## Himalayan Tahr on Table Mountain - the story continues

Dr. Ferdi R. Schoeman, Deputy Director, Conservation, Pretoria Zoo has very kindly dug around in the old zoo records and diaries to assist in discovering the origin of the Table Mountain Tahr which was the subject of an article in last month's issue of ZOOS' PRINT. Here is what we know of their history, taken directly from Dr. Schoeman's email :

"The first tahr in Pretoria Zoo arrived on 22 May 1903. The record simply states "Purchased". No further details.The second tahr in Pretoria Zoo arrived on 14 October 1904. A diary entry states that it was received from a Capt. Kessler. I may just mention that after the Anglo-Boer War, the Zoo received a number of animals from various British regiments and military persons. I suspect these animals served as regiment mascots.

The first tahr born in the Zoo was on 4 January 1906. On 20 May 1913 the Zoo sold two tahrs to Johannesburg Zoo. On 21 November 1920, Pretoria Zoo received a male tahr in exchange from Philadelphia Zoo (USA). On 31 January 1931 a male tahr was received on exchange from Johannesburg Zoo. On 18 May 1934 a female Tahr was received from Johannesburg Zoo. This specimen was one of the pair sent to Groote Schuur on 2 September 1935."

As a zoo historian I find this information fascinating. Of course, there is absolutely no possibility of creating even a vague genetic profile of the Table Mountain Tahr on the basis of this information, other than the obvious fact that they are very much inbred having been derived from just two founders.

Even if those founders were wild, there would still be a problem but it is likely that all of these animals had "made the rounds". The only individual which might have been wild caught is the one which was "purchased" in 1903. This is a "shaving an egg" kind of exercise but it is important to know for two reasons :

1) the animals now on Table Mountain are almost certainly a very different organism from the wild Himalayan Tahr. Descended from zoo animals and having spent many years in a different ecosystem from the Himalayan Tahr, they are most probably not good candidates for reintroduction even if they are not carrying any pathogens.

2) it is clear from records sent from other zoos that it is very easy to breed Himalayan Tahr. Some regions of the world had them for years but do not manage for conservation because the species is not a priority species for conservation. The European region has no programme or studbook for Himalayan tahr and according to a survey done by the EAZA office in 1999 there were 54.102.9 animals in 17 European institutions. Some of these zoos have surplus (such as Rome) which they would be happy to give to India should there be a request.

However, if Tahr are required for conservation purpose in India, it would be better for them to be bred from wild animals with sufficient founders to guarantee their genetic viability in the long term. There are enough wild animals that a few founders could be taken from time to time to supply a systematic programme. Ideally this should be done in a high altitude zoo of which there are sufficient to carry out such a programme.

The difficulty is to obtain permission to capture, even for a genuine programme and also to plan the programme. There are only two or three people who could do this in India today but whether or not they would be called for such work is not known. The only really systematic breeding programme done in India so far is for Pigmy Hogs. Dr. Gautam Narayan heads the programme and he and his team and another couple of people from Wildlife Institute of India could do this correctly.

Of course, the issue was not really conservation -- the suggestion to reintroduce them to sustain the population was spurious. It was given only to justify taking the Table Mountain Tahr to save the animals as individuals, for a welfare consideration. This is very short sighted and hopefully the issue is now dead.

### Suggestions from South Africa

For sake of interest, we would like to include suggestions made by the South African experts who were interviewed by the Ms Yolan Friedmann, Convenor of the Conservation Breeding Specialist Group South Africa, and Wildlife Breeding Resource Centre. She writes," After extensive conversations with a number of people including the South African National Parks Board, the EWT, Cape Nature Conser-vation, the University of Cape Town etc. the recommendation we would like to put forward regarding the Tahr goats in Cape Town is that, should the Indian Govt. be interested in obtaining these goats, that they first put up the funds to perform some in-depth research into their genetic and disease status. They will also form an interest-ing case study as they are severely inbred and from an academic point of view, it would be interesting to see what impact this has or has not had. There are some interesting features visible in this population which may or may not be as a result of inbreeding but this should first be assessed before introducing them into any resident Himalayan population.

The University of Cape Town is willing to do the work as they have the facilities and students and are situated at the foot of the Table Mountain Reserve, but, of course, this study would have to be sponsored.

### For the Interest of zoo historians

Finally, for the interest of zoo historians, it is quite amazing to follow the path of Himalayan Tahr around the London Zoo only. It is instructive in that those days normally did not produce a great number of captive born animals yet the London Zoo breeding record for this species is very good. The number and frequency of exchange and purchase is enormous. There is no conclusion here - far more study is required - the information is just interesting as it is. Douglas Richardson speculated that the Pretoria animals might have come from London Zoo putting for the following theory: "The original source of the tahr could have been from the wild or an Indian zoo, but I consider this unlikely. What is more likely is that the original animals at Pretoria Zoo came from London Zoo, which had bred 115 between 1876 and 1937. I am sure that London's records could verify if a group was sent to Pretoria prior to 1935. When he was the Prince of Wales, King George V went to South Africa to open the Union of Parliament and a huge collection of South African fauna was made for him and arrived at London Zoo in 1911. As was traditional, it is likely that a shipment of animals was sent from London to Pretoria either just before or after the arrival of the animals in 1911." Thanks to Ann Sylf and Elsbeth Chapin for collecting information from the old records of London Zoo but it did not reveal that London had sent animals to Pretoria anywhere near that time.

The eight and ninth editions of the Vertebrate Lists provide very interesting information on the origin of Himalayan tahr in London Zoo, however, and if one is interested in zoo history : one of unknown sex was presented by Capt. Townley Parker way back in 1852 which was the first in the collection. The next four are interesting of which 2 of unknown sex were deposited by H.R.H. the Prince of Wales in May of 1876. Two females were also presented by H.R.H. the Prince of Wales on 5 May 1880. This was in the early days of Calcutta Zoo and the winding up of Barrackpore so the animals could have come from either zoo. Next, a male was presented by Lieut.-Col. Alex. A.A. Kinloch on 17 February 1883 and the animals started breeding thereafter. There is more but that will be presented in a more systematic form in a subsequent issue.

### Are we so afraid ?

In the previous story on Table Mountain Tahr, we related that this issue came to our attention via the Natural History Network List Serve, when a member asked if anyone had information on the possibility of a reintroduction in H.P. as a survey was going on there. He expressed great concern about genetic issues, etc. When I put up the answer, which included the fact that a well know politician from India had intiated the dialogue from an individual animal welfare perspective, it was as if a total ban on the subject was in force. All of a sudden I was the only one discussing it on a very active list serve. Is it possible that even the NGO's are so intimidated by the fact that this was a politicians suggestion that they did not even want to be associated with further discussion ? If so, this is a poor report of our NGO's and NGI's !