

Kabul Zoo Update

Brendon Whittingdon-Jones *

Introduction

Kabul Zoo, Afghanistan, was founded by a group of largely German professors from Kabul University a few decades ago, along then modern lines. As the political situation in Afghanistan became so volatile, many of the original founders and staff had to leave the country, or were otherwise occupied, perhaps in the war itself.

After so many occupations and finally the bombings by USA in response to 9/11, the zoo was truly in an unspeakable state. Some press reports, including one about a blinded lion named Marjan, lit a candle of interest which became a bonfire. Donations were offered and a mechanism was set up to receive them by the North Carolina Zoo which collected nearly half a million dollars. We have reported measures taken to clean up the zoo, repair the basic infrastructure and try to make it more attractive to visitors in a healthy way (rather than their amusing themselves by throwing stones at animals), train the staff, maintain some basic hygiene. Some time ago, we featured reports from a new zoo cowboy, Mr. Brendon Whittingdon-Jones, a South African wildlife manager who just up and went to Baghdad to help out at the zoo there, and was later picked up by David Jones, Director of North Carolina Zoo, to spend three months at Kabul and try to sort some of the niggling problems.

The report below is from Brendon's return to Kabul after more than a month away. He found the changes he had instituted to be continuing and other signs of progress. Any zoo person would enjoy such reports and we are happy to get them and share them with you.

Afghanistan was adopted as an extension of South Asia by Zoo Outreach Organisation and SAZARC so that the zoo could become a member of the South Asian Zoo Association. This year we hope to have the Director and Education Officer at our meeting - Editor.

REPORT: GENERAL

I met with Mr Akbhary, the relatively new Director and discussed with him the offer from the Turkish Embassy to do some construction around the zoo. Although there still is not a written business plan, there is more structure in the way the municipality deals with the issue of financing the zoo. The \$2000 annual emergency fund no longer exists, but the Department of Culture has \$1000 per month from which the zoo (and other department sub-sections) can purchase necessary bits and pieces (brooms, soap, etc). Larger projects are submitted to the Municipality and need approval from the Mayor. The municipality has settled down and is more efficient and effective in keeping the zoo running on a day to day basis.

Mr Akbhary is working on trying to get a regular TV slot, or TV coverage for the zoo which, even if it just a few minutes a week would be beneficial. During my absence the bear had escaped and Fazel, the Education Officer, who happened not to be on site "talked" the staff into capturing it and returning it to the enclosure from his cell phone. This could not have been easy and the staff deserve a lot of credit for achieving this.

Unfortunately the interest demonstrated by various expatriots in Kabul in various fields, does not seem to be going to result in an effective team of "supporters" making an effort to help the zoo. Many of the expats are in and out of the country and despite their good intentions, have not been able to gather at the zoo even for an informal meeting. I believe even more now that the most effective way of maintaining standards and providing the support net for the zoo from within Kabul is through the veterinary faculty. Dr Sherman has proven his interest in the zoo and seems always able to find some time when needed. If that link continues to develop, it is in the best interests of the animals for their continued veterinary care.

DEVELOPMENTS

The 1.5 m fencing around the Rhesus Macaque Island is completed and seems to be proving relatively successful in stopping litter being thrown into the moat and at the macaques. Obviously it is not going to stop it all, but it certainly appears to be making a difference. The 7 young macaques (brought in over a period of a year) which had been housed in a small separate cage in another part of the zoo, have now been introduced to the island and it's macaques following the addition of large amounts of climbing logs, ropes etc. After one rather dramatic day all the macaques have settled down and the exhibit is the liveliest in the zoo. Visitors are spending up to 15 minutes at the area watching the acrobatics.

The growing frustration of this area is proving to be the keeper who has let his area and surrounds once again become filthy. My loss of diplomacy yesterday seems to have sparked a change in this area although it is still taking a lot of patience after watching the newly assigned keeper try and learn his new tasks. One of the several administrative problems is that little action is taken against the keepers who are not doing their job and extra work is loaded on the keepers who do perform despite all receiving the same salary. I have not yet figured out how the dynamics of the zoo administrative *vis-a-vis* the municipality, and it may be difficult to act against an employee for simple inefficiency.

A 1m fence has been put around the bear exhibit and has also markedly reduced the amount of litter thrown into that area. The engineer is reinforcing the edges of the exhibit since the bears have been systematically excavating it all. We have purchased some large log poles to build a new climbing frame for the bears.

The aquarium continues to be developed and is looking quite impressive. Filters etc have all been installed. The biggest problem remains the erratic electricity supply. This is, however, the same situation throughout the city at the moment, with electricity generally only available at night. The only way for the aquarium to survive is for the businessman who sponsors is to buy a generator, but it

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should be one that's not going to drive all the birds, and visitors insane.

We have put up more perching and shade for the eagles, vultures and buzzards.

On the left of the main entrance the engineer has built a series of shelves/display for the sculpture carvings for purchase. (An "extra" which the director has negotiated into the fencing contract at no extra cost.)

VETERINARY

I met with Dr Sherman last week and discussed the longer term options for veterinary support and co-operation between the zoo and the Kabul Veterinary Faculty. He is drawing up a basic proposal for Morris Foundation and Humane Society of the United States to feel out their willingness to support such an initiative.

The Italian CIMIC veterinary team visited last week for some pest control and will return again Monday.

EDUCATION

We are still trying to get a meeting with the Kabul Education Ministry and have been promised such a meeting several times by the zoo director, and Mr Akbhary. They both agree how important the education program is and the need to support Fazil and want a vehicle for the education program.

Of course this can't be considered until they organize themselves and actually start being proactive on the education front.

Fazil and Sha Nuri have been keen to put together a zoo brochure together for students and some visitors and have done a good job. I have found them digital pictures and we should be discussing the options with a printer in the next few days. Definitely an initiative I see worth supporting since they are keen enough and have made good progress unassisted. Mr Azizgul opined that the brochure should be written in *Dari* and in *Pashto*. Fazil and Sha Nuri have decided to put a photo of Marjan on the front and will first make the brochure in *Dari* and see how it goes.

MEDIA

Obviously the negative reporting has been irritating and counterproductive. I have finally had a response from a journalist (after sending out e-mails to about 20) who is coming to the zoo on Monday. Phone line was extremely poor so not sure yet which agency she is from. I am still trying to get some positive reporting!

RUMOURS

The Mayor of Kabul may move to another district/ province. Not sure on the reality of this, but if it is the case it could have repercussions for the staff appointments within the municipality and thus the zoo.

Z.O.O. News

Z.O.O. and its associate organisations, associations and networks have been busy. Following is a list of newly produced things which may be of interest to you.

Status of South Asian Non-volant Small Mammals: Report of the Conservation Assessment and Management Plan Workshop. This Report is 618 pages long and represents the most current information about South Asian Rodents and Insectivores ever. You can order it from ZOO for Rs. 1000.00 inclusive of postage and handling. If you are associated with our small mammal network, you will get a copy free, but will have to pay for postage (Rs. 150).

Poster of South Asian Primates : This is a poster of all 43 South Asian species and subspecies of primates, beautifully drawn by Dr. Stephen Nash, the artist for Conservation International and the Primate Specialist Group. You can order a copy from ZOO for Rs. 150.00 inclusive of postage and handling. If you are a member of our primate network you will get a large and small poster free of cost. This poster is dated and when sufficient information indicated changes in the drawings, names or species builds up, we will reprint the poster. Watch this page.

BACTivities for young batters : This is an A4 sized, 12 page booklet of information and activities for youngsters. Some of the explanations are sufficiently challenging that it is preferable for an adult to work with a child on this book. Members of our bat network will get one free of cost. Others can order from ZOO at a cost of Rs. 50 inclusive of postage and handling.

South Asian Monkey Colouring Book: This is a childrens colouring book with South Asian Primates as a theme. It includes a small copy of the Indian Primate poster as a colour guide. The book focuses on the four "kinds" of monkeys and various "kinds of kinds" and how they are named. Kids have to reply the questions asked in the book by looking hard at their physical characteristics. The animals are listed within "kinds" by how their common name was selected ... some macaques were named after people that discovered them, and some by the geographic area they are from and some are named by body marking. Primate network members get one free. Others can order from ZOO by paying Rs. 100 inclusive of postage for this A4, 24 page book.

Conservation of Western Hoolock Gibbon : Report of the PHVA Workshop. In February 2005 ZOO/CBSG, South Asia and the South Asian Primate Network conducted a PHVA for Hoolock Gibbon in Dhaka along with the Wildlife Trust of Bangladesh and the Forest Department of Bangladesh. This Report includes an analysis of the population dynamics of Hoolock Gibbons as per information of the participants and action plans focusing on a variety of themes, such as Education and Awareness, Modeling, Populations and Captive Breeding. Members of our primate network will receive a copy free of cost. Others can order this 100 page Report for Rs. 250 inclusive of postage and packing.