

HUSBANDRY PROTOCOL AND LONGEVITY RECORD OF A RED PANDA (*Ailurus fulgens*) AT SUNDARVAN NATURE CENTRE, AHMEDABAD

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Introduction

Sundarvan Nature Discovery Centre in Ahmedabad had a female Red Panda (*Ailurus fulgens*) which died on 10 February, 1998. A post-mortem examination done by the Veterinary Officer of the Government Veterinary Hospital, Ahmedabad confirmed that the death was due to old age.

The animal was gifted to the former Sundarvan Director Mr. Anil Patel by Major C.M. Sharma in 1983. Major Sharma had reportedly rescued the animal in Arunachal Pradesh from poachers. The animal was perhaps already two years old when it was brought to Sundarvan. Therefore, she must have been around 17 years old on the day she breathed her last.

This article is about the longevity record of this red panda, the type of exhibit the animal was housed and the educational graphics developed for it.

Longevity record

The maximum life span of a red panda in captivity is approximately 14 years though individuals generally do not live beyond 8 to 10 years (Crandall, 1964; Glatston, 1980, 1982 quoted in Roberts, 1995). The Sundarvan red panda is perhaps the longest lived individual in the history of captivity.

The record longevity period of red panda in Sundarvan owes its success to the right environment created for the animal by several individuals, notably the previous head keeper Natubha Jethwa and the previous Sundarvan Directors Shri Anil Patel and Shri Luvkumar Khacher. Over the years great care was taken to maintain a degree of consistency in its feeding pattern and enclosure environment. The educational graphic panels placed outside the enclosure wall were also placed during the same time, i.e. during the tenure of the present Sundarvan Coordinator.

Throughout its stay at the Sundarvan, the animal never got a chance to breed. Plans to send this female to Darjeeling Zoo for a captive breeding programme did not materialize for managerial reasons.

Housing

The red panda was kept in an air-conditioned enclosure which had an average room temperature of 27-32 degrees C. The enclosure, measuring 14x9.5x7 feet in dimension, wooden walls and ceiling. The only major alteration brought about inside its enclosure was the placement of a wooden log and a bamboo forest poster in March 1996. The log was placed for the animal to climb on and the bamboo poster to provide a natural bamboo forest backdrop for the exhibit.

Feeding

The animal was fed four times a day. About 250-350 grams of chopped apples and about 100 grams of wet bamboo leaves in the morning. The same amount of apples and bamboo leaves were provided at noon also. This was followed by about 1 litre of milk with 50 gm of sugar in the evening and about 200-250 grams of cut pieces of apple in late evening at 7 PM.

The only other ingredient added to this diet was grapes that were added during every summer. The above vegetarian diet regime was being maintained for the last 5 years and perhaps even before. Though no meat or egg was provided, the animal once caught and ate a captive rose ringed parakeet.

Visitor education

Sundarvan Nature Discovery Centre lays a greater emphasis on visitor education. Signages and wayside graphics in Sundarvan do not follow the conventional textual material found in other Indian zoos. Instead, the approach is to interpret the exhibit by using a combination of text and illustrations. The centre views that it would be futile exercise to bombard the viewer with too much scientific information. The text is kept minimal and the focus is on the behavioral and ecological specialties of the exhibited animal.

The enclosure walls had three glass framed viewing windows. A series of laminated interpretative posters were mounted outside the enclosure wall near the viewing windows. These graphics were developed by S.F. Annamalai (Annamalai, 1994) a student at the Centre for Environment Education, Ahmedabad as a part of his TEE-1994 course. The interpretation panels had the following piece of information:

1. Bamboo feeding habits of the red panda
2. Red panda's geographical range and distribution
3. Habitat requirements of the Red Panda
4. Nocturnal behavior of the Red Panda
5. Longevity of the red pandas in captivity

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