species specific standards of exhibition and care. Many other countries have added extensive species specific standards to their legislation, so that failure to provide appropriate and adequate care and housing to a particular

***Founder/Managing Trustee, ZOO.**
Email: sallyrwalker@zooreach.org

species is an offence. This convention is very useful as it gives zoos guidance in how to manage individual species. It is particularly useful for South Asian zoos as nearly all of them suffer decline of quality from the transfer of officials according to calendar or political whim. The result is that hardly any individual racks up enough years of experience to be truly expert. If species specific standards exist, mistakes can be reduced, assuming the standards are correctly drafted and respected.

Lynn de Alwis retired in 1985. He went on to design the ground breaking Night Safari in Singapore which has been a model for others around the world and continued to advise zoos and the wildlife department and NGO's till his demise.

De Alwis' retirement marked a leveling off of the zoo's progress. From the time of his retirement to the present there have been 9 directors for the zoo, some holding the post for only a year. Even now a search is on for a science based post graduate to take the post of director, but he won't remain in the zoo. The lack of continuity for the last ten years has not helped the National Zoological Gardens. Also, the well-intentioned addition of 26 raw post graduates at one time must have been a challenge for the existing staff to train and put to work. No one graduates as an effective zoo director, curator, vet or manager ... it has to be learned from scratch. Also the various governments, encouraged by the burgeoning visitation at the zoo and elephant orphanage, initiated two more zoos, one in Pinnawala near the elephant orphanage and another which is to be a safari park in Hambantota. All these additional activities, combined with the frequent transfers and resulting lack of leadership took a toll on the zoo's loyal staff and its progress.

At the 9th Conference of the South Asian Zoo Association lavishly hosted by the National Zoo it was noted by resource persons that the zoo seemed to be "off its game" a bit. They suggested some improvements which the staff took to heart. The Zoo officers were keen to host the WAZA Conference after completing the new facilities. SAZARC Director suggested the zoo get closer to their "mother association" WAZA where they could get some good advice and also profile the zoo and its plans in anticipation of bidding for the conference in a few years. Thus WAZA was invited to enjoy the beauty of South Asia while conducting its business with Council and accepted.

The Ministry of Sports and Public Recreation hosted two gala dinners in the city for the WAZA Council and all zoo officers, and a "zoo day" when Council members toured the zoo, had a tasty lunch of Sri Lankan dishes in the zoos' lovely semi-outdoor restaurant and then gathers to discuss the aspects of the zoo which needed improvement. To be sure

there was far more praise than criticism as the zoo is still very impressive but Council's experienced zoo personnel also gave some good advice. In addition, friendships and collegiate relationships were established over the week. In short both WAZA council members and NZG were enriched. Some WAZA members returned immediately to their workplace and some stayed and enjoyed the ambiance of Sri Lanka touring a small part of the island.

WAZA Council enjoyed this new innovation in Council meetings. The days' work of Council didn't suffer and a new perspective was established in some of the members. The zoo staff also got a different perspective of their senior colleagues and a bank of information and contacts, which they can draw upon for years to come.

Note: Much of this information was taken from two essays written by the writer, entitled Asia, South : Legislation and Licensing (pp. 57-58) and National Zoological Gardens of Sri Lanka, (pp. 856-857), published in the Encyclopedia of the World's Zoos, edited by Catharine E. Bell, 3 vols., Chicago and London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2001. S.Walker

