

**Interview with a VBM ... Very Busy Man! Meet Sri B.S. Bonal, Member Secretary, Central Zoo Authority, Ministry of Environment & Forests, Government of India
S. Walker**

SRW: Thanks for agreeing to this interview, Mr. Bonal. I'd like to begin by asking you to give a brief overview of your career with the Indian Forest Service IFS.

BSB: I am from the Indian Forest Service of the 1980 batch, belonging to the land of tigers (Kumaon, Himalayas) and serving in the land of rhinos (Assam) since 1982. Out of 34 years of service so far, I have been posted in wildlife areas for more than 26 years both *in situ*, viz In charge of Manas National Park as Deputy Field Director. I was Divisional Forest Officer DFO and Director at Kaziranga National Park.

Regarding *ex-situ* management I was posted first at Assam State Zoo, Guwahati and then National Zoological Park, New Delhi. Now I am still in Delhi as Member Secretary, Central Zoo Authority.

SRW: Which of these areas do you prefer in your profession as a Forest Officer ... wildlife, zoo, plantations, forestry ...?

BSB: Given a choice, I would always prefer to be in wildlife areas ... in the forest itself. Fortunately, I had an opportunity to serve in two of the World Heritage sites out of six in India, i.e. Manas and Kaziranga National Park, both in Assam.

No doubt, working in protected areas, e.g., Manas and Kaziranga National Park has been very challenging and very, very dynamic, where policing, protection and anti-poaching work, used to be the dominating aspect rather than the habitat management. Every day, staff would encounter poachers. The poachers were equipped with sophisticated arms like SLR, Silencer, etc. and with these arms used to enter the park. The officers and staff had no alternative other than to work with the principle of kill or be killed. That



Above: Land of tigers: the grand & many species IFS officers encounter in wildlife areas.

Left: Rest period and recreation in a CZA meeting of the Conference Committee, convened to discuss the upcoming CBSG/WAZA meeting events.

is how a number of poachers were killed during different encounters with them in my 9 years tenure.

The protection of rhinos, especially in Kaziranga where the population of rhinos has been increasing, is still challenging and continues to be the most challenging, yet satisfying, work. Consequently, the status of rhinos has been upgraded from Endangered to Vulnerable.

SRW: You have had the best of an exciting career. Regarding the zoo, what and where different postings you have had in the zoos.

BSB: Working in the zoos is very different, but not less challenging, rather more sensitive. I was Director of Assam State Zoo for 3 years and later as Director, NZP, New Delhi for 5 years. Now, I'm still in the zoo profession as Member Secretary, Central Zoo Authority, and I have to oversee the management of zoos in India.

Here, I believe, the man management is the key to smooth management of zoos, with the help of whom, you are supposed to create the environment for the animals in captivity and for visitors. We want the natural environment as close as possible to the habitat of the particular species and that requires hard work and perseverance, especially when the lower staff in Indian zoos are less educated or uneducated and difficult to understand modern concept of zoo management.

Added to the problems of the staff union that had arranged frequent strikes on one demand or the other. One has to tackle these challenges amicably for smooth sailing of the managers.

The main challenge in zoo management is to accommodate the rescued and seized wild animals. Although, National Zoo Policy says that zoos should act as rescue centers and receive such animals provided they have adequate and appropriate



Probably all I.F.S. officers feel lucky when they draw a field position where they can work for the survival of India's wild animals. Protection of the animals in the national parks is challenging but when the population begins to rise, it is fascinating and satisfying work. Pre and Post conference tours will take place all over India for the participants of CBSG and WAZA.



One among many highlights of preparation of the oncoming CBSG and WAZA events is gathering all four Member Secretaries to the Conference Committee meetings. Left to right: Brij Kishor Gupta has provided valuable assistance to CZA MS's for some years. Bishan Bonal, IFS, is current MS CZA. P.R. Sinha was second MS CZA. S.C. Sharma was the first MS, CZA and had spent some years as Joint Director, Ministry of Environment and Forests, while all the time pushing for a Central Zoo Authority. B.R. Sharma served as the third MS CZA. Photo by SRW.

facilities, but the pressure of conflict continues to reach in zoos.

SRW: We know that serving as Member Secretary of Central Zoo Authority is a very big and responsible post, and at times may be onerous. Would you tell us some of the difficulties as well as satisfaction of holding this post?

BSB: Of course, serving as Member Secretary of CZA is really a huge responsibility to improve the management of zoos in the country where the maximum number of zoos are under the control of government (whether the forest department or municipal corporation) where the budget allocation of the zoos has been very inadequate. The basic responsibility of management is of

State Government or the owners of the zoos. As further problem was that much needed funds were not released until the year end. Even the fund released by Central Government used to be routed through the State Government and reached managers at year end. As such, after the workshop conducted in Kolkata, 2010 for "Marketing, fund raising and resource management in zoos", many zoos have established their own Zoo Authority or Society so funds released by GOI directly reaches the managers. Through the authorities and societies the zoos can take steps to earn more revenue through animal adoptions, etc., but also is now available for zoos instead of deposited as government revenue and never used to the zoos' management.

SRW: What challenges have you faced as Member Secretary, CZA?

BSB: Indeed, there have been difficult times also, and even more may crop up. For example, the advisory issued for banning elephants in the zoos, implementation had been a touch proposition because success of implementation of the advisory board are totally dependent on the concerned Director and the Chief Wildlife Wardens of the States. Some of the elephants, (30 in all) from the zoos were transferred to camps of National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries wherever facilities were available.

However, most of the Chief Wildlife Wardens and Zoo Directors felt that the facility in their zoos were adequate and could be improved accordingly if permitted to retain the elephants.

As such, we had to constitute an Elephant Appraisal Committee that visited all the zoos still holding elephants for assessment and rationalization.

On the basis of their recommendations, we had to allow some of the zoos to retain elephants with improvements,



B.S. Bonal, MS CZA, Amitabh Agnihotri, Director, National Zoological Park, S.K Patnaik, I.F.S. (Retd) & long term Director of the Nandankanan Zoo, and S.C. Sharma, I.F.S. (Retd.) Zoo Director, Jt. Secretary MOEF and MS CZA seem to be engaged in redesigning some zoo folders. Clearly this was a candid photo at the National Zoo, New Delhi.



Group photograph of a few SAZARC participants hanging out...including Bonal and Brij Gupta, among others from India, Pakistan, Nepal and India attending the 4th South Asian Zoo Association for Regional Cooperation SAZARC conducted in Sri Lanka in December 2004.



A design for the release of a postage stamp created in honour of the conference.

providing natural environment, etc. That took quite some more time which displeased the people who wanted to shift the animals *in toto*.

Similar action is desired for other facilities like circuses etc. that would lead to more challenge, as most of these facilities belong to private owners. There had been a successful story when the performances of lions, tigers, bears, monkeys and leopards was banned and all these animals were brought to the rescue centres created by Central Zoo Authority. Some of these animals, however, are unfortunately maintained with no objective of conservation. Further, whenever a zoo is de-recognized and closed with an order to shift the animals to other recognized State zoos or to the wild, with all guidelines and protocols in consultation with the Chief Wildlife Warden of the State concerned, seldom get fully implemented.

SRW: What are the biggest obstacles that keep Indian zoos from being excellent and more globally unique?

BSB: There are 192 recognized zoos including 22 circuses, 18 rescue centres and about 60 deer parks. The large and medium zoos have great potential for excellence and are being run nicely. Special mention can be made for Mysore Zoo and Darjeeling Zoo. The deer parks and rescue centres, which are being controlled by the territorial wing of the forest department, universities, colleges and other such institutions are a concern, against whom a number of times actions have been taken to suspend or derecognize. Yet, some of these facilities still continue, because the animals such as spotted deer, black buck, sambars, etc. which are prolific breeding animals, have not been able to be translocated or shifted by the Chief Wildlife Wardens of the concerned states neither to other recognized zoos nor to release back to wild by taking over these animals. So, therefore, to



Who can resist a young leopard cub? or any cub! Clearly not Bonal and Brij. The cub seems to be unable to resist gnawing Bonal's thumb. Occasionally getting an opportunity to cuddle a wild youngster is one of the many benefits of being a forest officer or a zoo person.



After CZA's 5th Meeting of the Core Committee of Annual Conference of the WAZA and CBSG.

me it appears that if translocation and release back to wild is not possible for these animals, the option remains is phasing out and that could be done through the Chief Wildlife Warden of States.

SRW: It is a great honour to have been selected to host the CBSG and WAZA Annual Meeting and Conference. Would you share some of the special highlights

planned for these two important conservation organisations.

BSB: Yes, it is really great honour for us to host the CBSG meeting and WAZA annual conference. As the WAZA members wanted the registration fee not more than what was there in Australia year before last, we have kept the registration fee less than the fee in Disneyland, USA.

The highlight of this conference in India, I feel, would be to visit to various protected areas, national parks and sanctuaries as post conference tours. We have been in contact with the Chief Wildlife Wardens of the States and the Directors of the concerned zoos to their States.

The visit to Taj Mahal one of the seven wonders of world along with visit to Bear Rescue Centre, Agra, I believe, one would have lifetime experience. The bear Rescue Centre, I think, is one where largest number of dancing bears were taken over and given proper care.

SRW: Do you have an idea about how many people are going to show up for the WAZA conference.

BSB: So far as total attendance is concerned, we expect a large number of members to attend and we would love to have such a good attendance. We have invited Zoo Directors from SAARC countries as well, even those who are not members of WAZA. We have also invited former Member Secretaries and members of CZA as well as CZA committee members to participate during Technical sessions and the expenditure borne by the CZA.

SRW: You have broken new ground with MOU projects involving a variety of organisations and including research, training, etc. How has this idea has come so far and how it is working.

BSB: So far as MOUs are concerned, I credit Ms. Fanny Lai, then CEO, Wildlife Reserves, Singapore, an invitee for guest lecture in Directors' Workshop, 2010, Kolkata in "Marketing, fund raising and resource management in zoos". At that point of time, this idea for smooth exchange of Human Resource Development, exchange of animals etc. were thought of and immediately an MoU was executed and two officers from India were sent to Singapore Zoo. Officers from Wildlife Reserves, Singapore were



Organising an Annual Conference of the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums, begins quite some time before the event. After Bonal, MS. CZA was selected as host for CBSG and WAZA the real work began. Bonal displays a Power Point to WAZA Council last year to introduce some of the proposed events throughout the conference. Photo by S.Walker.



Agra ... Taj Mahal and Bear Center



Raja Segran, Fanny Lai, Bishan Bonal & Vijaya Kumar Pillai, present for signing of MOU between CZA & Singapore Zoo.

invited in various workshops organized in India including veterinarians and biologists.

Subsequently, the MoU was followed with Leipzig Zoo, Primate Research Centre, California, Central Zoo, Nepal and others pending.

This has definitely helped in smoothing the animal exchange programme and as well as training and deputation of officers to various zoos.

SRW: Finally, which aspect of Zoo Management do you wish to emphasize more?



Sarita Jnawali, Bishan Bonal, Juddha Bahadur Gurung, and Brij Gupta at signing of MOU at Central Zoo, Nepal.

BSB: As you know, every aspect of zoo management is very important, be it veterinary, health care, hygiene, enclosure design, landscaping, human resource development, education and awareness, conservation breeding etc. However, in recent times, we have been emphasizing more on animal enrichment with special attention for nature immersion exhibits. That means to provide near natural environment to the animals inside the enclosures both in viewing area and in the night shelter. Also this enrichment should be seen even outside the enclosure to give visitors a feeling of

visiting wildlife sanctuaries through forested areas. For this, a plantation of suitable and endemic species has been emphasized that will also prevent visibility of one enclosure from another.

I had an opportunity to visit Tamekan Zoo at Argentina, where I could feel of the same although the zoo was established just a decade ago but the plantations, the trees, bushes etc. looked like they had been grown long back. However, as our zoo management is very much dynamic, the system which we feel perfect today, it may not be the same tomorrow. That is how the zoo movement reached from the menagerie to the conservation centre.

In other words, we need to emphasize the development of zoos as conservation centres.

SRW: That is a superb ending for our interview. Thank you so very much for your time, Mr. Bonal. Our readers will have a new and in depth understanding of the Central Zoo Authority and its working, as well as the difficulties of you and the past Member Secretaries.



**Central Zoo Authority
CBSG & WAZA**



Group photo of Conservation Breeding Specialist Group, CBSG SSC IUCN & World Association of Zoos & Aquariums, WAZA at Orlando, Florida, 2013.