

Special feature -- Kabul Zoo, Afghanistan

Sally Walker

One hears awful stories about Kabul Zoo in the press. Not just since 11 September but from years ago, as long as there has been fighting in Afghanistan. We feel so helpless ... what can be done? Once I had an idea to try and muster support for the zoo from Muslim zoo directors around the world, in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia and UAE, to appeal to the Taliban Government to do something for the animals, but nobody I knew thought this was a productive use of time, so I left it. Now, the Taliban is gone but zoos and animals may not be a priority with the new government also. We hope that the humanitarian countries sending human aid might spare something for the animals also. The Press is doing its part by publishing many articles about the dedication of the staff and condition of the animals there.

The zoo and animal welfare community has taken some action which will provide relief for at least six months.

On 24 November 2001 the London branch World Society for Protection of Animals sent \$3000 through reporters from the Sunday Times to the Zoo Director in Kabul on Saturday, so a first contact has been made.

A vet has attended to the bear; the lions wounds are old and have healed.

The World Association of Zoos and Aquariums have issued a press release pledging the support of the world's organised zoos and given an address where zoos can send money for a long term zoo programme.

Mary Rosevear, Director, Zoo Fed, UK and Ireland has conferred with the UK environment Minister and something will come out of that. David Jones, Director, North Carolina Zoo is collecting for the American zoos community to give.

Probably the welfare community, AZA and World Zoo Association will each collect at least \$10,000 so \$30,000 will be available to feed and care for the animals and do emergency repairs for the next few months.

The really good news is that everybody is on the job... and now, not just for Kabul Zoo, but for other zoos in difficulty and welfare issues of captive animals of Central and South Asia.

At this writing (which is being done long before this issue will appear) there was no one to receive money in Asia, but if you want to send a support message to the zoo, you can send it to me and I will send it to an NGO in Afghanistan who will translate it and see that it reaches the staff at Kabul Zoo. Send this to sallyrwalk@vsnl.com.

Afghanistan and its Wildlife

The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is completely landlocked, surrounded by Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, China and Jammu and Kashmir, Pakistan, and Iran. It is one of the poorest countries in the world. It is a dry and cold country with diverse albeit sparse flora and a diverse and numerous faunal species for such a small country. Afghanistan is about one sixth the size of India.

Mammal species of Afghanistan, many of which are common with Indian and other south Asian countries, number more than 100, many of them very highly endangered. Large and medium sized mammals include snow leopard, markhor, urial, ibex, leopard, Marco Polo sheep (bharal), bears, wolves, foxes, hyenas, jackals, and wild boar. Small mammals include mongoose, hedgehogs, shrews, hares, mouse hares, bats, and various rodents. Over 380 species of birds have been recorded in the country and about half that number breed there.

It has been described as a land of "marginal environment" with enormous stress on the land by people too poor to buy fuel and by domestic livestock. This has resulted in soil erosion, and poor irrigation practices has reduced or destroyed the land. The Afghan government is said to be aware of the environmental problems but war pressures are an enormous distraction and also cause further disturbance to the environment.

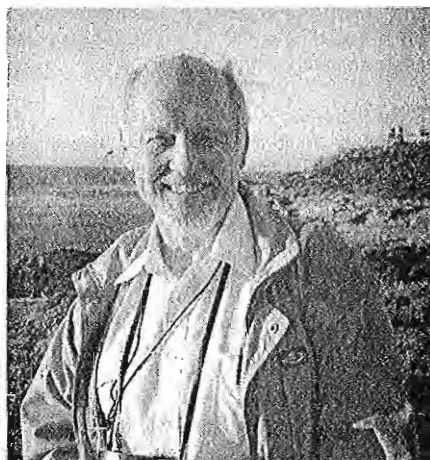
The combination of occupation, war, religious prejudice, political disturbance has -- to a great extent -- alienated Afghanistan from the rest of the world. The confusing and controversial role the country played in the hijacking of an Air India flight from Kathmandu has further alienated Afghanistan from many other countries.

Afghanistan's many problems have had a devastating effect on the Kabul Zoo. Horror stories from active wartime and political revolution have appeared in the press from time to time. Even today, foreign journalists occasionally write about the conditions in Kabul Zoo, Afghanistan, appealing to any kind of activists or concerned humans community to find a solution for the tormented and innocent animals.

Some readers may think that the zoo in a country like Afghanistan might never have been much different, but it is not so. At one time the Kabul Zoo was a proud institution.

History of Kabul Zoo

The Faculty of Science at Kabul University used to keep some wild animals for research. The public became interested in these animals which led to an idea of founding a proper zoo. A "Committee of Zoological Projects" in Afghanistan was founded by the President HRH Prince Nader with members taken from the Royal Afghan government, the Municipality of Kabul, and zoologists from the science faculty at the University of Kabul. Gunther Nogge, today the very well known Director of Cologne Zoo, Germany and former President of the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums, was on deputation as a professor in Afghanistan at this time and was much involved with the zoo.



Prof. Gunther Nogge, a founder and first advisor to the Kabul Zoo, along with others from the University of Afghanistan. Prof. Nogge is now Director of Köln Zoo.

A large site for the zoo was selected and made available by the Municipality of Kabul on the bank of the Kabul River. The zoo was inaugurated in 1967 and a year later the first department of a zoological museum was added. The zoo was supported financially by the Government while technical and scientific input was left to Afghan and visiting German zoologists. German zoo experts trained the Afghan zookeepers and taxidermists.

Modern for that time, moated enclosures were constructed in the interests of the animals themselves, the animal keepers, the zoo visitors and even for economic reasons. Since most of the animals were native and habituated to the climate,

maintained a close connection with Kabul Zoo and a number of research publications were generated on parasitological investigations and successful breeding.

The focus of the zoo was Afghan fauna. In 1972 there were 32 species of mammals, 85 species of birds and 4 species of reptiles. The total number of animals in the zoo was 417, nearly all of which were collected in Afghanistan. There was also a lion, a tiger, some pheasants and parrots. Twenty-five years ago there were several rare species listed in the Red Data Book of IUCN and others which were rarely seen in captivity.

Cologne Zoo, Germany, contributed the pair of tigers which were possibly *Panthera tigris* or perhaps an undeterminate subspecies. The 1969 Red Data Book of IUCN estimated that the total number of the Caspian Tiger (*Panthera tigris virgata*) ranging through northern Afghanistan, Turkestan and northern Iran was 50 to 80. Dr. Gunther Nogge conducted several expeditions to the Amu Darya region, however, and was convinced that the sub-species no longer existed in Afghanistan.

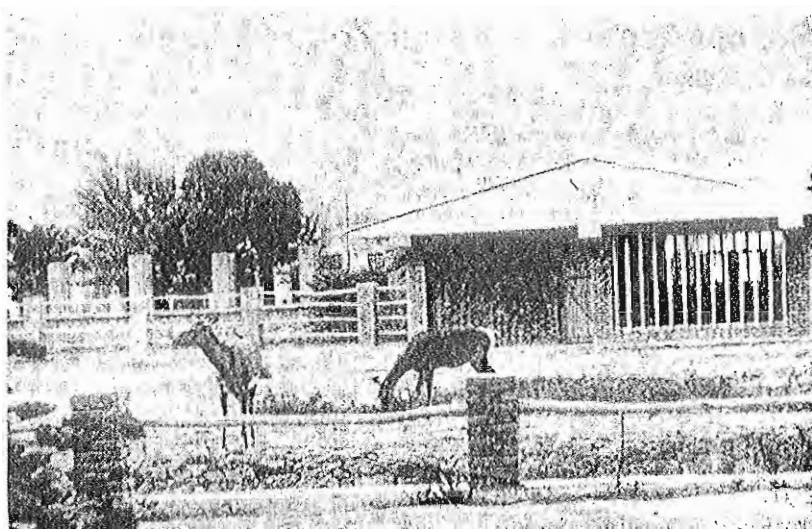
The zoo maintained the Afghanistan leopard which could be seen only in six zoos of the world at the time. In 1973 a snow leopard was donated from "royal breeding stock" of the King along with some other animals. (Anon., 1973).

Kabul Zoo then exhibited the Pallas' Cat which any zoo today would love to have or any wildlife biologist would love just to see! Other small cats in the zoo were Lynx and Leopard cat. Other animals were wolves, jackals, foxes, martens, otters, and striped hyaenas. Two species of bears, Brown Bear (*Ursus arctos isabellinus*) as well as the Black Bear (*Selenarctos libetanus*) native to Afghanistan were kept in a modern open-moated enclosures. Professor Nogge says the eye-to-eye distance from the visitors in a naturalistic setting made them very popular. The Turkish people contributed another bear, a young male of *Ursus arctos syriacus* (Nogge, 1973).

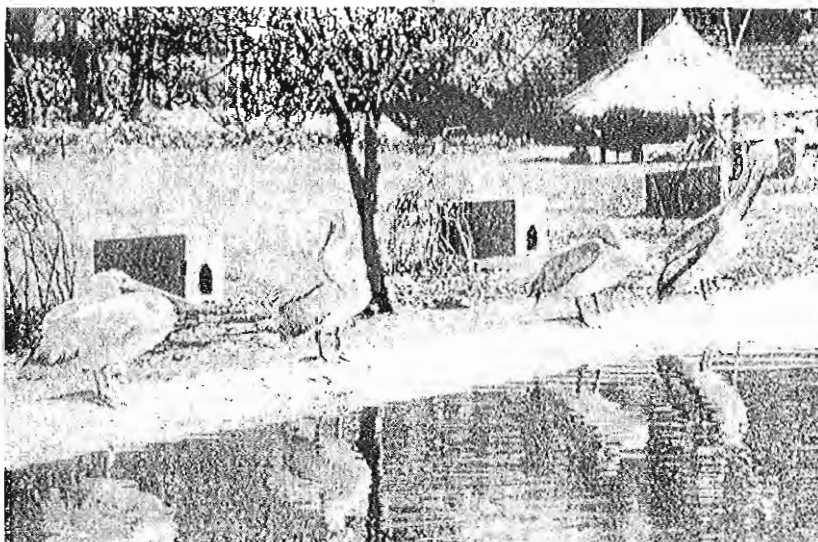
The zoo had a breeding group of the rare Bactrian Wapiti *Cervus elephas bactrianus* endangered by cultivation and pastoral practices, the deer was protected in a sanctuary established by the King in Ajar Valley, Central Afghanistan. The zoo also kept a small herd of the Goitered Gazelle *Gazella subgutturosa* in 1972 reported to be "nearly extinct due to uncontrolled hunting" (Nogge, 1973).

An early attempt at an ecological display was the large moated enclosure including an artificial mountain where Afghan red sheep, (*Ovis ammon cycloceros*), Marmots (*Marmota caudata*) and Snowcocks (*Tetraogallus himalayensis*) were exhibited together. Other mountain ungulates exhibited at the zoo were Ibex (*Capra ibex*) and Bezoar wild goat (*Capra hircus*). The Bactrian red deer and Afghanistan red sheep bred in 1973 (Nogge, 1973)

The founders of the zoo and their German advisors did well for Afghanistan for that period. Even a pond enclosure to mimic Afghanistan's well-known waterfowl lake, Ab-e-Istada, was included where one could see Flamingos (*Phoenicopterus ruber*



Bactrian Wapiti females in their spacious enclosure.
Photo by Gunther Nogge.



Huge Pelicans dominated the pond. Photo by Gunther Nogge.



Ibex and Bezoar Wild goat share an enclosure. Photo by Gunther Nogge.

roseus), Spoonbills (*Platalea leucocoridia*), Stilts (*Himantopus himantopus*), Shelducks (*Tadorna tadorna*) and Ruddy Shelducks (*Tadorna ferruginea*). In addition Afghan pheasants were kept and bred in a pheasantry besides several exotic species. Afghan subspecies of the common pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus bianchii*) lives only in northern Afghanistan. Himalayan Monal (*Lophophorus impejanus*) as well as (*Koklass pucrasia macrolopha*) is from Nuristan in east Afghanistan (Nogge, 1973).

The zoo was very popular with visitors and press. In 1972 the number of visitors was more than 150,000, an increase of more than 20% over the previous (Nogge, 1973). Thus, public interest could be fired about wildlife problems in Afghanistan. The first hunting law was drafted with a proposal for the establishment of wildlife reserves in different parts of the country. (Nogge, 1973)

Kabul Zoo was given a young female elephant, promised by Indian President Sri V.V. Giri on the occasion of a state visit. Immediately when the commitment was made plans were drawn up and construction for the enclosure began. This was in late 1973. In the same year Dr. Gunther Nogge who served as Scientific Advisor for Kabul Zoo left and Mr. G. Kuhnert took over the job. (Anon., 1973).



Male and female antelopes. Photo by Gunther Nogge.

The fall of Kabul Zoo

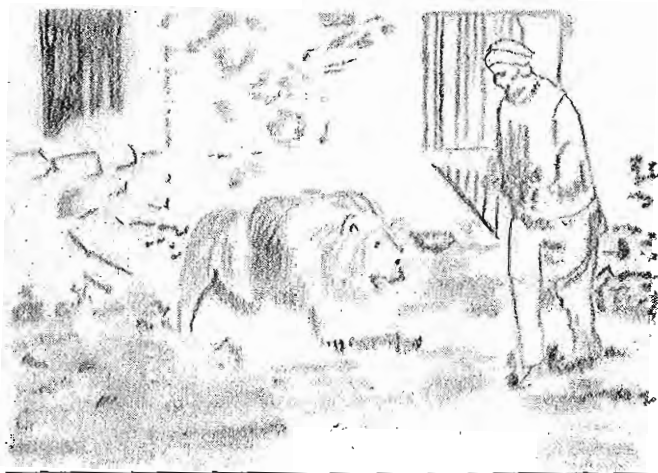
Kabul Zoo fell from a sublime to tragic position in just a few years. In the 90's it was still supported by the Kabul Municipal Authority or the Mayor of Kabul but the war and political instability as well as social and economic difficulties had taken a vast toll. There is no legislation or official agreement for the zoo which, then, is at the mercy of the inclination of the government officials which happen to be holding the Municipal posts.

A report on 25 January 1998 from London Times correspondent in Afghanistan, Stephen Grey indicated that the Kabul Zoo was in great difficulty. Then the zoo held a pair of lions, 6 bears, 1 wild boar, 2 wolves, 2 foxes, and 6 rabbits. It is not known precisely how many were killed during the civil war. The male lion was blinded by a grenade explosion thrown by soldiers in retaliation when the lion mauled a colleague who went into the cage on a dare. A bear had a gunshot wound in the leg. Many animals were shot for food. What remained were freezing as there is no power or fuel to heat their cages in the minus 19 degree cold.

A 60 year old head keeper named Akbar who had worked in the zoo for decades was taken from his hut and murdered by unknown persons and for unimaginable reasons. The animals position became far worse without him – he stayed when the other keepers left and sneaked out of the zoo at night to find food for the surviving animals. The newspaper report said that the zoo was a "favourite of Taliban soliders on leave from the front line" – but for the wrong

reasons: the keepers were unable to stop them from throwing snowballs at the animals, who had already have tolerated more from man than any creature should. The zoo was located 20 km from the front line of the civil war which was too close for comfort – or safety – of the animals.

Mr. A. Raffaele Ciriello <http://www.ciriello.com> had taken a photo of an Afgan zookeeper with the blind lion at Kabul Zoo in 1995. He said "This gentleman was bravely taking care of the Lion, at that time the lone host of Kabul Zoo. More than one year after, I went back to Kabul Zoo to visit the guardian and give him this picture. When he saw himself on the photograph, this man embraced me and started sobbing". Mr. Ciriello refused permission to publish his photograph but you can see it in living colour on the following url : <http://www.afghan-web.com/ciriello/life/life5.html>



Sketch of an anonymous Afgan zookeeper with a lion.

In April 2000 a report from Associated Press in the Dallas Morning News listed the animals as the blind lion, two mangey monkeys, a clubfooted bear and two emaciated wolves. The cages smelled and were full of garbage standing in tall grass and even an occasional land mine. The administration building had been destroyed.

Yet, for the remaining Afghans in the city, people who were too poor or weak to run away, the zoo was a last resort of entertainment, the Taliban having banned movies, television, music or any recreational activity, even sports. During that period the zoo got about 100 visitors most a day. "We used to have beautiful animals," said Abdullah Saeed Rahim, a scruffy, elderly man who had cleaned the cages and fed the animals for 16 years. He tells the story of three bears at the zoo: shells killed one, shrapnel and an infection another, and the clubfoot bear survived. There were no medicines and no doctors (A.P., 2000).

Another article which came out the very next month, focused on ennui of the keepers who allowed the visitors to shout at the animals and poke them with sticks. This story reported 7 monkeys, 2 rabbits, 5 foxes, 4 wolves, 2 hawks, 2 falcons, 3 vultures, 9 owls, a deer, a snake and some pigeons in addition to the lion and bear. The article says that numerous animals had been killed in the fighting before 1996.

A guard reported that animals had died of beating and being fed narcotic drugs by visitors. The Taliban solidiers apparently visited the zoo frequently on weekends and enjoyed baiting the animals, claiming the animals were government property and thus theirs to enjoy.

Mohammad Mehdi, reportedly a zoo official, had appealed to the

government to provide armed guards to protect the animals. Authorities put a carcass of a wolf on display to show visitors the effect of their behaviour. The last remaining deer had to be secured every night to keep it from being taken. (Bashir, 2000).

Pamela Constable, in an article in the Washington Post, in March 2001, interviewed Abdul Sattar, the lion keeper. Sattar tells the touching story that after the lion was blinded, his mate died of an unknown illness and he didn't eat for a week. Sattar is so familiar with the lion that he just walks into the enclosure with a bucket of camel meat. Sattar commented, "this was a beautiful zoo, and knowledgeable people came here. Now there are only rustic people who have come to the city. They don't know anything about animals or their rights. All I can do is try to keep them away from the cages."



Unveiled, an Afghan woman and her daughter (right) enjoy an outing at the zoo Thursday in Kabul. Under Taliban rule, women had to keep their faces covered and were not allowed into the zoo. (Associated Press, 16 Nov 2001)

Today

Today, after the recent fighting which accompanied the War on Terror, it is amazing that any animals are left alive at all, but they are. Media reports people visiting the zoo again, including Afghan women, immediately after Kabul was liberated from the Taliban. Keepers report that there is only enough food for two more days. Faxes and emails are flying around ... who will help? On November 18, 2001, in a series of Observer interviews of the "man on the street", the zoo director, Sher Agah, made an appearance. He had been to the market where some shopkeepers gave him credit for food for the animals. The zoo personnel themselves have not been paid for months but now they don't have

money for the animals also. He had been to see the new Minister of the Interior who promised money, but who knows when it will materialise. The Director has been in place for a decade and has seen much ruin ... the elephant house, which was rocketed eight years ago during Mujahideen fighting, the elephant -- a gift from India -- was killed. Many animals were killed by violence and others by the inability of the zoo to provide a healthy environment. Sher Agha says that he loves his job but worries about the animals. He wants the world to know about their condition so that someone will come and help them.

A few years, in 1998, a welfare organisation strong in veterinary technology made some strong and practical recommendations, such as euthanasia of untreatable animals and relocation of animals if it is not possible to provide them with the 5 freedoms of animal welfare. They recommended limited renovations to stem the crisis, continued contact with the government, sending a delegate which is trained in veterinary management to oversee a systematic inquiry and seeking contacts with NGOs already working in Afghanistan. The same recommendations apply today.

The resilience of this city is almost unbelievable. How could anything so fragile as wild animals survive the years of beating meted out by war and human insensitivity? The animals there are valuable only from a humanitarian -- as opposed to a conservation -- point of view. Their lives have been hell for years ... they deserve a break: either a painless death and liberation or a life sentence to safety and comfort. I hope they get it.

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Addendum — Update

Peter Dickenson in his web based Zoo News has had information that the founder of the Kabul Zoo was Ernst Kullmann in cooperation with the University of Bonn. I have taken my information that it was "A Committee of Zoological Projects" in Afghanistan was founded by the President HRH Prince Nader with members taken from the Royal Afghan government, the Municipality of Kabul, and zoologists from the science faculty at the University of Kabul" from a publication "The Outdoorsman" listed in "References" above.

This will be clarified in due course but, more importantly, the world zoo community has come out in force to assist the Kabul Zoo with close to \$150,000 in pledges at this writing on 7 December !). The World Association of Zoos and Aquaria took the lead and the major zoo associations of the world, e.g. Zoo Federation of Great Britain and Ireland, European Zoo Association, American Zoo Association, and others as well as their individual member zoos and staff have taken a more or less collective decision to see through this problem. We hope they will consider taking up other problematical zoos in central Asia.