

Kabul zoo — update 2002

Ghulam Mohd Malikyar*

Editorial note : Ghulam Mohd Malikyar is a native of Afghanistan. He is one of the primary movers and shakers of Save Environment Afghanistan SEA, an environmental NGO. He has worked with the Snow Leopard Trust and the International Crane Foundation. Ghulam is very interested in helping improve the zoo and is currently developing educational materials and running some education programmes, particularly to address current problems, such as visitor behaviour. He was involved in the zoo earlier and arranged for some cages to be reconstructed. He is a member of Z.O.O., the Asian Regional Network of International Zoo Educators (ARNIZE) and CBSG, South Asia as well as other local Afghan and Pakistan NGOs.

There is now a committee to renovate the Kabul Zoo which will have its own suggestions and focus; but we felt the perspective from this Report from a native who grew up with the zoo would be interesting to readers. This article was submitted in July 2002.

I have been regular visitor of Kabul Zoo since 1978. During 23 years, many impressive and depressive changes have occurred there. My most impressive memories of the zoo was the donation of an elephant to zoo and the cleaning and construction of retaining wall around JoySheer canal that flows beside Kabul river in zoo. Ghulam Mohd Malikyar

Background

At the foot of the historical Shirdarwaza mountains in the heart of Kabul city and at the bank of Kabul River, Kabul Zoo opens a gate to the old city. The zoo was established in 1967 on a total five hectares of land through which the Kabul River flows in the middle of zoo. A dam constructed on the river has made the zoo much more picturesque and pleasant for the Kabulis and outsiders. The five-hectare zoo was meant to house a number of indigenous and foreign animals and later would have been enlarged to eight hectares as part of its development plan. The zoo was run and looked after by the Municipality of Kabul and a scientific committee of the faculty of Natural Science of Kabul University. Since its opening it has been home to around 300 animals of 45 species of mammals, birds and others. A natural history museum and a coffee house were other interesting features within the zoo.

Despite having limited compound and compartments, the zoo had been established in proper scientific mechanism and with a pleasant landscape. The entering gate opens to the main roads of DarulAman and Dehmazang. The natural history museum in the back of the compound and a fish pool in the front has given it more beauty. Formerly, the pleasant grounds in the west of natural museum's building and the flock of flamingo around the pool had been attracting many visitors. Totally, a one-hour walk around the zoo provided healthy fun and enjoyment.



Most visitors visit the zoo for "fun and enjoyment", some of them, the wrong kind ! A visitor tries to feed shampoo to a monkey. Tribute photo by Pete Souza, 26 Nov. 2001.

The double floor natural museum opposite to the entering gate was very attractive. Most of the museum specimens were indigenous animals which were scientifically arranged. The location of the Kabul Zoo — around 2km from Kabul university and one km from 9 high schools around it — is important. It could be made suitable for any research and education programme. Conducting public education programmes in wildlife and conservation could go a long way towards raising awareness of Kabul residents and visitors for appreciation of their environment.



Depressive changes. Damage caused by government bombing in mid-1990's during which time many animals were killed. Tribute photo by Pete Souza, 26 Nov. 2001.

* Executive Director, Save Environment Afghanistan, 405 GulHaji Plaza, 4th floor, UPOBox 831, Peshawar, Pakistan. Tel/fax 92-91- 42822. <sea_afghanistan@hotmail.com>

Depressive changes, of course, were due to conflict of the last few years of which the final stage was the almost complete disruption, destruction and evacuation of the zoo.

Over the years this writer never observed any study or education programme in Kabul Zoo. So one of the main lacunae was lack of advocacy and information on wildlife and such places. Even otherwise, highly knowledgeable dignitaries had least information in the subject.

Going through 35 years history, Kabul Zoo was not as rich as neighboring country zoos, but still served as a recreation site and resource for research and studies in Afghanistan. A good number of indigenous mammals which inhabited mountains and forests in Afghanistan have been displayed at the zoo. The others were donated and or purchased from foreign countries. Further enrichment of zoo was envisioned in a development plan for 1981 that remained on paper due to the war. There were both large and small mammals in captivity over the years, various species of deer, wild sheep and goats, brown and black bear, wolf, and jackal in the category of large mammals. Some small mammals were lynx, coati, skunk, foxes, squirrels, marmots, hares and monkeys. In addition there were also a large number of birds and some reptiles. A complete and correct list with scientific names is under preparation.



Afghan children get the wrong kind of education harassing animals in the Kabul Zoo. Tribute photo by Pete Souza, 26 November 2001.



Fighting wolves. Tribute photo by Pete Souza, 26 Nov. 2001.

Zoo Visitors and Education

All visitors who came to the zoo came for fun and enjoyment only, with a very few exceptions. Either a very small number or no school study tours had been organized. Students and children have been visiting the zoo individually with their family members. Zoo education was not present except for small signboards on the species and their habitat. Signboards referred common name, some scientific name and habitats fixed on the gate of animal compartments. Only the students from faculty of natural science and sometimes students from faculty of veterinary science of Kabul university conducted some study tour in zoo and these were infrequent.

Lack of education caused many serious injuries among visitors. In 1987 the lioness attacked a child who was embraced by his father and his right hand was cut off. At the fall of same year the same lioness attacked and seriously scratched the hand of a thirty two year old man when he was

teasing the animal. His hand was then amputated in the hospital. There were other serious injuries as well, including the account, in 1995 of the lion which struck out at one of local fighters who had actually entered the animal's cage. In 1998 one of the keepers tried to maintain the only surviving cobra but was bitten and died within two hours. Education could have prevented some of these dangerous happenings and injuries.

No practical work towards education in the zoo has taken place. According to literature, Kabul University had developed some informal curriculum but it did not come to be implemented. Now Save Environment Afghanistan (SEA) has taken an initiative to conduct some educational activities which will address the visitor behaviour problems. The Zoo Outreach Organisation has sent material focusing on visitor behaviour, enjoining people to stop teasing and feeding animals, which has been used with some result in India and other South Asian countries. We have translated and adapted for our own use. After testing the material with a few visitors, ZOO will help us produce more materials.

Finally, visitors' admission fee has been at a very low price, about 1 cent in US money or about 50 pice in Indian rupees. The income was used only to support minor expenses or maintenance. In 1987 a video room was established to raise funds but this had a negative impact on youth. Most of school students came to visit the zoo because of its video

hall and were fans of movies not the zoo. A small tea house in a corner was serving visitors. Following construction of a compartment for reptiles in the eastern part of zoo, the old hall for reptiles was renovated and decorated as a coffee house but it had insufficient customers and could not be maintained. In short, there was no sufficient fundraising program in zoo.

Administrative and scientific problems
Kabul zoo operates within the framework of the municipality. Until recently it was the only funding agency and day-to-day care taker of the zoo. Food items were procured locally. Food supply was good but inconsistent. Sometimes, beef was replaced with camel meat. No scientific supervision of food for carnivorous animals had been practiced. In any case, the food supply was regular.

Despite an agreement between zoo and Kabul university, there was no proper management of the zoo due to the long conflict in the country. A systematic construction was reduced to improper buildings. When the enclosure for reptiles and aquatics was converted to a coffee house and shifted to its new location in the zoo, most of the reptiles were lost. Diets for animals had not been provided according to their needs, and dietary checks were not systematic. There was only one veterinary doctor who looked after almost 300 animals of 45 species. A one room laboratory operated for treatment of all animals.

Two lion cubs were maimed and then died at the age of eight months in 1986. Many other mammals had died because of the lack of zoo professionals. The author remembers when a bactrian deer fled and was injured when it jumped to the river. Such happenings were not infrequent.

Political Conflict and the Zoo

In May 1993, the first rocket attack in zoo hit the natural history museum. Following the fighting between warring factions in Kabul city many, many rockets hit the zoo compound. Since zoo is located among two strategic mountains, the rival factions used the zoo as hidden place. Fighting in and around the area around zoo was the worst. This resulted the almost complete loss of animals. A large number of animals were killed outright and a number of animals died because of lack of food and due to hunger. A very



Cages of wartime. Tribute photo by Pete Souza, 26 November 2001.

small number were released by Mr. Kaka Mohd. Akbar, a zoo guard. The elephant was killed when a rocket hit its compound. Three people carried out the corpse 40 days later.

A lion and lioness, bear, pig, two monkeys were among the only survivors in the zoo after the war. The bear died soon. The pig was shot dead by a soldier in zoo. Mr. Mohd. Akbar was the only guard who looked after the animals at that time.

Present status (March 2002)

The collapse of governments, scientific and research institutions and finally general ignorance of environment in Afghanistan opened doors to all sorts of destruction. Kabul zoo is among those institutions that suffered serious

damage by the war. Insufficient attention at the time of former government (1978-1992), location of zoo at a very strategic point and focal point of the conflicts among warring factions (1992-1996) and finally the control of Taliban (1996-2001) reduced the zoo to a barren and ruined site.

According to SEA report in 1998 from 300 animals of 45 species only nine had survived but in very critical condition. Among the survivors were a pair of lions earlier imported from Germany, injured by one of the gunmen and was partially treated. The lioness died in 2000 and the lion in January 2002.

Barred fences and cages are in worst condition. Water ponds, natural history museum, animal keepers, the

elephant compartment, were hit by rockets and is in the form of a lime hill. Most of the donated animals are either dead from negligence and lack of resources or have been taken away. Despite endeavors of zoo authority, at the moment only 13 cages for birds which was repaired by SEA in 1996, lion and wolfs ground are in a usable condition for short term maintenance. Several foreign veterinary doctors visited zoo in 2002 and treated superficial injuries of some animals. A number of heaters were donated by a British Agency but there is no space to use the heaters. SEA received a quantity of diets from Wildlife Information Network (WIN) but this came very late. The zoo could have benefited a lot by association with WIN around 1992-1995.

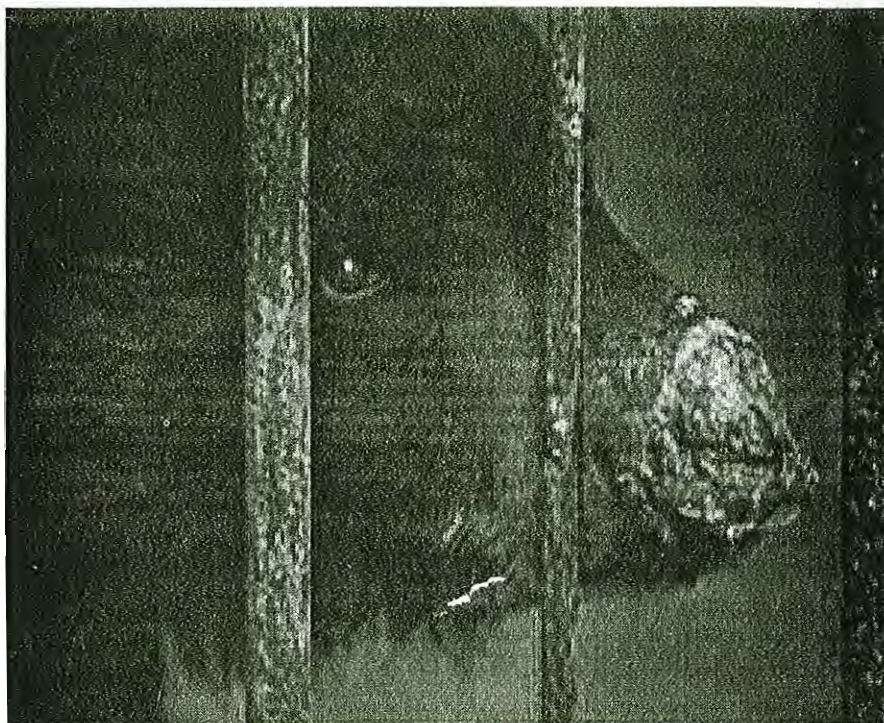
Suggestions for restoration of Kabul zoo:

-- Rehabilitation and restoration of Kabul zoo requires comprehensive planning. At the moment the government faces inflation, Zoo rehabilitation could not be the priority, speaking very practically. Investment by the international community and zoos are the only alternative. As estimated, totally USD \$ 478,000 is required to rehabilitate the zoo to an appropriate form. Donation and transportation of animals could be contribution of other countries at an appropriate time.

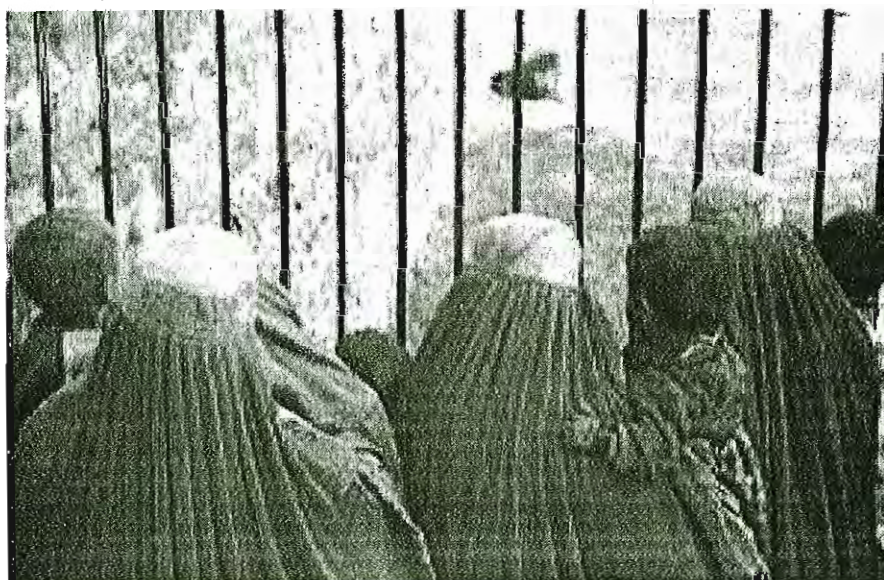
The location is not sufficient for the zoo. Main roads surround it on three sides Traffic and noise disturb the animals all the time. Since a zoo needs to be accessible, however, it seems difficult to build it far away. In any case a plan is in hand and it may be better to build it 10 km away from the town.

Alternatively expanding the compound to main road in the west of zoo, since the area is owned by zoo and rented to vegetable growers, may provide some relief from the space problem. The building for natural museum should be built in the west part of the river and zoo.

-- A task force from the government, international bodies and NGOs should be formed to look after rehabilitation process should be established. Kabul zoo should interact with Kabul University or any NGOs involved in the issue.



Bear injured by conflict at Kabul Zoo.
Tribute photo by Pete Souza, 26 November 2001.



The potential for education is enormous. Afghan women watching the lion.
Tribute photo by Pete Souza, 26 November 2001.

-- Trained and technical staff should be appointed and existing staff trained.

-- In a country that most of her time spent in war and ignorance, keeping indigenous animals in zoo could be a valuable tool for education, research and captive breeding. Even these could be donated as a number of zoos have some species found in Afghanistan. Therefore efforts are needed to establish zoo education. For the successes of this program, SEA has received education material from

Zoo Outreach Organisation and has translated and develop it into local languages. This would be possible tool to set up in zoo. SEA intends to establish an education camp in zoo. In this end, support of others are extremely required.

-- Establishment of permanent zoo fund at the national and international level. This fund will be used for maintenance, enrichment of zoo, and construction of small zoos in other zones in Afghanistan.