

A Career in the Z.O.O. -- Zoo Outreach Organisation

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Growing up in Bangalore, I used to visit Mysore every summer and Dasara holidays to spend time with cousins at our grandparents place. The holidays always consisted of a visit or two to Mysore Zoo in a tonga from Sidappa Square. One of the best cities in the world, Mysore also had one of the better zoos in India. The Mysore Maharaja's foresight in planning the city with its broad roads (broad enough to take on even today's traffic with ease), footpaths and layouts was also reflected in the initial layout of the then 10-acre and followed by others who developed it into a 250 zoo. Mysore Zoo is a "must-see" place for any visitor to the culturally-rich city of Mysore. My favourite pastimes at the zoo, apart from ogling at animals, were to be amused looking at the wobbly mirrors in the front hall of the museum and getting lost in the hedge-maze in the children's area. The other reason I used to love going to Mysore Zoo was also to look at the white lady walking a tiger or two, or playing with tiger cubs in a temporary enclosure erected close to the tiger moat. Little did I know that after 15 years I would be working with the white lady, Sally Walker.

I joined ZOO, thanks to a batch mate of mine from Bangalore University. I had completed my Masters in Zoology and was looking for a job in a conservation organization. My friend Siva, a physics graduate was searching for work in astronomy. We were both working other jobs in the meantime. Siva sent me a brochure of ZOO when he visited the office to sell a fax machine, but got talking to Sally about the work ZOO was involved in. I wrote to Sally and three months later I was working in ZOO. I joined as the CBSG programme officer in July 1993 and have thanked every day for presenting the opportunity to work at ZOO and with Sally.

My first assignment was to learn everything about population modeling and conservation biology, both of which were absolutely new to me. The CBSG documents were used more like pillows for their ample girth, but on looking back, quite a bit seeped into my skull, after all. The on-the-job training I got was the best I could ask for. Jumping right into the LTM, Asiatic Lion and Indian Rhino PHVAs within 3 months after joining ZOO gave me the biggest, best and the scariest exposure one can ever think of. The contacts built during those workshops also helped me with getting more and better training in principles of conservation biology and

exposure to the world of zoos and their management. Right from the beginning, I was encouraged by Sally to get into the thick of both in situ and ex situ conservation. In addition, the organizations focus on education and publications made the training holistic and provided a very good platform to develop on.

One of the things that attracted me to ZOO was Sally's style of functioning and dedication. She had in 1993 a very good staff (three of whom still continue). When I showed interest in the monthly publications of Zoos' Print and Zoo Zen, Sally immediately put me onto the task of working on them. My past experience in working for a publication house helped me immensely in absorbing the aspects that go into keeping publications on track. Sally had maintained an excellent, unbroken tradition with these two publications without a single gap in their publication. And this she had done without adequate financial support. When queried about the rationale, she explained the need for these to reach out to wild lifers and foresters in the country as there was no regular publication in the field that provided information and knowledge on holistic conservation. She had committed to keeping them going and her spirit and dedication was what inspired me to follow suit. I am the biggest fan of these publications and pray that we all have the strength to continue them for another 25 years.

Of course, working in ZOO was challenging and kept my colleagues and me on our toes all the time. With Sally's constant pushing, inspiration and motivation, the challenges soon became an integral part of our working routine. The environment also allowed for experimentation and giving shape to new ideas – starting the taxonomic networks with amphibians and invertebrates in 1995, reptiles in 1997, assessing status of species from different taxonomic orders from 1995 onwards, starting a peer-reviewed journal Zoos' Print Journal as a section within Zoos' Print in 1999, developing training workshops for biologists and taxonomists in lesser-known faunal and floral groups, developing the network engineering model for promoting conservation of lesser-known groups, representing the region in several IUCN specialist groups, developing integrated education training

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for teachers and NGOs, and most recently starting a global peer-reviewed monthly open access journal on conservation and taxonomy – Journal of Threatened Taxa, have all been some of the more exciting challenges we have taken on and executed over these several years since ZOO embraced in situ conservation in 1991.

Apart from the challenges, I have enjoyed working in ZOO also for the principles and philosophy established by Sally, something that I identify with 100%. We have had our differences of opinion regarding every new project, but because we work on the same plane regarding principles and philosophy, the differences have turned out for the better. I am proud of what ZOO has achieved and am privileged to be associated with the organization, my colleagues, and Sally.

It's not easy running an organization, definitely not so when every other month is a struggle for finding salaries to pay; especially when there is no corpus. This is one area we have been terrible in raising funds for steadying the organization. We understand it is critical, but taking on so many responsibilities and challenges, we have neglected to pursue this aspect. This is something I keep thinking about and hopefully, we'll get into making some money for the organization soon.

It's very rare to find an organization with people working for it for any long stretch of time. The principles and philosophy again have seen us have a strong force of faithfuls, some of who have completed more than 15 years of service! Sarojamma, our office mom, who has been with Sally for over 30 years, is the longest serving member of ZOO along with Sally. She is a binding force of our organization. She excels in doing odd jobs, keeping us all on our track, and is an excellent cook. Life in ZOO would not have been the same without her. Latha Ravikumar, an amazing body of whipped energy, has been with ZOO for over 18 years; she was there when I joined ZOO. She has made the best use of the opportunity ZOO has provided by involving herself in every aspect and graduating from a office secretary in 1991 to the Financial Director's position in ZOO Trust for the last three years! She has shown incredible talent for filling in various positions and job profiles and is a good manager. Geetha, the other lady who was at ZOO when I joined came back for a second stint in the organization a few years back and is now set to complete about 12 years of service. Daniel joined on 1 January 1995, on a Sunday, and has worked diligently in keeping up the invertebrate and education aspects of the

organizations projects. Marimuthu, who used to work with ZOO when I joined also came back from Brunei for a second stint and is now set to complete 14 years in ZOO. He has developed very well in education and outreach and keeps everyone entertained with his routine antics.

Pravin, another second term employee of the organization has been in total for about 10 years. Ravi, my trusted assistant completed 10 years in ZOO and is readying to get married in March this year. He has single handedly managed the Journal of Threatened Taxa and has done an exceptionally good job of it. Manju has been with us for eight years in which time has developed into a world authority on spiders of South Asia. We are pushing her to get into other fields to round her conservation training. Arul, another two-termer has spent close to eight years in the office. Having a good team is a blessing, but having a dedicated team as a family for long years just cannot be beat. Sally would not have been able to achieve what she has today but for the wonderful team. And a fitting reward has been to set up a ZOO Trust with all the long termers as executive members.

I can go on and on, but suffice to say what I have already done. I hope the next 25 years in ZOO will be as much fun as we have had in the first quarter. Thanks Sally for all that you have provided, for your philosophy, perseverance and motivation. I wish you and all of us the very best for the next 25 years.

