

Anniversary Editorial : Progress and plodding in Zoos

Sally Walker

It was great to see an article about the sterilization of Axis deer at Mysore Zoo in the press earlier this month. Population control in Indian zoos was one of my pet promotions after I became involved with Mysore Zoo in 1981, and later other zoos. At that time nobody was sterilizing their animals and the quick and easy breeders multiplied like crazy, that is, in the zoos sufficiently well-managed to keep them alive. The sturdier herbivores, such as Axis deer and Nilgai, were filling zoos, and **not in a good way**. They were inbred, overbred, and sometimes even cross-bred, or hybridized.

At that time in India, a hybrid animal was a precious item for a zoo because the public was so fascinated by them, as was the case with albino animals. Even some wildlife and zoo professionals here seemed to have a real fascination for almost any cross-bred or white or otherwise "spectacular" animal. It has not been that long ago that some of the high ranking officials were bemoaning that there was no healthy litigon or tigon in any zoo in India and singing odes to the magnificent "white tiger". The remaining litigon at Kolkata Zoo became so old and paralyzed that it could not move away from the rats in the cage nibbling its feet, literally eating the poor animal alive. Yet, the zoo was afraid to euthanize it and release it from its unspeakably cruel situation. Was it the animal welfare lobby fighting euthanasia? No! not at all. In fact, the animal welfare lobby was begging the zoo to let the animal go ... to give it a painless death. It was one of the political lobbies instead of welfare that was carrying a torch to keep the animal alive – it was just a way of creating publicity for them and embarrassing the ruling party.

White tigers are not such a big deal. It is only a colour phase and perfectly natural. But white tigers are at a disadvantage in hunting prey due to their bright, white stand-out coat colour. They died out a few decades ago and will do so again if the very dubious project to rehabilitate a population of them in the wild is implemented.

Due to such blinkered thinking and atmosphere, it took a very long time – I think 3 decades – to convince zoo managers to vasectomize their animals to prevent overbreeding and inbreeding. Even after the Central Zoo Authority was formed and the Zoo Act and Norms and Standards were passed, zoos still dragged their feet. It was a very big deal for them to undertake this. Many of the managers were afraid for their careers, as it was not uncommon for them to be suspended, transferred or at least severely chastised for any animal death, whether it was the fault of the zoo or not. The press also played (and still plays) an important role in this sort of witch burning by snooping around with the sole purpose of finding some sickness or death around which to create a sensational scandal. Once I sat in the Director's office at Mysore Zoo and

observed a couple of press people lambasting the Director because a hyena had passed away. The hyena had lived in the zoo well over its normal life-span and the zoo should have been praised for keeping it alive so long. In those days, press people in some cities had zookeepers or other staff on their payroll at some zoos, to leak any incident that was press-worthy, namely the bad ones.



Axis deer get vasectomy. Photo comp. Mysore Zoo.

Its so much better now. Dr. Suresh Kumar, Assistant Director of Mysore Zoo told the Star of Mysore that several deer would be sterilized that day, 21 June 2010, and nine more deer later in the week. He related rightly that the primary purpose of the surgeries was population control and also prevention of inbreeding. He also shared his hope that a new bloodline of Axis deer could be introduced in the zoo in course of time, to strengthen (but not unduly increase) the population. He added that 64 males had been vasectomized the previous year. He also credited his colleagues who assisted in the work, e.g., Dr. Dharamvir, Dr. Prayag, Dr. Vinod and other staff. According to the article, the zoo's capacity is a maximum of 50 Axis deer, but the current population was $82:86 = 168$ animals. It is not necessary or even advisable to have so many Spotted deer as a zoo exhibit. Dr. Suresh pointed out that it was expensive as well as unhealthy for the animals. He described vasectomy surgery which replaced castration, which was a cruel method of solving the population problem.

Dr. Suresh boldly related the unfortunate incident of releasing 300 deer from Mysore Zoo into Nagarhole several years ago. He said the deer were not able to survive in the wild having been accustomed to having food delivered to them, and a large number of them expired. There was, he said, a "hue and cry" raised, as well there should be. He listed other ungulate species such as Swamp Deer (Barasinga), Sambar, Chinkara, Black Buck, Fallow Deer, Mouse Deer, Barking Deer in the zoo which are not breeding prolifically and do not need population

control. Some of those species are highly threatened in the wild today. In fact, having surplus (as long as they were bred scientifically) would be a boon for sending to other zoos and creating strong captive populations nationally that could be used for reintroduction at some stage. I wondered, when I read this, about Manipur Deer. The Mysore Zoo once had a good herd. Director C.D. Krishne Gowda had gone to some trouble to insure a different blood line was introduced to existing animals in order to strengthen the herd.

Also, during the press conference the question arose about feeding surplus deer "particularly the aged ones" to carnivores in the zoo. Dr. Suresh related that the rules of the zoo prohibited it. It is ironic and against common sense that a zoo would be permitted to release 300 captive spotted deer in a forest where the deer were doomed due to their innocence in woodland survival techniques, and NOT permitted to simply give a merciful death. It is done in zoos all over the world. It is equally ironic that foresters as zoo managers would allow themselves to be convinced to release so many vegetation dependent animals in a protected area like Nagarhole. If those deer had learned to survive it would have been at the expense of forest vegetation. Dumping 300 herbivores in a forest at one go belies all sense. It is even ironic that the zoo would be permitted to do this and not permitted to euthanise surplus and feed them to the carnivores. At the time I spent lots of time in the zoos, the carnivores were being given mostly muscle meat which is not sufficient for them nutritionally. Many tigers and lions eating a lot of expensive meat every day still looked under-nourished because the vitamins and minerals that would have come to them by eating a whole animal (skin, hair, internal organs, bones, etc.) was not being supplied. I see no harm in euthanizing aged or even surplus ungulates and feeding tigers or other carnivores. The harm is done when the herds grow so big, fights between males break out and the animals enclosure is so congested that the inmates grow neurotic. Or when they are released in a wild setting.**

Releasing surplus ungulates in the wild has been done by many zoos, among them the best of the zoos in India and Sri Lanka. They felt they had no alternative ... they were afraid to vasectomise, euthanise or sterilize. Even today I dare to say it is being done despite the insistence of CZA that they have strongly encouraged zoos to follow the guidelines of the IUCN SSC Reintroduction SG.

Looking back to my early years in Mysore Zoo – this is more than 25 years ago ...before Zoo Outreach Organisation was founded, I clearly remember the terrible trouble I brought on the Mysore Zoo and its Director, C.D. Krishne Gowda. I convinced Mr. Gowda to accept the offer of an experienced western zoo vet, Dr. Nan Schaeffer, via U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to come over and demonstrate semen

collection from large carnivores, as a first step toward A.I. But the majority of lions in Indian zoos at that time were hybrid - it had been relatively recently the information of African and Asian lions being separate sub-species was heard by India. As it happened a hybrid lioness at the zoo gave birth to several cubs and there was no accommodation for them as a family. This was happening all over Indian zoos as African and Asian lions were mixed together everywhere in the country. In this context, I suggested that Dr. Schaeffer during her visit to demonstrate procedures be asked to vasectomise some of our numerous male hybrid lions, and being a man of courage, my Director directed it be done.

You talk about a hue and cry! It was raised in Parliament. We were accused of "destroying Indian wildlife". My Director was threatened with suspension and I was really in the dog house. One of the senior foresters was particularly severe but the following year he asked me to get Dr. Nan back over to vasectomise lions at Bannerghatta. In the years to come zoos in different parts of India faced exactly the same situation. We trained vets in vasectomy, but when they did so, they were lambasted by the press and chastised by government. Now, at least, this has become an accepted procedure.

Those days are behind us but it often seems to me that some of the powers who guide conservation action in India have gone to the other extreme and promote very advanced and expensive modern techniques when the zoo community here has not yet mastered all the basics. There is great improvement, thanks to CZA, but more is required before exhibiting freshwater dolphin, cloning cheetahs and reintroducing white tigers.

What price the Prestige of a country? How much is "looking good", "keeping up with the west" and "getting there first" worth? From observation it seems that prestige of that order is worth more than anything at all, particularly ethics, common sense and expertise. India's laudably successful emergence from its habit of rapid proliferation of zoos by designing effective legislation and leading 400 zoos to either step up to the plate and improve, or close, is threatened by such dramatic projects as banning elephants in zoos, rehabilitating cheetahs when it is not certain that they even are native to India, etc. I wish the zoos would be given time and opportunity to really catch up! It is going on, but slowly due to the transfer system where no one is permitted to spend more than 3-5 years in the zoo. In such a situation, its going to take much more time and experience to get it right. Where are the dynamic politicians who could change the transfer system in zoos. What price prestige in a country?

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***** Please see page 13 for the very recent World Association of Zoos and Aquaria WAZA statement on euthanasia.***