

Rapid Appraisal of San Diego Wild Animal Park, USA with Particular Reference to Rhinoceros Facility

Brij Kishor Gupta*

To refer my experience at the San Diego Wild Animal Park, I quote the foreword written by Gerald Durrell in 1979 for the book "Lifeboats to Ararat" by Sheldon Campbell *"unfortunately all zoos are not good, but high on the list of the best ones is San Diego; it has always enjoyed an exceptionally good breeding record, but, what is more to point, it has been guided in the right direction, so that its whole attitude has been biased in favour of conservation. In the next twenty or thirty years, San Diego will become one of the most important conservation centres in the world"*.

And it is a dream come true. Today the San Diego Zoo, San Diego Wild Animal Park and Centre for Reproduction for Endangered Species (CRES) suite of institutions managed by a nonprofit Zoological Society of San Diego are one of the world's top most conservation centers. I feel amazed and proud to visit the place again. During a previous visit to the United States in 1996, I could visit San Diego Zoo but missed the opportunity to see the Wild Animal Park. This time I could spend a whole day with Mr. Randy G. Rieches, Curator of Mammals of San Diego Wild Animal Park.

The Wild Animal Park at San Diego, which opened in 1972, is a breeding center open to the public. It is situated in 1800 acres of foothills along the San Diego Pasqual Valley, about 30 miles north of San Diego.

The exhibits at the Wild Animals Park are large and open, where animals live in large mixed group (multi-species exhibits) as they would in the wild, except for their natural predators. At the Wild Animal Park, populations of mixed species are exhibited in main exhibit areas called, East Africa, North Africa, South Africa, Asian Plains, Asian Waterhole, Mountain Habitat, Mongolian Steppe and Condor Ridge. Wild Animal Park is home to about 3,600 animals comprising 418 species, including 56 endangered species.

Visitors walk or ride buses around the zoo, but see the Park from a ground monorail that travels for five miles among the exhibits. The park has been instrumental in breeding many endangered species, including Rhinos, Cheetah and Condors.

The Zoological Society of San Diego focuses on saving major "flagship" species from various continents. Fieldwork on these animals is also accorded on a higher priority. Many of the projects supported by the Society are sited in areas of high biodiversity that are especially at risk (e.g. In the Caribbean, the West African rain forest, the mountains of South Central China, Western Ghats in India, and California). These are so called "hot spots" of Conservation.

The park's concept is to provide visitors a 'drive through Safari Park'. The Wild Animal Park's field exhibits, which represent geographical areas and habitats of Africa and Asia, Wgasa Bush Line Railway Tour has been provided.

This open sided small train provides a clear view to the Park's amazing animal habitats. While on the train, the guide calls out the name as the species come into view, then provides information on their native habitat, physical characteristics, eating habits, ecology and their important features. This 55-minute guided tour is very much appreciated by visitors.

Into Africa, Southern White rhinos are being kept along with Cape buffaloes, Giraffes, Crowned cranes, Fringe-eared oryx and Impala. The South Africa enclosure provides a view of Waterbucks, Blesboks, Zebras, Sable antelopes, South African ostrich and many other birds.

The Mountain habitat, a rocky area is refuge for Siberian ibex, Himalayan tahr and European mouflon. These animals fit right into the habitat very much like the mountainous habitats they would inhabit in the wild.

The Wild Animal Park also has an enclosure called the Mongolian Steppe, where Przewalski's horses are being kept. These horses are endangered and are descendants to the horses depicted in the ancient cave paintings at Lascaux, France.

Apart from visiting the wild animal park on a monorail it has a lowland gorilla exhibit, animal show area, hidden jungle, Lorikeet landing area, walk through botanical garden areas and Condor Ridge

For the people who see the park of foot, there are wooden pathways which lead to the Nairobi Village, where one can see the thatched huts, open air markets, gift shops, restaurants, snacks, and shady areas to rest, areas for children to play and areas where one can explore more information on the park and animals. Around the Nairobi Village wildlife from birds to primates to small hoofed stock to insects are also exhibited.

While one walks further from the village area, African walkthrough aviary provide close encounters with birds native to the areas of Africa with lakes and streams.

At the park, close to the Nairobi village is Mombasa Lagoon, surrounded by paths, wooden walkways and simulation of a Congo fishing village. This area is also home to pelicans, storks, flamingoes and ducks along with the migratory bird visitors. Outside the lagoon, exhibits are scattered around one corner and the next, for primates such as Spider monkeys and Crested gibbons, hoofed stock such as Babirusa and dik-diks and small carnivores.

At the Lorikeet landing area, one can enter an aviary designed for personal encounters with dozens of green-nape lorikeets, which fly among visitors. Visitors take photos with Lorikeet while they feed them or even while birds perch on their shoulders.

* Research Scholar, Department of Zoology, DEI, Agra

The Condor Ridge inhabits California Condors. This habitat tells the stories of native North American species that have experienced both decline and recovery, compelling tales of survival that have much to teach about caring for native wildlife heritage.

In the Asian Plains Great Indian one-horned rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) are being exhibited along with Spotted deer, Sambar, Gaur, Black buck and Barasinga. The Asian Waterhole a 35 acres exhibit, which is quite a big area, houses hog deer, Sika deer and Pere Davids' deer.

The backdrop of the rhino exhibit has a typical terrain view covered with green grass, which meets most of the animals' needs. As we know Indian rhinoceros is mainly a grazer but also browses, and has a prehensile tip in the upper lip. The rhinos prefer cool climate (for few months San Diego is very cold) and swampy habitat (which they may be missing in San Diego due to soil quality and rocky terrain). However efforts have been made by the Zoological Society of San Diego to recreate the vegetation type. I witnessed rhinos grazing in the exhibits as one sees in wild. There was tall grass missing inside the exhibit and wallow pond to cool the body. As during a hot day they may spend their time wallowing. There are quite a few small mud pool, but they need to be made more spacious as preferred by rhinos. We know in the wild Rhinos are fond of *Saccharum* and *Cynodon dactylon* species of grasses, similar species may be planted in the exhibit area.

While discussing with Randy Rieches and Linda Sullivan, Project Manager of Woodland Park Zoo, Seattle, USA during their study visit to Rhino Facility at Delhi Zoo and Kaziranga during February 2004, that rhinos maintained in U.S. Zoos have foot infection suspected as they spend most time on harder surface. According to the experience of B.S. Bonal, Director, Delhi Zoo, the rhinos maintained in Indian zoos do not have such problems. The matter is subject to discussion among the experts.

I feel that the rhino enclosures can be provided with a combination of grass, shrubs and saplings of species like *Polygonum*, *Solanum* even though they keep destroying the vegetation. The animals can be rotated between enclosures to allow vegetation to grow. The park may create some marshy habitat. The enclosure can also have species of grasses similar to those *Typha elephantina*, *Aciculate*, *Phragmites karka*, *Andropogon*. Overall the rhino facility and their holding areas are designed and managed to excellence. The habitat is maintained very well. Lot of hard work has been put forward by the team in maintaining the world class San Diego Wild Animal Park.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Dr. Arthur C. Risser, Director and Dr. Donald Lindburg, Associate Director at Zoological Society of San Diego and Mr. Randy G. Rieches, Curator of Mammals at San Diego Wild Animal Park for their help during my visits to San Diego Zoo and San Diego Wild Animal Park. I am grateful to Dr. Tom Foose of International Rhino Foundation, USA for providing travel grant to attend the conference at San Diego.

Note : to see beautiful colour photos of San Diego WAP'a rhinos, please consult our website at url : www.zoosprint.org where this issue of ZOOS' PRINT magazine has been uploaded.

CALL TO ARMS FOR GHARIAL (*Gavialis gangeticus*)

The Crocodile Specialist Group, acting on information about the precipitous decline of Gharials (*Gavialis gangeticus*) in the Chambal River Sanctuary, has drafted a resolution addressing the issue to the IUCN World Conservation Congress to be held in November in Bangkok. The draft resolution acknowledges India's deep, long term commitment to conservation and to preservaton of Gharials in Chambal Sanctuary and elsewhere. CSG calls for the intervention of India's senior NGO's so that the actions to solve the problem and save the animal will be strengthened. Last year this method worked well as a similar resolution to save the Chinese alligator was introduced at the last World Conservation Crogress and led to active efforts to save this species.

Gharial in the wild has been of concern for a long time to the Government of India. The gharial was classified as Endangered in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Animals 2003 and has been given high priority for conservation action by the Crocodile Specialist Group, IUCN SSC.

The resolution from the Congress reviews the success of actions initiated in the past by the Government of India and encourages the Government to continue its efforts to save the Gharial in Chambal and elsewhere. It encourages all IUCN members to support the Government of India in their efforts to :

- maintain a strong research presence dedicated to the species
- manage biodiversity within the tri-state Chambal Sanctuary
- take actions necessary to ameliorate current threats to the existing population with the aim of improving its status.
- undertake measures to reverse population declines of Gharial in Chambal.
- The resolution requests SSC within available resources to offer assistance to India via the CSG in convening a technical workshop to implement the foregoing actions.

Information courtesy IUCN SSC Crocodile Specialist Group



All photos by Brij Kishor Gupta



All photos by Brij Kishor Gupta