

# Substandard Zoo Initiative of the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums

S. Walker<sup>1</sup>, D. Morgan<sup>2</sup>, P. Dollinger<sup>3</sup>, O. Byers<sup>4</sup>, N. Maddison<sup>5</sup>, K. Schwartz<sup>6</sup>, I. Boardman<sup>7</sup>, R. Ngwenya<sup>8</sup>, B.R. Sharma<sup>9</sup>, K. Taylor-Holzer<sup>10</sup>



In October 2005, at its 61st annual meeting, the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums (WAZA) formulated an initiative to address the issue of substandard zoos, following some years of concern. Two events facilitated this action step:

First, Ed McAlister, WAZA President and Chair of WAZA's Welfare and Ethics Committee, along with David Jones, Director of North Carolina Zoo, reported a recent visit to Japan in collaboration with the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW). The visit involved inspection of numerous shockingly substandard bear facilities and interaction with their owners and managers. The facilities were illustrated in a short film clip which was run later at the WAZA plenary.

Second, the Conservation Breeding Specialist Group (CBSG), following a discussion of the topic at their annual meeting, presented WAZA with a statement of solidarity for the initiative :

*“We as a community of staff and friends of organized zoos have a moral, ethical and professional responsibility to engage with poorly maintained animal collections in order to help them improve their standards, achieve conservation goals and benefit the animals they hold.”*

The operant word in the statement is “engage” meaning personal contact, as in the instance of Ed McAlister and David Jones visiting Japan and spending time with the owners, directors and governmental officers related to the bear facilities. Substandard zoos need attention and care by knowledgeable and concerned people with the capacity for compassion, and for patience with the governing authorities and staff running these facilities. In many ways they may be as “captive” and helpless in their administrative constraints and lack of awareness and expertise as the animals they keep so badly.

**Not all bad zoos are run by bad people, or even bad governments.** Therefore, it has been found that in many instances the infusion of information and training, judiciously delivered, has led to a complete about-face in the community or country of these substandard institutions.

The World Zoo and Aquarium Conservation Strategy WZACS itself suggests that zoos with means and expertise should assist less well-resourced zoos, particularly while working on an *in situ* project in a country which has substandard zoos. It says in Chapter 7 of WZACS that “institutions conducting field projects should make every effort to include, where practicable, local zoos and aquariums in the project. Such ties will help the local institutions to promote understanding and contribute to the sustainability of local wildlife management.” The Strategy goes on to comment even that “it is not appropriate for a well-resourced zoo or aquarium involved in a field project to ignore or snub poorly

*maintained or under-resourced animal institutions in the region. Well resourced institutions should attempt to work with local institutions to improve their standards and capabilities.”*

**According to a variety of WAZA documents, substandard zoos are zoos that**

- either do not meet the legislated codes for animal welfare of their respective countries, or,
- if such codes are inadequate, or in the absence of such codes, do not keep their animals in enclosures of such size and volume, and being structured and containing such equipment, as to allow the animals to express their natural behaviour, and
- do not meet the basic principles described in the WAZA Code of Ethics and Animal Welfare.

In the CBSG meeting the substandard zoos group discussed the issue and made the following points:

- **There are substandard zoos all over the world.** Substandard zoos in developed or “High Currency Countries” (HCCs) such as the United States, Europe and Australia are *more* culpable than zoos of Asian, African or South American countries because the former have access to and probably knowledge of an organized zoo community where they could get information, help, etc. Substandard zoos in wealthy countries theoretically could purchase the equipment, special food and medicine, and required expertise for good zoo management far more easily than zoos in developing countries.
- **Substandard zoos in Low Currency Countries (LCCs),** however, do not have the same kind of access. They need help even to find out where to purchase some important material. They have to pay three times the price for books, drugs, certain equipment not available in their country, (basic cost, postage, and customs duty) in addition to the cost-expansion which goes along with the low unit rate that their currency means in comparison to HCCs.
- **Emerging zoo associations provide a framework for action.** Now, the development of stronger-based regional and national zoo associations in Latin America, South Asia, South East Asia and Africa provide a framework and platform for the global community to tackle the substandard issue, as well as a vehicle to work through in these or nearby regions.

<sup>1</sup> ZOO & SAZARC, <sup>2</sup> PAAZAB, <sup>3</sup> WAZA, <sup>4</sup> IUCN SSC CBSG, <sup>5</sup> Bristol Zoo, <sup>6</sup> Milwaukee Zoo, <sup>7</sup> Wildlife Information Network, <sup>8</sup> Pretoria Zoo, <sup>9</sup> CZA, India, <sup>10</sup> IUCN SSC CBSG.

**- The “solution” to the “substandard zoo” problem is not just closing zoos.**

Although some zoos surely should be and will be closed, it has been found that closing zoos leads to other problems such as *what to do with the animals*. In substandard zoos many of the animals are not viable for exhibit or breeding (surely not for release) and even those which are, are often common surplus and not wanted by other zoos. Many zoos in some countries simply release any surplus animals and animal welfare persons are doing this with confiscated animals. This creates problems for conspecifics in the wild, for habitat; it also leads to human animal conflict. So, improving zoos, whenever possible, is a better option in most cases, although it may not always be possible.

Different countries have evolved different solutions for substandard or marginal zoos, ranging from ignoring them entirely to strong legislation. Switzerland, for example, has detailed legislation, providing for standards, inspections, closure of zoos. The Federal Veterinary Office has produced checklists, and a great number of enclosures - even in big zoos - had to be adjusted or the animals given away, and a few facilities were closed down. EU countries also have produced similar legislation prior to or as a consequence of the EU Zoo Directive. Australia has very detailed standards with guidelines for different taxon groups and the United Kingdom also. In the United States there is no zoo legislation as such but there are laws which loosely cover people keeping wild animals which differ from state to state. In the USA, the American Zoo and Aquarium Association has a rigorous inspection and standard to be “recognised” by the association which seems to take the place of legislation for those zoos which are organised enough to apply. A recent estimate put the number of non-AZA accredited wild animal facilities in the United States at 2000 however, many of them being no more than “roadside attractions” consisting of a few miserable animals.

In the so called developing or Low Currency Countries of the world, the LCCs, India is the model, as the only LCC which has created legislation for inspecting, evaluating, assisting or, when appropriate, closing zoos. Central Zoo Authority of India has closed over 100 zoos in the last decade and is thus the world expert in the very difficult task of disposition or placement of homeless or “zooless” animals.

Thus, the call to action by WAZA, enthusiastically supported by IUCN SSC CBSG, is not only timely but imperative, and that is because of the dramatic conservation, education and public relations impact of substandard zoos.

**Impact of Substandard Zoos**

WZACS essentially defines conservation as *in situ* conservation, using the IUCN definition, e.g., “*the securing of long term populations of species in natural ecosystems and habitats wherever possible.*” Accordingly, substandard zoos, particularly in Low Currency/ High Biodiversity countries not only do not contribute to sustainability of local wildlife management, but actually contribute to extinction. These zoos have to curtail their bad management practices in order to stop this contribution to extinction.

**How substandard zoos contribute to extinction**

**Animal Welfare** issues include unhealthy zoo living environments, poor biological, behavioural and veterinary expertise affecting sanitation, nutrition, mental well-being, preventative medicine, life span, visitor misbehaviour – teasing, feeding, outright violence, stress and so on. These practices do NOT lead to successful conservation breeding; just the opposite.

**Conservation impact** is dramatic as the animals in poorly managed zoos have a poor survival and reproductive rate. This causes loss of potential genetic and a frequent *perceived* need for restocking by substandard zoo authorities.

**Impact on wild populations** also occurs due to wrong practices by substandard zoos. Some of these practices are indiscriminate capturing of animals from the wild, or indiscriminate releases of overbred, diseased, behaviourally abnormal or surplus animals into the wild. Also when zoo animals are released without correct preparation there is a greater likelihood of disturbance of wild population behaviour leading to stress, panic and accidents. Social behaviour of wild conspecifics is affected and inappropriate releases can disturb wild population dynamics.

**Impact on wild habitat**, like impact on wild populations, occurs due to indiscriminate and poorly researched release of surplus animals and can impact habitat. A large number of new animals can wreck a niche or fragile ecosystem.

**The zoo industry image is tarnished** because “zoo” is the same word applied to a broad range of institutions. Animal rights, anti-zoo, radical animal welfare groups do not differentiate between different kinds, quality or intent of zoos. The organized and well-intentioned zoo community is lumped with the “other” zoo world by most of the public. Our best zoos share the same stage with our worst zoos as far as public and press are concerned.

**Public education** is probably affected adversely by substandard zoos. It is very difficult to convey an effective conservation message in a really bad zoo. People don’t learn the right attitudes by seeing animals in discomfort or ill health. Although there are no studies as yet to prove what impact a bad zoo has on the public, we think a bad zoo conveys unfortunate subliminal messages, such as: a.) Wildlife is cheap, b.) Authorities don’t seem to care so wildlife must be plentiful, and c.) Wild animals are pathetic so why bother !

**Therefore , it is imperative that the zoo community unite and respond powerfully to the issue of sub-standard zoos.**

Despite much concern by WAZA and others in the zoo community over the last few years and helpful actions by individual zoos over many years, there has been no definitive position statement or systematic strategy for addressing these issues within the organized zoo community. Now, however, a subcommittee/working group, exists to respond to this issue. First, much background work needs to be done. Among other things, such as looking at what has been done before with what results, substandard zoos need to be assessed as to whether:

- a. they want, and would benefit by, engagement, information, training, mentoring; or
- b. they require intervention to engage their authority or government; or
- c. they need some emergency support and then “a” or;
- d. they need to be closed; and finally
- e. if there is desire, interest, and willingness to be helped.

Such knowledge will help to develop a strategic plan.

For western countries, helping zoos in high biodiversity countries is a way of giving something back. Good zoos have those countries’ animals drawing visitors to their institutions. Substandard zoos in high biodiversity countries are often the ONLY place where local people see living wild animals – they NEED zoos too.

The better zoos in LCC or developing countries may also help substandard zoos, and there are some precedents. In Pakistan the Lahore Zoo has given assistance to the Pakistani Hyderabad Zoo. In Bangladesh, the Dhaka Zoo donated animals to some of the smaller zoos and trained them to look after them. Also, Dhaka Zoo hosts staff of the smaller zoos in Bangladesh whenever they get visiting experts for training.

#### ***In situ* conservation**

The World Zoo and Aquarium Conservation Strategy and Substandard Zoos has called upon all zoos to get involved in *in situ* conservation. The Strategy is meant to apply to ALL zoos, but can “range country” zoos and substandard zoos contribute to *in situ* conservation? We believe that “good” zoos in range countries *can* definitely contribute although it is more difficult for them for a variety of local reasons — political, territorial, administrative and economic.

In implementing *in situ* conservation WZACS specifically suggests working with local zoos ...yet, many “local zoos” are not very good, so why and how? Well, if they are indeed contributing to extinction by bad management practices, then *helping these zoos improve their ethics, standards and manner of operation or encouraging their governments to close them is itself an important conservation action.*

#### **Animal Welfare groups**

In the past, animal welfare groups have been very active in ferreting out and complaining about substandard zoos. In many instances, this is helpful as no one really knows where and how many bad zoos there are and every one identified and listed can be helped either to improve or to close.

The problem with animal welfare groups, however, is the same as with zoos, e.g. there are good ones and bad ones. Some of the animal welfare groups are serious, sensible, scientific and practical. They can distinguish between a good zoo and a bad zoo, a good zoo with some not-so-good enclosures, etc. These groups sometimes can be very helpful in encouraging a government to provide funds for improving the bad enclosures or the whole zoo or closing it. However, there are animal rights organisations for which all zoos are bad and their belief is that all should be closed and the animals released back to the wild! This is not helpful, least of all to the poor animals which could not survive if released back to the wild.

The challenge in addressing the issue of substandard zoos is to find ways and means bring different groups together and work towards common goals. The World Zoo and Aquarium Conservation Strategy encourages partnerships between different groups to realise common goals of conservation and animal welfare. The WAZA Code of Ethics is strong in its insistence on zoos making conservation its highest priority but not at the expense of causing undue suffering of animals in captivity.

Conservation, however, with its need for fit and healthy animals is itself a reliable framework for animal welfare. It is hard to imagine many instances where long term conservation of species and the well-being of animals would be in conflict.

Some animal welfare advocates often learn to distrust zoos by seeing substandard zoos and concluding that all zoos are the same. In decades past, perhaps zoos as a community were not as united either in conservation or in animal welfare as they are today. The development of awareness and sensitivity to conservation and animal welfare issues has made a quantum leap. Only the most extreme and critical animal rights advocate could find much to target the WZACS or the WAZA Code of Ethics.

#### **Partners for good zoos**

Good zoos do far more good than harm and closing all zoos would usher in unthinkable cruelty to the animals housed there, unprepared for life in the wild and undeserving of life in an animal welfare rescue centre. The only way forward is to improve the substandard zoos that can be improved and close those which simply cannot be improved. Both zoo personnel and animal welfare advocates will agonise over whether a life of confinement in a sterile rescue centre is preferable to a quick and painless death for some unfortunate animals which can’t be placed, but these difficult decisions must be made.

The over-riding issue is that the problem of substandard zoos is bigger than any single community or profession can solve alone. Zoo professionals, the welfare community, wildlife and other governmental agencies, conservation groups, etc. all must work together for a common good.

WAZA has taken a giant step in initiating this project. It is up to all of us to help it succeed.