

Asiatic Lions at Zurich Zoo -- Part II

The Enclosure : Details, facts and figures

One year after the opening of the indoor lion enclosure, the outdoor enclosure is now ready to be moved into. This marks a further milestone for Zurich Zoo in the zoo's development towards becoming a nature conservation center as well as being a further visitor attraction. The enlarged enclosure currently spanning a surface of 1,700 m² was modelled according to India's Gir Forest and makes a species appropriate housing of the big cats possible. Today, Gir Forest, land of origin of Zurich Zoo's Indian lions, is once again home to a wild population of approx. 350 lions that were nearly exterminated (12 lions in 1910). The World Zoo Conservation Strategy upon which Zurich Zoo's elementary strategy is based, comprises encouraging development projects in the animals' countries of origin. Zurich Zoo therefore supports the protection of the lions in India. In Zurich, the zoo, as a nature conservation center, wishes to draw attention to the problems concerning plants and animals and motivate visitors to contribute actively to protecting nature.

Architecture and construction work

The reconstruction of the existing house for big cats and the integration of the former polar bear enclosure into the new and modern lion enclosure proved to be a major challenge for all parties concerned. Construction work at the heart of the zoo required detailed logistical planning. The new building could, however, be completed in due time and within the budget limitations amounting to CHF 7.5 million.

The lion enclosure

The lion's housing is very similar to their original habitat and meets requirements made towards a modern nature conservation center. Zoo visitors can observe the animals from various different viewpoints and watch them hunting for food, eating, resting, playing, and with their family. Moreover, the enclosure offers sufficient possibilities for the animals to withdraw as well as enough space for possible offspring.

The animals

The new enclosure is to serve as the home of a lion pride comprising one male and one to two female lions and their offspring. The first "king" of this pride is Bhagirath, born in Sakkarbaug Zoo in India in 1989 and housed in Zurich since 1991. The two lion ladies, Aipani (Helsinki: 2000) and Joy (Frankfurt: 2003), joined Bhagirath in Zurich a few months ago. Because they did not get along very well during the past year, they were separated, so that only Bhagirath and Joy will now be moving into their new housing for the time being. Just as in the wild, the lions will not be living in their new habitat alone.

Thanks to corresponding architectural precautions, a socialization with Chinese dwarf otters should prove to be possible.

The plants

Various foliaceous trees (Gold Acacia, Antler Tree, Gleditsia, and Hackberry) as well as shrubs (Tamarisk, Rosemary Willow, Russian Olive, Sallow Thorn, Bladder Senna, Crown Vetch and large bamboo plants) were planted in the enclosure. During the past year, these plants were able to grow roots so that they can no longer be destroyed by the lions and can therefore contribute to the formation of a bush forest in the hilly landscape.

Feeding system

The complex lion feeding system allows for irregular feedings simulating hunting behavior, feed placed in boxes with timely limited access, suspended prey, or hidden feed rations.

Information Center

The new lion enclosure of Zurich Zoo also comprises a 120 m² Information Center. The exhibition "Man and lion - a relationship between fear and reverence" depicts the relationship between man and the lion, reverence of the lion but also contempt for it and its extermination. Among the highlights of the exhibition are a model of a 30,000-year old lion-man from Hohlenstein-Stadel, the original gold ring of an Ashanti king from Ghana, and the model landscape of India's Gir Forest.

Dimensions

Outdoor enclosure: 1,700 m²
Indoor enclosure: 124 m²
Information Center: 120 m²
Overall lion enclosure surface: approx. 5,400 m²

Costs

Total costs amounted to 7.5 million Swiss Franks. The construction of the new lion enclosure was financed entirely by donations; major contributors being the Baugarten Foundation, Holcim, the Vontobel Foundation, the Zoofäscht Committee, the Tiergartengesellschaft, and a large number of private donators.

Important dates

Took up of construction work: April 2005
Termination of construction work: May 2006
Public opening of the lion enclosure: March 28, 2007

2nd phase

With the opening of the new lion outdoor enclosure, Zurich Zoo has taken a further step towards becoming a nature conservation center. The enclosure was modelled according to the natural habitat of its inhabitants, i.e. the Gir

Forest in India. It offers Zurich Zoo's lion family approx. 1,700 m² space and ten times more room to move than in their former housing. The socialization with other animal species as well as predatory appropriate feeding are aligned towards the latest insights into adequate zoo animal housing. As with the Masoala Rainforest, the new lion enclosure is also home to an information center.

After a construction period of approx. one year, Zurich Zoo's lions could move into their new indoor enclosure in the spring of 2006. Now that the vegetation of the outdoor enclosure has been able to grow for a year, the lions can begin to explore their outdoor housing. The former Big Cat's House at Zurich Zoo was completely renovated and the former polar bear enclosure was integrated into the overall construction. The warm colours and white decorative elements of the new lion enclosure are reminiscent of Indian architecture. To make it possible to see the lions - who are sensitive to the cold - in the winter months, the design of the outdoor enclosure was continued in their indoor housing. The generous architecture and the near-natural living space of the zoo lions convey a sense of space and vastness, nevertheless ensuring that visitors can remain in direct visual contact with the lions.

An Information Center was constructed directly adjacent to the 124 m² indoor lion enclosure. Across a surface of 120 m², an exhibition depicts the relationship between man and lion, reverence of the lion but also contempt for it and its extermination. It is under the supervision and according to the ideas and the architectural input of landscape architect Walter Vetsch (Vetsch, Nipkow Partner AG, landscape architects BSLA SIA) that the planning group Indian Lion worked out and implemented the concept for the new lion enclosure of Zurich Zoo.

Near-to-nature housing for the lions

Different ground substrates, e.g. broken lava, soil, sand, gravel, and lumps of rocks were used for the indoor and outdoor enclosures. Moreover, various foliaceous trees and shrubs were planted in the enclosures an sufficient space for the lions to lie down as well as to withdraw and retire were integrated on different enclosure levels in order to meet different weather conditions. As in the Gir Forest, Zurich Zoo also offers its Indian lions a habitat with small streams and rivulets. The back space of the new indoor enclosure with individually dividable zones is out of the visitor's view.

Predatory feeding

A complex feeding system will challenge the animals in their hunt for prey: Irregular feeding hours, feed from boxes with timely limited access, suspended feed, hidden feed portions as well as alternating large and small feed rations.

Moreover, new and continuously changing environmental stimuli will be placed in the enclosure, amongst others scents of different animals, e.g. excrements or twigs from other animal enclosures, spices and essences, e.g. perfumes, conifers prepared with essential oils or traces of prey that was dragged through the enclosure.

Exciting socialization

Given the fact that lions are at the top of the food chain, the possibilities of housing them with other animals are greatly restricted. At Zurich Zoo, it has been planned to house the lions with Chinese dwarf otters. A careful familiarization is to be made possible thanks to various constructional measures. In addition to different hiding possibilities, the dwarf otters are also to be ensured access to the enclosure's water surfaces.

The Information Center

"Man and lion - a relationship between fear and reverence". A 120 m² large Information Center was built next to the new lion enclosure at Zurich Zoo. The exhibition "Man and lion - a relationship between fear and reverence" illustrates the relationship between man and the lion, reverence of the lion but also contempt for it and its extinction.

Across different cultures and epochs, man has revered, feared, despised, and exterminated the lion. Following exhibitions on Masoala's Tropical Rain forest, domestic bats, and threats to amphibians, Zurich Zoo will now be inaugurating its fourth permanent exhibition. This exhibition will be housed in the Information Center that is adjacent to the indoor enclosure of the zoo's Indian lions. Visitors will thus be able to view the 120 m² large exhibition surface and home to select objects related to lions in the context of man's cultural history in the immediate proximity of the animals. The lion was and remains a symbol of power and pride. Consequently, numerous objects of art are dedicated to its reverence. The lion is, however, also still fought as an enemy and hunted - out of fear or for pleasure - which explains why the lion has been exterminated in vast parts of its original habitat, i.e. from Africa to Europe all the way to Asia and North America.

The exhibition is divided into four zones, i.e. Europe, the Mediterranean (North Africa, the Middle East, and South East Europe), Africa, and Asia. The choice of objects on exhibit was made to ensure the largest possible diversity in terms of age, origin, and use. Amongst others, the following objects are on show in the exhibition: A 1716 Zurich Thaler (a former Swiss silver coin) depicting a lion; an approx. 30,000 year-old lion-man from the Swabian Alps; a royal gold ring with an engraved Ghanian lion; a Massai lion fur hat from Kenya; an Assyrian relief depiction of a dying lion; a 3,500 year-old Mykenian

ceremonial dagger from Greece; a true-to-the-original model of a Roman mosaic from Vallon in the canton of Fribourg representing a gladiator and a lion; and a reproduction of the archaeological excavation of an approx. 3,400 year-old mummified lion from the burial chamber of the wet nurse of Pharaoh Tutankhamen. In addition, an electronic display panel shows the current world population figure (more than 6.5 billion), as compared to the world wild lion population (less than 23,000). This makes it quite clear how the relationship between man and lion could possibly end.

The accompanying texts of the exhibition were written in German and translated into French and English. The exhibition concept was worked out by Zurich Zoo, under the auspices of Roger Graf, and implemented by Formwerk AG.

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You can download press articles and photos at www.zoo.ch/medien*



Photographs are all from Interpretation Centre at the new Asiatic Lion Enclosure at Zurich Zoo. A wealth of paintings, cave drawings, artifacts, tools, poster presentations and dioramas and other displays teach any visitor who comes in more about history and conservation of the Asiatic Lion.

Photos by S. Walker