

Valedictory Address

Conference on National Zoo Policy at Kanpur, Minister of Environment and Forests

Zoos appeal to some of the most profound parts of human nature: perhaps they are a pleasant and comforting reminder to us of our origin in and myriad ties to nature. This appeal has transcended a succession of world views, although the zoos have always adapted themselves to the culture of the moment. Once again our views of ourselves and our place in nature are changing. It is up to those who know and care for zoos, if they wish to save this ancient institution, to see that like the animals in them, zoos evolve and survive.

We all know and realise that environmental values and animal welfare ethics have changed radically in the last decade. These changes, along with the breakneck speed of scientific and technical advancements, have created a revolution within the zoological profession. The animal welfare ethics people today question even the right of zoos to keep animals in captivity, if they cannot provide these animals a quality of life that is comparable to the quality of life they would enjoy in the wild. The death of each animal, for which no justifiable reason can be assigned, is resented by them. The zoo enquiry report by World Society for Protection of Animals, which challenged even the justification of existence of zoos must be fresh in your minds.

The reason that in spite of their best intentions, the zoo managers have not been able to come up to the new challenges confronting the zoos, lies in the short duration of time in which the task of changing what were once menageries or curiosity parks to conservation parks, had to be achieved. Every revolution needs a period of transition, which was not available to you. Your critics want instant answers for all the problems which confront zoos. If you are unable to come up to the task, the credibility of zoos in public eye is affected seriously. Your task is further complicated by sticky perception about zoos, which still dominates the thinking of the zoo visitors and decision makers, who want you to acquire more animals for display and create more zoos, irrespective of the fact that neither the manpower nor the finances for creating a well planned zoo and managing the animals in a professional and scientific manner are available. The only viable option available to you is adoption of self-imposed ethical guidelines that may in the long run engender public support to you in your ventures and make zoo management a profession instead of a past time.

Government of India has always been at your beck and call. In the first instance, an attempt was made to infuse professional skills in zoo management across the country through mandatory standards and norms notified as "Recognition of Zoo Rules". The response, however, has not been very encouraging. Now, another effort has been made by adopting a "National Policy on Zoos". This is the first official document which recognises the zoo as multi-disciplinary institute engaged in search of professional excellence in various aspects of zoo management viz., zoo architecture, collection planning, natural history based upkeep, diagnosis based health care, genetics and breeding biology and the mass communication skills. The policy recognises wild animals of various species as an invaluable

resource, which will not be exploited for display purposes in a routine manner. The zoos are required to cooperate with each other in pooling and reorganising their animals in genetically and socially viable groups. Breeding of endangered species in zoos has been only incidental and accidental so far. The policy enjoins upon zoos a responsibility to actively participate in planned breeding programmes allocated to them. All endeavors must be made to safeguard against the zoo population getting surplus of the required numbers.

Greatest potential of zoos lies in the number of persons that visit zoos. The zoos must reach to people, they must touch an inner chord, something deeper than idle curiosity presenting them "a taste of the wild" that can educate them about the need for living in harmony with nature and help in conservation of all living forms found on this planet which will be in the long term interests of mankind. The task is not going to be easy. Besides communication skills, the zoos will have to go for natural immersion exhibits which can present complex ecological concepts in a pleasant ecological milieu. The policy is not an end in itself. It can only help in initiating the process of honest introspection that would lead to identification of the areas of weakness and working out the strategies for mitigating these short comings.

It goes without saying that the resolution in the policy would remain only a pious hope if the State Governments and other zoo owners are unable to bring in requisite infrastructural changes to implement the zoo policy. Need of scientific inputs has been the most under-realised aspect of zoo management. Creation of a cadre of dedicated personnel with sound background in wildlife biology and animal behaviour, nutrition and animal health care, veterinary care, zoo education and nature interpretation is most crucial for development of zoos along the lines indicated in the zoo policy.

The resource allocation being limited, networking with eminent research institutes and the non-governmental organisations is going to be main plank of support of zoos in the field of scientific research and zoo outreach activities. The global zoo community today looks at zoos as a wall-less organisation, where everybody is free to contribute for furthering the cause of conservation. But there is hardly any place for territorial aspirations. Only such a selfless cooperation and commitment on the part of every person working for the cause of zoos can get the zoos rightful place in the contemporary world.