

NATIONAL ZOO POLICY

National Zoo Crisis

As 1999 dawns, the Indian zoo community has potential never before in hand. There is - on the surface at least - a new set of possibilities for Indian zoos to rally as a community and set out upon a more rational, consistent and meaningful course.

■ There will be, by the time this issue of ZOOS' PRINT reaches readers, a new Member Secretary of the Central Zoo Authority.

■ The previous Member Secretary and experienced Zoo Director and Ministry Jt. Director for Zoos, sits in the highest official position in the Indian Environment Ministry relevant to zoos, e.g. the Addl. Inspector General for Wildlife. Thus the experience and expertise gained during his tenure as zoo director, Jt. Director in a Ministry, and Member Secretary also goes with him to this pivotal post in the Ministry.

■ The current Minister for Environment, Sri Suresh Prabhu, is proving to be one of the most open, sensible and dynamic Environment ministers to sit in the Ministry for some time.

■ The National Zoo Policy has been approved by Parliament and joins the Zoo Act and Central Zoo Authority as one of the strongest organs for improvement and change for zoos in the world.

■ There is also a new set of members of Central Zoo Authority who have just held their first meeting. These members bring a different kind of expertise to the zoo scenario and more political clout.

■ There is a set of strategic recommendations from Biodiversity CAMP workshops of which India has assessed more species of tetrapods than any other country to guide captive breeding collection policy.

■ There are a set of organisations to serve Zoos, e.g. the Indian Zoo Directors' Association, Zoo Outreach Organisation, Wildlife Institute of India Zoo Cell, as well as several Friends of the Zoo and Zoo Clubs

So

Last year at the Indian Zoo Directors' meeting a visitor from another country, a respected zoo director and leading light of the World Zoo Organisation and Regional Zoo Association asked me: "What's going on here ? You have all the elements for excellence in India -- good people, strong legislation, good finance, departmental support, ... -- what's wrong ? Why aren't the zoos better ? Why can't they cooperate with one another ? What's wrong ? Everything looks good on the surface but its just not happening !"

Why isn't it happening ? This year is time to take a hard and honest look at all our institutions that deal with zoos and try to find out why Indian zoos are not better. It is not that all the zoos are bad -- far from it -- but that no zoo is living up to its conservation potential in any way, even in education.

The following history of zoo events since Independence has been published as introduction and background to the newly approved National Zoo Policy with the hope that history and hard talk can help create a climate of honest self-evaluation for all institutions and individuals involved with Indian Zoos in 1999. This year should be a year of self-examination and correction so that by the millenium, Indian zoos can be marching towards genuine transformation -- on the ground, not just on paper.