South East Asia Zoo Tour

Peter Dickinson*

On Friday 3rd March 2006 I left India. At the airport I put the remainder of my rupees into the Madras Blue Cross collection box. Hopefully some little animals will benefit. We flew over the Andaman Islands on our way to Bangkok, Thailand. They looked truly beautiful from way up in the sky. I daresay they were just as nice at ocean level.

Saturday, 4 March 2006

In Bangkok I had bought a map in reception and noticed the zoo was not so very far away so I decided to walk out there. 'Dusit Zoo' has figured in many Zoo News Digest links over the years, though not recently, and I really could not bring any of the stories to mind. Icould not remember whether they were good or bad. As it turned out the zoo was, in my humble opinion, very good. But. I thought that practically all the large mammal enclosures were too small, that the electric fences needed sorting and the cat cages were a bit evil on the eye but apart from that I saw little to criticise. It is a pretty zoo, spotlessly clean grounds, beautiful trees, flowering orchids and lakes. The lakes themselves were extensive and contained large carp, massive catfish, huge turtles and to my surprise I saw a very large water monitor as well. All these I saw at one point competing for food supplied by the visitors.

The zoo restaurant is a huge covered area served by around a dozen separate food units providing an immense range of appetising looking foods. One side of this area is an immense mixed aviary which is viewed through glass. Though predominantly storks (Painted, Adjutant) there were also pelicans, night heron, Chinese pond heron, white-necked storks, peafowl (White, Blue, Green, Black-shouldered), jungle fowl, pheasants, corvids, egrets and others. There were some storks on the outside of the aviary too but I don't know if these were visitors or escapees.

There was 1.3.0 Asiatic elephants. The bull pen held a big swaying male. The enclosure was, to my mind, too small. Water moat protect by small raised sharp cobbles (much better than steel spikes) and first line of defence an electric fence. He had a pool, was not chained and was being fed unlimited amounts of some type of bamboo or very coarse grass. There was vegetation in the enclosure which was untouched. The cow enclosure was similar though about three times the size and included a waterfall pool for bathing.

The housing for both was high and open sided with huge sturdy wooden palletes to stand on. All the animals looked content and were in beautiful condition. The Asiatic Jackal (*Canis aureus*) enclosure was, I suppose, moderate sized. What really surprised me was how relaxed the animals were. The two I saw were flat out, sleeping, not ten foot from the fence. It wasgood to see. It was the same with the Hog Badgers (*Arctonyx collaris*) which although in a smallish pen were really relaxed. New arrivals were a group of Red Kangaroos but in a very odd hippo type pen...it turned out it was, the hippos being relocated recently.

The Giraffe enclosure was serviceable but to me it resembled an Ewok castle. I can live with artificial rockwork and even like artificial trees but giant mushroom type structures just don't pull any strings. I thought the Hippo enclosures too small and sadly they were all concrete. There was nowhere for a bit of a mud wallow. I did enjoy watching the cow and half grown male calf basking in their filtered pool with underwater viewing though. The bull was confined to a small adjoining pen next door.

(There does seem to be a lot of splitting off of bull hippos. Why? Have I been lucky because we never had problems with ours being around for the birth or afterwards).

All the primate cages were nice with plenty of perching and ropes to swing on etc. It was possible with some of these to view on two levels. After the Hanuman and Nilgiri langurs of India it was nice to see the Douc, Dusky and Silver Langurs here. There was also apparently a Phayre's langur but I didn't see it as it was hiding. There were some nice groups of the more common macaques which people seem to ignore these days.

Again I thought the Orang enclosure too small and all down instead of up up up. It too had that Ewok castle type appearance.

There was a large new exhibit being prepared for Red Pandas. It was all indoors for some reason. I imagine it will be air conditioned.

Sadly the fishing cat had no water. I thought this a sin. Still in my top five enclosures of all time is the fishing cat at Drayton Manor zoo. All other holders should aspire towards this.

The tiger and lion enclosures were an odd mix of styles. Again too small but serviceable and the cats looked fine. I would ditch the spikey bars though because they do nothing for appearance.

I thought the open topped leopard enclosures were a brave move and not something I would like to work with or give approval too. If I could get out of one of these (and I could) then a leopard certainly could. It might never try it or think about it but the possibility remains.

The Chimpanzee enclosure though small had plenty to do and held a nice little breeding family group. I liked it. The animals appeared content, happy and healthy.

There was a separate charge for the reptile house but I thought it was worth it. The emphasis was on but not confined to Asian species. Firstly there the outside shaded pens holding a variety of turtles and tortoises. My favourites amongst these were the group of Black Asian Giant Tortoise (*Manouria emys phayrei*) which surprised me as to how

*** Editor, Zoo News Digest, e-newsletter. Email: Peter@elvinhow.prestel.co.uk**

large they got. Mind you there were other gems too like the Mangrove terrapin (*Batagur baska*), the Yellow tortoise (*Indotestuda elongata*), the Yellow headed temple terrapin (Hieremys annandalei) and my old favourite the Orange headed temple terrapin (*Geomyda grandis*) which, to be honest I did not know had an English name up to this point. The two bear enclosures (Asiatic black and Malayan sun) were small but nice. There seemed to be only one of each though.

I suppose the advantage of a small enclosure from a visitor point of view is that you can get just that bit closer. In this case I got closer to a Serow (Capricornis sumatraensis) than I have ever done before. Fascinating looking creatures. It was from this vantage point that I saw a guy proposing to his girlfriend and slipping the engagement ring on her finger. Very romantic. "Meet me in front of the Serow".

There is a preserved Air raid shelter from world war II preserved in the grounds. There was a zoo here even then. Surrounding this is an exhibit on the evils of war. I remember seeing something similar in Frankfurt Zoo some years ago.

Also in the zoo is the headquarters of the 'Zoo lovers society of Thailand', which sadly wasn't open because it was a Saturday. The Greater flamingos had several chicks all under a month old. There were Painted stork chicks as well as birds nesting and displaying. I have never seen so many painted storks anywhere. The walk through tropical aviary was brilliant. I suppose it was different because it was tropical but it was outside. It was actually a clever mix of walk through and adjoining aviaries and the whole thing held together by height and a clever marriage of living trees and plants alongside the realistic artificial.

There was a separate charge for the Animal presentation show http://www.asian_wildlife.com and though it was all in Thai I went along to see it in any case. It was very simply done. None of the behaviours shown were strenuous or difficult. From what I could gather there was a eco message and the visitors loved it. The species used were Otter, Macaws, Binturong, Pelicans, Hornbill, Gibbon, Kite, Eagle, and Lories.

There was an impressive collection of Hornbills dotted about and these are included in my favourites here, the Wagler's pit viper (*Trimeresurus wagleri*) and the White-crowned hornbill (*Bernicornis cornatus*).

Walking to and from the zoo I thought more than once just how like Paris some parts of the city are. Big wide tree lined boulevards. After a days wandering I wouldn't say that the people of Bangkok are less friendly than those in India but it seems that way because they are more shy. I think perhaps it is a language thing. The Indians want to talk to you to practice English and the Indians appear much less shy. Still it's early days.

No hard and fast plans. I have a months visa for Thailand before they start fining me. I am hoping to slowly make my way south and, passing through Malaysia, reach Singapore in about six weeks time.

Sunday 5th March 2006
We caught a bus out to the Chatuchak market and spent the morning wandering around there. It was all very different. The people, the goods, the smells. I was particularly interested in seeing the pets section, which we found eventually. The fish and aquarium set ups were from good to outstanding. I couldn't say the same for the puppies, kittens, rabbits and guineapigs which were all too young to have left mom. In spite of the heat and humidity some were dressed up in little coats and jackets. Also far too young were the squirrels. I counted five different species. Practically all of these were being syringe fed by the stall owners. There were many stalls and many squirrels. There were also lots of parrot like being handreared too ranging up from Cockatiels to Macaws.

The reptile stalls were of special interest particularly as most had signs saying that photography was forbidden. I wonder why? I saw young Mata-mata and Star tortoises amongst others. In the same area was astall selling Tigers bones, teeth, Elephant hair jewelry etc.

Monday 6th March 2006
Today we made our way out to Safari World http://www.safariworld.com reputed to be the biggest Safari Park in Asia. Not the easiest or cheapest place to get to without a car and then, comparatively speaking, pricey to get in. We went through the Safari part in a taxi. It didn't strike me as being huge, but useable space was adequate. There was a very large and impressive herd of giraffe. I saw more painted storks here than in Dusit zoo and that's a lot of storks.

After the safari we went into the 'zoo' proper. The most striking thing here was the toilet. It was simply beautiful. It is because of this that I detected the hand of Bernhard Harrison (ex Singapore Zoo) who I recollect giving a presentation on beautiful toilets. He must have had a hand in planning somewhere along the way. Actually the whole collection was neat, tidy, clean and quite beautiful. The heat and humidity was made beareable in parts by the misters overhead. We visited the dolphin and beluga show which was much appreciated by the audience. I was pleased to see that there were no adverts for a 'swim with' programme. After the one I saw in Turkey I find the idea distasteful. The one show here that wasn't running was the 'Orang utan Boxing'. I was glad of it. Has it been closed down because of International public opinion? Or is it for some other reason. The signs said 'under renovation'. There was a lot of other work going on too. I also didn't like the idea of the public paying to have their photo taken with a tiger cub. Maybe its just me. But then again if it is managed properly, the animals are not stressed and it gets people to care about tigers then perhaps I am wrong.

Shortly before we headed back we went to the "Spy World" show. I really did not know what to expect. It was mainly in Thai but to be honest I actually enjoyed it. I think it was a combination of the effects, the extravagance and the audience effect that I liked. There are some young visitors who are not going to sleep for a week. The biggest plus was that there were no animals involved. It does sort of prove another point though, that organisations like 'Safari World', like Scarborough Zoo or Windsor Safari Park in its

latter days are purely in it for the money. The animals are just there. There are no high ideals of conservation, education or research. And that's wrong. That is not to say that there are excellent animal people involved. I am sure there are, it is just how I feel about this place. Worth a visit though. I liked most of the enclosures and am less critical of these than some in 'real' zoos.

Tuesday 7th March 2006
Eventually we reached the Siam Ocean World Aquarium which is situated in the basement of the Siam Paragon, yet another of Bangkoks amazing shopping complexes.
Here we met up with Kevin Tanner, one of the GM's. I have had contact with Kevin through ZooNews Digest a few times over the years but had not met till today. He gave us an informatitive and interesting tour before allowing us to pass through again at a slower pace. I always find it difficult to compare good aquariums because they all present in a different sort of way. It is so important that they present well, educate and get the conservation message across whilst giving people a good time. The Siam Ocean World does all these. It is one of the best aquariums I have seen. It is early days yet. Only open a few months there are a few teething problems. No, I liked it. Loved it even.

Wednesday 8th March 2006
According to the literature, the Khao Kheow zoo http://www.khaokheowopenzoo.com in Chonburi is just an hour and a half away. A doddle we thought and caught a taxi to Bangkok's Eastern bus station. We had a twenty minute wait before leaving. The bus was filled with a group of really lovelylady Buddhist pilgrims who were on their way to a cremation and funeral celebration. They fed us with freshly dug peanuts, bananas fried in sesame oil and vegetable soup. They invited us to the funeral, in fact begged us to go. They said they would feed us and accommodate us for free. They were such a friendly happy bunch. I could not help compare their funereal outlook with that of most I have seen elsewhere. In the end we decided not to take them up on their offer and, in a way, I regret it.

In Chonburi we had to catch a second bus out towards Khao Kheow. This dropped us off in the next town where the road turned off to the zoo. We walked along this for twenty minutes keeping an eye out for a bus. There wasn't one. We asked a few people who said there wasn't a bus, ever, and we were still 19 km from the park! We decided to hitch hike and were picked up by three delightful and pretty university lecturers (teachers of biology and botany) who went out of their way to get us onto the next right road. Still 14 km to go. Hitching again we were picked up by a surveyor and his mate who said they were going to the zoo as well. They weren't at all, but made the trip especially for us and refused all payment. Such nice people. The ninety minute journey from Bangkok had taken over four hours!
The entrance fee was only 50 Baht. Compared to the 700 and 450 Baht of Safari world and Siam Ocean Journey. I thought I was going to be disappointed. I wasn't. This is a truly beautiful zoo in a stupendous setting. It is huge and tropical. Cicadas were singing, lizards basking, butterflies flitting and sweat running. It was very hot and there was a lot of walking to do. Just about all the enclosures were of generous size and many included lush growth. Perching and climbing apparatus was excellent. Browse enrichment was included in all the parrot like as well as elsewhere. There was evidence of regular enrichment in many of the enclosures. Someone here has read the books.

The walk through aviary was massive. I cannot recollect having been in a bigger single spaced aviary. There was loads to see in there including tortoises, turtles and chevrotain as well as perhaps seventy species of bird.

There were a large number of Crab eating macaques throughout the park. A group of about 15 youngsters had got together and were leaping off a tree into a Tapir pool. Swimming, playing, scrapping. Having as much fun as a barrel of monkeys. I could have watched them all afternoon.

The elephant enclosure was large and attractive. Not big enough apparantly as two elephants were outside and chained. Also outside chained was a cow in a small open metal poled pen. With her was a tiny calf which anybody could touch or pet. A lovely little thing. You would never get away with such an arrangement in the UK. Within the main paddock there were other animals chained or wandering free. All could reach over the moat and touch outstretched hands or offered feeds. On the zoo car park are numerous fruit and veg merchants selling produce for just this purpose. Okay, it wouldn't work in the UK but what beautiful animals. All apparantly happy and healthy and no sign of stress. There was more than adequate supervision but no-one was misbehaving. I have never seen so many Binturongs. They were all over the place. Even mixed into the otter enclosure. There were two groups of youngsters of different ages. I think there may well have been twenty five animals altogether. The butterfly garden was exceptional. All open but the butterflies were there in huge numbers.

I liked most of this place. I wished I had more time. I wished I could have gone on the night safari, I wished I could have walked the nature trail and I wished I could have spoken to staff. From a health and safety point of view it was way behind the rules of Europe but it is a beautiful collection. Where it lets itself down is with the little things.
Those tiny little but so very necessary attention to detail like long time broken but never repaired fixtures and fittings, empty abandoned cages, rubbish uncleared in some locations in and outside cages. The staff are there they just need to address these issues. I'm being picky as usual though. This is a brilliant, well done collection and well worth a visit.

We had sort of thought that the return journey to Chonburi would be easier and though there were no buses or taxis in a way it was. One of the girls on the gate phoned her dad to pick us up about a kilometer down the road. As it happened we were offered a lift about 200 yards down the road. They took us all the way to the bus but did want the petrol money. There was a bus waiting.

Sunday 12th March 2006
A thought just occurred to me. All the cats I see here, and there are a lot of them, are Siamese cats. This is regardless of breed or colour, I am in Siam after all. It goes further than that though. The dozen or so 'Heinz 57' feral types which I have had some contact with are exactly the same vocally and behaviourwise as the pure breed

Siamese we kept in Kuwait in my youth. Interesting. I wonder how applicable it is to other species. It adds even more strength to my theory of isolated groups of captive chimpanzees becoming linguistically different... and of course culturally as has now been shown in gorillas.

I spent a very happy afternoon in Chiang Mai zoo. The Chiang Mai zoo is massive. All up hill and down dale, tropical, hot and sticky and tiring to get round. There are disinfectant dips for cars and foot passengers at the entrance. All very noble I am sure but at the same time pointless, unless all vehicle passengers disembark and dip too. My impressions of this zoo are very mixed. There were parts of it which I liked a lot and others which I thought very little of at all. There was illogic at work and the Ewoks had a hand in some of the design. Some areas needed a really good clean and though not dirty had obviously not been attended to for some time. There was considerable massive development taking place. I wondered perhaps if this was being done 'in house' and so taking key members of the husbandry team away from their normal daily duties. The collection was well signed and included English and scientific names. Sadly lacking though was that all important distribution map. We criss crossed round on foot and so did not visit any area in any logical order.

The bear enclosures were small but busy and the bears seemed content. The tigers just made the grade but I thought the lion exhibit depressing. Likewise for the chimpanzees. I only saw one of these and likewise just one Orang utan. I hope their companions were just out of view. The Gibbon enclosures were horrible. They had the height and plenty of cage furniture but lacked any opportunity to brachiate. They were too dark and the sloping earthern floors gave an unkempt appearance.

I thought the Sarus crane aviary to be excellent. It was a pleasure to look at. There was loads of space. Space was a bit of a problem here in general, or rather proper utilisation of it. If I thought the walk through aviary at Khao Kheow was big then this one was surely bigger, though less well managed and less in it. But, if there is this appreciation of bigger being good then why isn't size given greater consideration elsewhere. Recognition of flight distances in birds should be the first indicator that something differerent should be done. Some flying birds were in cages that were too small. This 'problem' could have been solved in one fell swoop by doubling them up with ground dwelling species like pheasants which had tons of room above.

The Humboldt Penguin enclosure was different. Inside air conditioned connected to outside nicely planted by swimming under water. So they had the choice. I noted that all thirty or so penguins were inside taking advantage of the cool. I wondered which biotope they would choose to nest in and whether the arrangement affected the timing and/or duration of moult. I thought the Indian Rhino enclosure poor. All bars and dried mud. I could only see one animal. The Porcupine (*Hystrix brachyura*) enclosures were a bit sad. The reptile area really needed a good going over and smacked of terminal neglect. The Binturong enclosure was a huge disappoint-ment and wants closing off to the public till they correct it. I noted that a huge new aquarium was being built. About time too because the present one is past its sell by date. It contains some really large and beautiful fish though.

There was a separate charge to see the Giant Pandas. This was impressive and well worth seeing. It would seem that an equally huge amount of money was being spent on the new Koala exhibit. So this being the case the management knows how and where money should be spent. This makes it all the more unforgiveable that other areas should be allowed to deteriorate. The most impressive animal I saw here was the Forest Eagle Owl (*Bubo nipalensis*). There were two, but one was simply stunning. Now I could ramble on being critical but I won't.

One recent novel event within the zoo had been the encouragement of local 'modern' artists to introduce some creations. Sadly I could not read what it was all about but nonetheless appreciated discovering new 'odd' very colourful things in unexpected locations. Each of these was accompanied by a photo of the artist and his/her creation. The one I liked best was one which was actually within the animals enclosure as enrichment. This had my mind whirring as to staging similar 'enrichment' art exhibits within other zoos around the world. What a good idea! It would not work for those few sad collections which insist on only 'natural' enrichment (why?) but you never know. Short term their stock might have some fun.

Monday 13th March 2006

Did you you know that the thirteenth of March was Elephant day? I certainly didn't, neither did the young lady I booked my trip with today nor the driver 'Bert' whom was assigned to me. I had taken time deciding on what I should go and see in the elephant line. I didn't want rides, trekking, shows or football. No, the Elephant Conservation Centre and hospital sounded just fine. When we arrived though we discovered that it being 'Elephant day' that most things were closed up. Initially disappointed I changed my mind when I learnt that it only meant my missing logging demonstrations, playing musical instruments and the like. I did not see one, but two elephant hospitals and staff at work. I saw a number of sick, elderly and injured animals, including several with one foot blown off by landmines. Poor unfortunate creatures. One old animal, estimated to be eighty years old stood waiting to die. The mahout reckoned it may last three months at most. I read about the work that the hospitals do.

The Elephant Conservation Centre (ECC), covering 122 hectares (incidentally the ticket said The Zoological Park Organisation), appeared to be a smart and very much on the ball commercial enterprise with the shows and ten day mahout courses and even mahout homestays. There is even an 'elephant resort', a smart little place with log cabins overlooking a pool with a view. I don't know how much use a ten day mahout course would be to your average zoo elephant keeper other than giving experience with a greater number of animals though. I think that generally speaking that Western elephant husbandry is racing ahead of established and sadly often wrong traditional practices. Still though, I did not see anything here that I thought wrong. It appeared a smart and professional set up.

The elephant cemetry was sad. Having loved and lost a few I could feel the associated heartbreak. One animal, though dead some years must have been much loved as there were fresh flowers on her grave.

Whilst up in the ECC I met an American woman, Alycin Hayes (Creative Percussion Music) who was visiting as a consultant to improve upon the elephants range of musical instruments. She asked for my suggestions. As I cannot play two notes in tune I was hardly the person to ask. I did though suggest that she create something electronic that made sounds only the elephants could hear. This could be explained to the watching audience as the elephants responded to sound commands outside the range of human hearing. Then, using electronic wizardry the same thing could be repeated using something along the lines of a bat detector and so allowing people to hear what the elephants could. You get the gist. I thought it was a good idea. Certainly educational.

Some of the elephants wore strings around their ears. Bert said these were the same as the string bracelets that some Budhists wore round their wrists for good luck.

It was at the second elephant hospital 'Friends of the Asian Elephant - Puen Chang' http://www.elephant.org.th that I learnt all about the remarkable Miss Soraida Salwala. Without her magnificent and determined efforts there would be nowhere and no-one for sick and injured elephants and they would still be many begging on the streets. No I have tremendous admiration for the woman and do not think a sainthood would be out of place. I came unstuck when I saw that the efforts being made by this organisation to prevent the export of six Thai elephants to Australia. Why? Because once again zoos and circuses are lumped together in the literature. Because the blinkered outlook of the Born Free Foundation amongst others have been stirring the crock! Sorry but something isn't right here. This may be an elephant hospital. It may be the best elephant hospital in the world BUT it is still a zoo. I think they should recognise that as fact or close the whole place up to paying visitors OR work hand in hand with the professional zoos of the world because we need each other.

After leaving the elephants we stopped at a local market. This was definitely off the tourist trail so no frills. I am glad of this because sometimes I wonder just how much is done in markets just to thrill the average tourist. There was a fascinating array of wild fruits and fungi. Pieces of wild pig. Huge ants eggs. Buckets full of giant water beetles, Cooked crickets, raw bark beetles, plastic bags full of dried frogs, dead dried frogs trussed up neatly and prettily with bamboo, eggs, herbs, seeds and spices.

From here we moved on to Samphun city where we visited the temple. It was useful to have Bert there with me to explain some of the Buddhist mysteries which have been puzzling me. Actually though, I don't think I am any the wiser. I made a contribution for repairs to the temple roof. Things really are the same everywhere you go.

We moved on to an orchid farm for a buffet lunch. Delicious food in a beautiful setting. Attached to the orchid farm was a 'Butterfly Fram" (Sic), which to my mind was a complete waste of time. I see more butterflies in the average garden.

One thing I am not seeing very much of is bird life. All birds are a rarity. In India a water buffalo without a minimum of three egrets would be unthinkable. Here there are none. No waterfowl on the lakes or canals, no crows. It is all very strange. In the gardens are of my hostel there some mynah and sparrows and perhaps two other species tops. At some of the temples you can buy baskets of finches to release for good luck. The temptation is to release them all except it would not solve a thing. I would not be surprised to learn the birds were trained and returned to their aviaries ready for the basket tomorrow.

Although not on my days agenda but as there was time free I visited the 'Maesa Snake Farm'. All I can say is that you have to experience these things first hand, but at the same time if idiots like myself continue paying to visit then they are hardly likely to close down. Interesting though because the thirty or so other visitors loved every minute of it.
The visit started out with a 'snake show' where two unfortunate Thai cobras were relentlessly teased. This was quickly followed by an unfortunate young python, which again was teased and used as a whip. Much the same for the rat snakes. The running commentary was of no educational value whatsoever. Geared towards the watching dorks who lapped it up. The finale involved throwing paper notes into the ring for the brave handlers. I am always willing to forgive ignorance as the explanation for cruelty as this was clearly the case here. After the show I visited the 'zoo' which held an assortment of reptiles, small mammals and birds. In their favour I would say that everything had clean water. That's the limit though because nothing, nothing at all had what I would call even a half decent cage. The sooner this place is closed down the better or completely new management, message and a lot of money spending.