

Zoos of India by Dr. J.H. Desai Reviewed by S. Walker

The date written in my copy in Dr. J. H. Desai's hand indicates that it was published in 2002. The publication date must have been inadvertently left out by the typesetter. Dr. Desai had gifted the book to me and I had thought "Oh, I must review this!" but that was almost a decade ago. I asked my staff if we had ever published a review in ZOOS' PRINT and there was no record of it. Dr. Desai and I have spent a lot of time together talking about zoos, particularly Indian zoos and all the obstacles, peculiarities in the system and misunderstandings that plagued Indian zoos. He is a friend and I am most embarrassed to contribute this review almost ten years later. Things, like time, and respect due our friends and colleagues, just slip away sometimes. In this instant it was most certainly unintended.

Earlier this year I was asked to write a chapter on Asian zoos for a zookeeper oriented book on zoo legislation. This was not just South Asia, although South Asia got more attention, it was Asia and I managed to pull something out of people, print and virtual print on every zoo. That is how I happened to pick up Dr. Desai's book last spring. It was in my own personal library at the ZOO office. So I begin this book review with the above profound apology to Dr. Desai.

ZOOS of INDIA was commissioned by the Central Zoo Authority although I am sure Dr. Desai had previously thought such a history should be written. He was a right man to do the job as he had been, for many years, the Director of Delhi Zoo later named National Zoological Park, I believe, due to his efforts. Dr. Desai had studied in the United States and got a Ph.D. in a topic associated with zoos, and he had spent time at some of the zoos of the USA. He was well acquainted with their standards and procedures and tried to use his special knowledge to insure the specialness of the National Zoo.

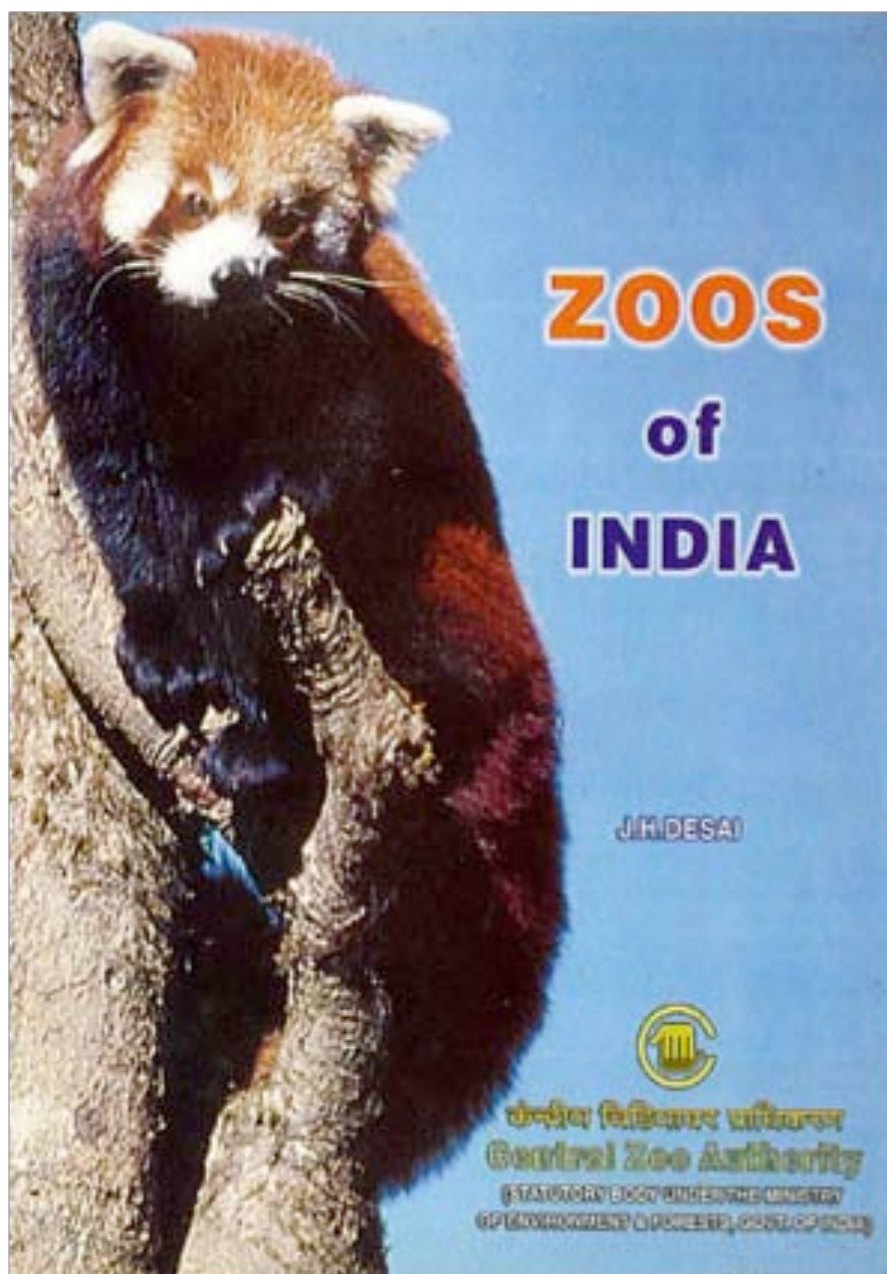
The author opens his history with a concise overview of the specialness of zoos generally and the effect they have on many of their visitors. It is easy to make out from this overview that Desai was a very strong zoophile, a person that is practically addicted to or in love with zoos. He then turns to a brief but very educative global zoo history overview from the very first zoos, starting with the Egyptian archaeological pictographs of what was probably the first zoo-like captive animals collections as early as 2500 BC.

From that chapter summarising the history of zoos of the world, the author focuses on the Zoo Movement in India starting with the captive elephants which were kept by Kings for work, war, hunting and entertainment up through the most current activities of the Central Zoo Authority of India. The evolution of zoos in India is explained in detail, particularly the impact of independence, the Wildlife Act, the setting up of the Wildlife Board of India and the proliferation of zoos in India.

Desai doesn't mince words when speaking of the problems of Indian zoos which is refreshing. He also relates various events with either progress or backsliding by the zoos. From a rather pokey rate of growth, after the Wildlife (Protection) Act the

next two decades were replete with zoos many of which were deer parks and mini zoos. It seemed as if every official wanted a zoo named after him. The growth continued completely unchecked until the Zoo Act, Zoo rules and Central Zoo Authority was established and could use their powers to force all captive animal facilities to disclose their existence and request permission to operate. In the end there were over 450 zoos.

Since there have been so many changes in the face of zoos, Desai devoted the next chapter to zoo architecture and the types of exhibits or displays of animals. This is one of the most important facets of zoos which to a great extent determines the comfort, health, longevity and breeding



success of the animals. The quality of exhibit also determines in large part the quality of visitor experience and their understanding of the importance of wildlife.

From there the author takes us to the "Aspirations" of the country's various institutions and their role in the evolution of the modern Indian zoo. Starting with the Zoo Wing of the Indian Board for Wildlife to the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act (1972), the Zoo Expert Committee Report, Wildlife Action Plan, Zoo Consultancy Project under Wildlife Institute of India, the Indian Zoo Directors Association, and even Zoo Outreach Organisation, we can learn and appreciate the steps which had to be taken to bring the zoos into the 20th Century.

Aspirations section is followed by the Chapter entitled Constraints, which is a honest and penetrating review of the weighty problems that plague the progress of Indian zoos that can only be changed by recognition of the heavy burden these problems place on zoos doing what zoos are supposed to do. These problems stem from the administrative system, the size of the country, the attitudes of both government, government servants and the public and circumstance. This chapter then morphs into the quantum leap made by the government for the benefit of Indian zoos and their denizens, that is, the decision to formulate zoo legislation and create the Central Zoo Authority or CZA, as it is usually referred.

CZA is a unique zoo organisation in the world and the author does a good job describing why this is so with lists of objectives, its functions and its many achievements. There are multiple Tables illustrating the number of zoos evaluated at the time of publication, and the number which were granted recognition and the number closed. A decade later, these figures have increased which signifies that it is a good time for a revision of this detailed history. A table illustrates the amount of fund spent by CZA on the authority and its zoos every year, a staggering sum that this writer dares any other country to match. The various training workshops are listed with date and short description in addition to the list of significant information disseminated. There is also a review of the activity of CZA to rehabilitate animals from Circuses as Government of India banned performances by certain animals. The government decided that CZA should create rescue centres for these confiscated animals and seven zoos were selected to host these rescue facilities.

Interestingly, before CZA was created, there was an initiative in government to create a National Zoo Policy. A workshop was conducted with various officers and NGO's. Ultimately it was decided that a stand alone policy would have no teeth and instead there would be legislation and in order to implement the legislation effectively, there would be an institution called the Central Zoo Authority of India. In fact this was brilliant governance on several levels. Had government actually created a policy without CZA, they would have been ignorant of many aspects of the ground situation. Only after creating the authority, conducting inspections/evaluations and working with the zoos, did the true picture come into focus and only then could a very comprehensive Zoo Policy be written and incorporated into law. The author has included the Policy verbatim over seven pages.

An extensive description of Education and Training has been given in the chapter titled same as well as the achievements in Conservation and Research. In the chapter on Pioneers and Pathbreakers, the author introduces readers to some of the outstanding zoo personnel of the last two centuries, starting with the colonials who established Barrackpore Zoo in about 1806. Historical figure Lord Arthur Wellesley, then governor General of India, spoke of the idea in 1801 and had begun collecting animals himself. He inducted a brilliant naturalist, both botanist and ichthyologist, Francis Buchanan as Director. Begun with a purely scientific objective, Barrackpore Park became more a public attraction. It qualifies as one of the first "zoos as we know them" in the world. It was wound up in 1980 as the seat of government had long since moved to New Delhi, and there few visitors and with no one left to care about it, it languished. What animals were left were moved to Calcutta Zoo. Still, its history has been researched and one day a book about it will appear with beautiful colour plates of the animals, many of them quite unusual and almost all very rare today, which Wellesley had demanded that Buchanan commission.

Some of the more interesting zoos of India are described in the chapter Zoos for All Seasons and the chapter entitled "Towards a New Millenium" will be discussed after listing the rich load of information in the Appendices. This book actually is quite unusual for a history book ... it is practically a history cum encyclopaedia! The following document will give readers practically all the information they need to know to become fully

conversant in Indian and even some other zoos and surely about the complexity of the subject of zoos. If you will permit me to indulge in a personal experience (and you will since you have no choice except to skip it), once upon a time, at a CZA meeting being chaired by a brand new Chairman who was the current Minister of the Environment Ministry, the topic of zoo complexity came up. The Minister had unfortunately commented impatiently on some of the deliberations on problems regarding the zoos that this was a waste of time or something to that effect. He said : "This is very simple. You have some animals. You have a zoo. You feed them. You give them shelter. What is the problem?" As one of the only Members of the Authority who was not a government employee, this writer piped up and made an impassioned plea to the Minister to please learn more about the zoo because it was anything but simple. I gave some examples and eventually stopped talking. I don't remember if there was any distinct behavioural change after my polight diatribe. Everyone was rather stunned but a number of them were also grateful.

If you reach the end of the last chapter of this book without thinking zoos are complex, reading the Appendices might help convince you. They are :

1. Wildlife (Protection) Amendment Act, 1991 & CZA and Recognition of Zoos
2. Recognition of Zoo Amendment Rules 2001
3. Guidelines for Safari Parks
4. Guidelines for Setting up a Deer Park
5. Guidelines for Disposing Carcasses of Animals in Zoos
6. IUCN Guidelines for Reintroduction
7. List of Recognised Indian zoos

Towards a New Millenium

My favourite chapter in this history of Indian zoos is the last one where Desai suggests that in the 21st Century when the human population has crossed the six billion mark it is possible that in overpopulated countries there may be disruption of ecological process which would put even more wild species at risk. The Indian zoos need to "gear up", he says, to meet these challenges. Zoos are uniquely placed to confront some of the problems as no other organisation, as zoos are in the business of saving species. He opines that the strong legislation which guides and protects the zoos is a very positive aspect. Specific areas, however, need to be addressed, such as public image, livestock planning, intensive management of small populations, use of

advanced science for propagation of threatened species, environmental education, collaboration between *in situ* and *ex situ* populations management personnel, world wide network for international cooperation.

Desai completes the history with a discussion of these elements and the potential of Indian zoos to address them and take care of any inadequacy. In most of the items he mentions, CZA and its Indian Zoos have made monumental steps, such as establishing a laboratory to conduct DNA studies and consider procedures such as cloning and AI to strengthen wild animal populations, etc. CZA has also taken the subject of education to a very different level by involving Centre for Environmental Education, conducting training in zoo education, producing books and guidelines for education, etc. These are only a few of the dreams for Indian zoos that have come true or are in process. Desai comments that as the human population grows and its demands on natural resources expand, zoos must strive to save wild animals and their habitat but "as a precautionary measure, let our zoos be prepared to provide them a last chance."

Desai closes the last chapter by quoting an image visualised by participants of a "Futures Search" conducted in December 1999. It was to be a vision of the ideal Indian zoo in 2010. It is a fitting way to end this review as well.

"Our zoos will have healthy animals in eco-system based naturalistic enclosures supportive to in-situ conservation with competent and contented staff, good educational and interpretative facilities, the support of people and to be self sufficient."

Now we are waiting for Dr. Desai to bring out an updated history of the zoos of India and CZA during the last decade. That will probably double the size of the book, but no matter! Its worth it.

Photo Top - a view of the Red Fort from a inside the National Zoo, on of the many attractions.

Photo Bottom: The National Zoo tank, known for its hundreds or thousands of migrating birds which settle in the zoo annually, another free attraction.
Photos by S.Walker



Top Barrackpore Park, first zoo in India and among first in the world. Part of a scientific exercise to describe and draw all India's species. Initiated by Gov. Gen. Arthur Wellesley (1920). Images below are slides of paintings by Indian working for the Indian Natural History Project.



Photos of Marble Palace Zoo. Gentleman by pillar is grandson of founder. Photos by S. Walker.

