

Role of Zookeepers in Conservation Education

Rengasamy Marimuthu* and Sally R. Walker**

In India and the other countries that make up South Asia (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka), there are 250+ zoos, most of which are owned and run by national, state and/or municipal governments. India, with 198 zoos, has the maximum number of zoos in all the South Asian countries. India's zoos are divided into three categories, Large, Small and Medium zoos. The designated category is related to the size and number of their native threatened species. There are thousands of zookeepers working in these zoos who are accountable for basic day-to-day care and welfare of the animals. They are tasked with reporting any problems of health, behaviour, enclosures, etc. Moreover, some of them conduct informal education activities by answering visitor queries about the animals in their charge.

In the latter part of the 20th century and early part of the 21st, there have been many significant developments throughout the zoo profession globally. In South Asia however, still the conditions in which zookeepers work are not up to the standard of western zoos. In western countries if one wants to make zoo keeping his career, he can start as a volunteer as early as his school days. Some of the zoos offer zookeeper summer training for zoo volunteers that is another path to working in the zoo. Zookeepers in western countries are educated; some are highly educated and this helps them with promotions and upward mobility.

In the South Asian region, zookeepers are not highly educated. They enter into the profession without any science background or even pre-knowledge about animal behaviour and care. They learn on the job only, by trial and error in the early part of their employment, as there really is a lot to learn. They do not have many opportunities for systematic and professional training in animal care, much less in developing good communication skills needed to interact with visitors.

In addition, a zookeeper job in South Asia is not lucrative or even respected. It is considered a menial job as it involves cleaning dirty cages and



feeding animals with raw meat. The zookeepers themselves don't select that position for their career ... they take the job because there are few other options for them. It is often their last choice. Zookeepers in this part of the world are never invited to take part in any decision-making or meetings regarding the zoo or the animals. Their values and knowledge are not recognized but for the rare exception. Because they are lacking in organisation and communication skills they are not in a position to form their own zoo groups to share and interact with other zookeepers of their own city, state, or region, much less other zoo chapters in different countries. They rarely get opportunities to travel to other zoos. So, within their country or province they are detached from their colleagues. In South Asian region there is only one national zookeeper association but it is in name only without much activity.

Zookeepers are low-paid and as a result, their living standards are very poor. They don't get promotions in this career so they don't rise in the zoo hierarchy as takes place in other countries. They join as a zookeeper and remain a zookeeper of the same level until their retirement from the service.

In South Asia there are many different languages and dialects in use within

the country. The zookeepers are for the most part conversant only with their mother tongue and this is a major impediment for their professional development. They cannot interact with all visitors or even zookeepers from other localities. In addition, contemporary literature available on zoo management is out of their reach financially as well as linguistically. Most South Asian zookeepers are unfamiliar with the Internet and have no access to it even if it is available in their zoo. Thus their last recourse for getting familiar with the activities and happenings in modern zoos around the zoo world is denied to them.

Even though the South Asian zookeepers have so many difficulties in their profession, many of them are very dedicated. They take great interest in their animals and in learning new things about their care and conservation. They share information with local visitors when asked and explain what they know about conservation. This is an immense contribution to species conservation as many of the local visitors are farmers or tribals who occasionally come to town, or poor people from slums, who often have wrong attitudes to wild

***Senior Education Officer, **Founder/
Director, Zoo Outreach Organisation
Tamil Nadu, India
Email: *marimuthu@zooreach.org;
sallyrwalker@zooreach.org

animals. The simple explanations from the zookeepers who take such interest make many of these people more sympathetic to animals of all kinds.

What ICZ zoo chapters can do for South Asian (and other) Zookeepers

Developed countries zookeeper chapters might do a great deal to develop and sharpen the skills and raise the image of South Asian zookeepers. As the International Congress of Zookeepers motto is "connecting zookeepers world wide", professional zookeeper associations are most welcome to assist our South Asian zookeepers. We are all having the same goal of biodiversity conservation; South Asian countries have some of the highest biodiversity in the world. At the same time, South Asia loses much biodiversity due to activities of the extreme size of the human population. Zoos are potentially able to achieve something of value with regard to protecting biodiversity. However, the available resources in the zookeeper population of South Asian zoos are very minimal and cannot be compared to most western zoos. Zookeepers need training, encouragement, and outreach from the international zoo chapters in improving animal care and animal welfare to reach the highest standards and also to interact with those levels of the public who have wrong attitudes toward wildlife.

Prioritising focus on zookeepers in developing countries zoos can result in sharpening zookeepers' skills in South Asia:

First of all ICZ zookeepers and chapters from more advanced zoos could share technical information through printed literature despite the language barrier. They can request some sympathetic organizations and institutions that have staff and students capable of translating English into local language. The authors' base, e.g. Zoo Outreach Organisation (ZOO) is prepared to coordinate such efforts. ZOO also hosts and administers the South Asian Zoo Association for Regional Cooperation (SAZARC). ZOO is a 27 year old functioning organization and SAZARC has been operating for 11 years. ZOO and SAZARC can help identify persons in any of the South Asian countries to help with translations from English to local for the benefit of zookeepers in this region.

Secondly, international zoo chapters from sympathetic zoos could request national level zoo committees to nominate one or two keepers with some English language background to be hosted for hands-on and didactic zoo management training at zookeeper level for a few weeks. This could include English language tuition to enable them to read English and keep up with all-important zookeeper and other literature. Needless to say this could apply to other foreign languages where there was a link. Conversely, there may be South Asians working in zoos in USA and Europe whose parents or they themselves immigrated, who could be tapped to train in countries where their native language was spoken.

Third international zookeeper chapters often have keepers that spend a lot of their time also educating the public. It is another important feature in zookeeper training, that is conservation education, one of the most important activities of any of the world's zoos. South Asian zookeepers know a great deal about the animals they are looking out and many visitors are more comfortable with zookeepers than with a

highly educated Education Officer. Zookeepers in South Asia are given some responsibility for educating visitors. Zookeepers already have the attention of visitors but need training to convey the scientific message correctly and frame the day-to-day information so that it is interesting and memorable to visitors, while also promoting the conservation and welfare principles of zoos. Sometimes our zookeepers also like to impress visitors by explaining how vicious and dangerous their animals are and such habits need to be replaced by more practical and valuable knowledge.

Visitors should leave with completely changed attitudes towards animals like tigers, bears, lions, snakes, etc. and with some understanding that all wild animals play a role in maintaining the ecological balance. South Asian zookeepers normally cannot participate in zoo education training because of their own education background and poor communication skills, even in their own language. Also zoo visitors spend limited time at the zoo and it is a challenge for keepers to convey information and change attitudes in the short time they have with visitors.

A "fix" for this could be to create an education programme especially for zookeepers, the kind of information they know very well and the kind of audience that appreciates them. Conservation and welfare messages can easily be blended in with the fascinating accounts of daily life and care of zoo animals. Zoo Outreach Organisation would be interested to interact with western zookeepers interested in this aspect.

Once, about 3 decades ago, co-author, Sally Walker organized a teacher training workshop in Mysore Zoo and called a number of highly educated people to serve as Resource Persons, such as the Chief Wildlife Warden, Zoology Professors, Wildlife Biologists, etc. The teachers listened patiently but their response was lukewarm, completely unlike what happened when we called a local Resource person, the elephant keeper and his young elephant calf to talk to the teachers. This was a very active session in which the teachers were allowed to touch the elephant and ask any number of questions about the behaviour and care of the little elephant. That was equaled only by the chimpanzee keeper who brought his baby chimp, described how he was handreared and his daily routine, and answered many questions. Zookeepers have wonderful stories and experiences to catch the attention of visitors, particularly those from less comfortable circumstances.

Conclusion

Zookeepers in certain countries and regions have very primitive conditions and hard lives. We are sympathetic with them, but we must also make a point that if they lack facilities and knowledge, their valuable animals also will suffer. It is important for zookeepers and their zoos in better off situations to assist these developing country zookeepers if they are so inclined. It is both a conservation and welfare action in itself, as improved zoo keeping will result in longer-lived, healthier and happier animals in our zoos.