

## MAMMALS, BIRDS AND HUMANS: A TALE OF ZOOS

**Ken Kawata**

*For your leisurely afternoon reading, here follows a bouquet of somewhat unrelated topics from yesteryear. Lions, giraffes and hippos are among the cast of species in zoos and present account begins with them.*

### **Colonialism's Conquest Continues**

For some of the common zoo species, such as lions and giraffes, their journey from wilderness ended generations ago, as they had established self-sustaining populations in captivity. In the meantime, zoo visitors often appear uninterested in the animals' ancestry lands. Yet they provide fascinating stories. Expensive, state-of-the-art, "naturalistic" post-Hagenbeck exhibits cannot even begin to remind us of their original home: African savanna and streams.

*"The spectacle of captive animals offers but a shallow reflection of wild reality, and the confinement of innocent creature for human amusement may exert a degrading effect,"* observed Stephen Kellert about zoos. On zoo visitors he noted: *"When visitors do focus on the animal, they prefer active wildlife, with humanlike attributes, usually amusing and exotic creatures."* (1996) The key word here is not innocent, but *exotic*. At an American zoo the public does not expect to see prairie dog, jackrabbit, black-footed ferret, white-tailed deer, gannet, whistling swan or barred owl, all of whom are native American species. Typically lions and tigers, great apes, giraffes, hippos and elephants make the popularity list of the "basic stock".

For a moment, let us take a glance at another popular institution, museums. Zoos and museums carry a similar trait, to exhibit artifacts for the public, in the zoos' case live animals. The origin of exhibit materials is noticeable in the history of museums. *"Two of this country's largest and oldest 'encyclopedic' museums...the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York...turn 150 this year,"* noted Holland Cotter: *"...our big museums were, indeed, built by men with princely aspirations, members of an American aristocracy of industrial wealth, citizens of a still newish nation that simultaneously shut the globe out and considered it ripe for the picking. Most of these patrons were white, Christian and Northern European by descent. Some were civic-minded and viewed museums as instruments of public education, though the 'public' they envisioned was a narrow one, defined by class and race. In the end, museums were primarily monuments to their political power and private wealth could buy."* Some may find a paralleling phenomenon in the histories of the Zoological Society of London and the New York Zoological Society. (Cotter, 2020)

The scope of zoos' collections extends into a global exploration for a stage of wonder, chiefly from Sub-Saharan Africa and southern Asia. *"By 1900 Europeans firmly controlled the world's economy and most of its territory" and "During the modern era Europeans conquered much of the globe under the guise of spreading a superior Western culture. They were so successful that billions of people gradually adopted significant parts of that culture."* (Harari, 2015) The core of animal collections consisted of mammals from the chunks of land, divided by colonial powerhouses. Interestingly, *"Once you go away from the Earth into space, and you look back at the Earth, you see it a single blue marble,"* Firouz Naderi, an Iranian-born scientist,

observed. *"You see no borders, no lines, separating people,"* (Anon., 2023a). Thus artificial divisions by imperial powers get blurred, carrying less significance in terms of natural distributions of plants and animals. It may not occur to zoo visitors immediately but most popular zoo stock comes to industrialized, affluent nations from the formerly *colonized* lands. The occupying overlords included Great Britain and France. From there exhibit materials were taken just as they did for museums. Without those animals, zoos cannot sustain public appeal.

How about a huge piece of land from Asia, home to tigers and elephants? Two British scholars noted: *"India offers a particularly powerful illustration of key themes in the complex interrelation between naturally occurring wildlife, indigenous cultural perceptions of that wildlife, the exploitation of that wildlife for overseas populations and finally a colonial experience."* Also, *"India did have princely menageries, which are particularly associated with the Moghuls, and some of the menageries were transformed into zoos, as in Baroda, but the majority merely withered away. During the period of British rule, zoological gardens based on predominantly European models were developed. A more important transformation came about after 1947, in the post-independent period, when there was a decline in the interest in and development of zoos, mainly because the British traditions had not become indigenous."* (Mullan and Marvin, 1987)

Looking into early days of the United States, major factors helped to shape the country. Exploitation and destruction of nature were typified by the extinction of the passenger pigeon; the American bison was pushed into the brink of extinction. A snapshot of history also reveals attempts to exterminate indigenous peoples and large-scale importations of slaves from Africa. All these resulted from actions by European colonialists. Robert Jones sums up the process of the Doctrine of Discovery which *"claims that European civilization and western Christianity are superior to all other cultures, races, and religions."* *"This sense of divine entitlement, of European Christian chosen-ness, has shaped the worldview of most white Americans and thereby influenced key events, policies, and laws throughout American history."* (2023)

For zoos it's the prevailing Eurocentrism that sets the stage, something we take for granted. Once you toss a pebble, in this case Eurocentrism, into the pool of history nothing could stop the ever-widening circles.

At this point, let me get on a limb to put ourselves behind glassy eyes of the gorilla specimen to view the Western world from *his* perspective. He sits in a famous panorama, a sanctity of nature, destined to be an instant wonderment at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Carl Akeley killed the great ape and brought him back, mounted him and it became a part of the reproduced African landscape. Unrelated it may seem, but here emerges a curious but unsettling disconnection between zoos' African stock and the African American population. Which extends to economic disparity. An example: During the period of 2021 to 2022, median income for Black American household was ca. \$40,400 annually while for white household, it was ca. \$78,000.

Harry Belafonte, the singer, actor and civil rights activist, often commented on this subject (he died in April 2023 at age 96). Writing for *The New York Times* in 1968, he noted that *"the real beauty, the soul, the integrity of the black community is rarely reflected"* on television. *"The medium is dominated by white-supremacy concepts and racist attitudes"*. His ten-year old son saw few Black heroes on television: *"He will see the negro only as a rioter and a social*

*problem, never as a whole human being.*" (Anon., 2023b) Now back to the zoo arena and an uncomfortable disconnect emerges. Disproportionately fewer blacks visit zoos, thus missing the opportunity to look at wildlife from their ancestral land: aforementioned two British scholars found out that *"many blacks might view the zoo as a prison and would not want to associate with an institution which persecuted animals. In other words, they empathize with the plight of captive animals."* (Mullan and Marvin, 1987) Everyone is under the huge umbrella of our Eurocentric society.

### **Asperger Syndrome? Perhaps**

*"Some people feel awkward with fellow humans, but believe they can get along better with animals,"* Ron Blakely, the director of the Sedgwick County Zoo in Kansas during 1970s-1980s, would begin during a casual conversation. In short, his view was shared with Heini Hediger: *"Animals are being used as emotional crutches by them. They come to work at zoos and create people problems for us... They are at odds with his fellow humans and don't make promising material because even an animal keeper has to work with human beings more than one might think at first sight".* (1970)

At Ron's time most directors still had intimate connection with the animal collection. They often "cut their teeth" with animal care. A product of the old-school Ron was idiosyncratic, carrying an indisputable and authoritative air, in clear contrast to today's more "gentler and kinder" cookie-cutter executive-type. To extend Ron's theory, there are different categories in zoo workers. The first group in the keeper rank may be termed as Category A.

Barbara, a young keeper in a Midwestern zoo, small in physical appearance, was outgoing but angry. She accused coworkers vocally for whatever the reason. One of her coworkers was at about the same age, had a pleasant personality and quite attractive and a woman at the business office described her as actress Elizabeth Taylor. She gathered attentions from male coworkers, which did not sit well with Barbara. She avoided this woman. Barbara took a strong affection for some of her charges, for instance a small cat. She gave aspirin to a bobcat (if my memory serves correctly) because "The cat had a headache". That brought up several issues. Firstly, as a keeper she should have medicated animals only under the instructions by management. After all the cat was not her pet. Secondly, how did she *know* a cat had a headache? Besides, according to Dr. Nayer Youakim, should aspirin be given to a cat, *"doses need to be lower and less frequent, calculated and prescribed by a vet, and even then there's still a reasonably high risk of serious side-effects. High human doses would typically still be considered deadly in a cat."* (Email, 17 April 2023)

Here is another example, a keeper called Lisa, medium-built and middle-aged, in a Southwestern zoo. Story had it that she had a daring escape from a Communist country. Lisa had a rather darker complexion, did not have a strong German accent and she did not communicate with male coworkers so smoothly, especially with supervisors. With women she only talked to a small number of them. Aforementioned Barbara and Lisa had something in common: When facing animals they metamorphosed into new persona with warmth and gentle, soft tone of the voice. With a treat in her hand Lisa would say, "Come here dear, take it, it's good stuff, dear, eat it" to an elephant. Lisa eventually left the zoo. A while later a phone call in my apartment woke me up in wee hours in the morning. It was Lisa. "I know you don't like me but I love animals. So hire me," she began to repeat like a broken record. Obviously

she had one too many drinks. There was no job opening at the zoo, I repeated myself but that bounced off her head.

So much for Category A.

Some may call the zoo field “an industry” although we do not manufacture and sell material like “normal” industry. Instead, we exhibit animals. Unique as it may be, it still is a workplace; people report to work in the morning, later picking up a pay check. In an ideal world the governing body appoints capable executives with a free hand for operations, giving them an air-tight insulation against external interferences, political or otherwise. Under good leadership employees work harmoniously; they don’t mind coming to work every day. In reality such a workplace is rare, and stays on a fragile balance.

Now back to Ron Blakely. His observations on zoo workers can be extended into another type, Category B. For people in this category the only way to “feel good” about themselves is to put others *down*, by hurting them, mostly.

Combining A and B, what emerges is a type that reminds you of Asperger Syndrome, characterized by their difficulties in social interactions and communications; restricted interest and causing employment problems. (That Syndrome may overlap with aphasia, a disorder that affects the ability to communicate.) Some zoos may be plagued with employees with Asperger Syndrome while others may not. In the worst case a zoo can be tossed into a chaotic mess although such a process is often complicated. Once ruined, it will take a long time to restore a peaceful workplace. It may be hard for the public to comprehend, yet a chaotic managerial mess in a zoo can be orchestrated by a single, skillful employee. Such an employee is likely from an animal department. If this person is characterized with both Categories A and B, he can create a storm.

In a rare case of a person owning both categories, he is innately skilled to cause a volatile work situation. Let us call him an instigator. The top dog, the zoo director, is too risky a target but an easy one tends to be someone in the management, so a general curator fits the bill. The Instigator has been looking for a little seed to take root; with an eagle’s eye, it won’t take long to find a story such as “The curator is a poor communicator,” or “He is not interested in animals. When I told him about my bear with a health issue he didn’t even come to look at it”. True or not matters little. By that time the Instigator had already formed a clique to stir up the pot. Soon the above two stories have become facts. (Taking such stories seriously, workers are as naïve as believing in Santa Claus.) The Instigator smiles at the curator but avoiding eye contact, stays behind the scenes and pulls the strings and the stage has been set. Early in the morning the curator makes a round of the zoo. A keeper, a clique member, spots him; she trots around to another keeper and whispers something into her ear; thus the work day begins.

Such a case does take place in zoos. Focusing on negativity, rather than positivity, is also an unfortunate human nature: Under peer pressure the keeper force, especially those young, fresh off college campus, inexperienced in life, may believe almost anything. Viewed from the outside, it seems that a naïve young bunch dancing to Mickey Mouse Mambo, so to speak. Gradually the workplace becomes a naysayers’ reframed, fractured nation. Back-stabbing is not uncommon in a workplace, but in our case the Instigator twists the knife. *Esprit de corps*? That’s as rare as an alligator hunter of Point Barrow, Alaska. The zoo director soon notices that something is cooking in the field.

"Hey, what's going on?" he yells at the instigator. For a moment he and followers back down. By that time a diabolical stroke had already arrived, stripping away reason and common sense. The impression: The entire zoo is against the curator. Through the peer network, the story reaches neighboring zoos. A keeper from a far-away zoo shares what he has heard: "That curator is bad all the way around." On trial are confidence and self-respect. Then the news media begin to pick up the storm in an "animal paradise". At this time the zoo is under the young, fair-minded parks director. His office is in the large municipal building in the city center.

"I gather that Mutiny on the Bounty is going on," Hugh begins in his friendly Texas drawl in his spacious office. Pretty soon a management consultant is hired to examine the workplace. He skillfully interviews all parties individually, in private. The purpose is fact-finding, and it does not take long for him to figure out the whole situation. He says that the Instigator "is negative just about everybody." Also, some keepers outside the tight-knit group of the Instigator are under pressure to be silent. Lesson, if any, from this is that the people aspect is critically important in zoos. It's such a basic issue. It is also a prerequisite that a curator needs extensive experience and knowledge in animal care and biology. Some college students wish to work in zoos to make contributions to conservation of wildlife. It would be desirable that those young souls would get somewhat familiar with the human aspects. Hoping to help world's wildlife is one thing, yet you must first get your feet wet in the real work world.

### **Milwaukee's Mini-Melodrama**

*Some members of the public may assume that wild creatures live together in perfect harmony, a fairy tale version of wildlife which may apply to working in zoos. In their fantasy, workers love each other and animals (a new zoo volunteer told me so). Or do they? A sudden and drastic turmoil in a workplace is not that uncommon. An unexpected outburst in the upper echelon can force a senior staff member off to the street. In 2023 I forwarded the following memo to a few colleagues.*

"It's been decades since I left employment at Milwaukee County Zoo, Wisconsin, USA. Yet it often feels not that long ago. Here follows my recollection on my days 1981 through 1987.

The zoo was well known as Milwaukee's 'new' zoo with modern exhibits and a varied animal collection in a large forested area. Meanwhile very few staff members had higher education, and as the new era arrived, upgrading began. Gilbert Boese, a Ph.D., came on board as the director; a general curator position was filled by me (with a master's degree). As I reorganized the staff, establishing job accountability to acknowledge hard-working employees, many thought the zoo was nearing greatness. At that time the zoo's support organization had a new executive Lillian<sup>1</sup>, an attractive, married woman.

Soon, finances of the zoo, a branch of a local government, and the support body, a private organization, began to merge, a rather dubious adherence, administratively and ethically. Boese and Lillian developed an intimate relationship. (Later both divorced their spouses and married each other.) Then Lillian and her staff began to have more 'weight' in the operation of the zoo itself. For the staff the wisdom for survival under that circumstance is to keep your mouth shut, but that was not my style. I voiced my

position in no uncertain terms that as a County employee, I would not take instructions from a support organization. Boese initially noted that I was right.

But the workplace climate was changing rapidly. Soon, my control as the curator over the zoo operation began to be reduced, one area after the other, and I was banging my head against the brick wall. Then one day, staff vet Bruce fired me; Boese and Lillian let him do the dirty job. As an administrator I had no protection from an official entity such as the labor union. I had had my life set in Milwaukee, got married and bought a condo. (I have not fully recovered: in fact, I have never stepped back into the zoo ever since.) Another factor: I knew too much about the zoo world, history, animals and people. That was bound to make Boese et al. uncomfortable. Around that time John, a quiet and hard-working keeper at the reptile house, commented: 'The new sheriff cleaned up the town. Now he has to go.' Then one morning Rudy Underkofler, the top guy in the office, was told to clear up his office right away and get out. Obviously, Rudy knew too much about the ins and outs of the zoo and the support organization. Disgusted by all this Robert Bullermann, the assistant director, retired. Thus, in nine months, three top staff members, Rudy, Bob and I, left the zoo.

Around that time a young zoo secretary came to me, very nervous, and told me that she knew *something* in the office but did not know what to do. You just have to listen to your inner voice, I said. What it was I don't know. She too left the zoo. Boese kept working on merging the two organizations but eventually Boese left the zoo, and died not too long afterward. I don't know what happened to Lillian. All in all, Milwaukee days turned into a bad soap opera."

Here follow a few samples of responses. (Their affiliated institutions remain anonymous.)

...Just got me remembering the three memos incident. Boese was going to be out of town over a special event weekend and tried to put Lillian in charge. I got back from a research trip the next week and had to go through about a foot deep pile of letters and such. Came upon a memo from Boese: "While I'm gone Bullermann will be in charge of the zoo." OK. Further down another memo: "While I'm gone Bullermann will be in charge, but if anything happens talk to Lillian." Hmm. Still further down: "While I'm gone over the special event weekend, Lillian will be in charge." Hah! Later, when he was in trouble he denied trying to put Lillian in charge, and apparently nobody kept the three memos. Rich Sajdak (he was on the staff of the zoo then).

...This must have been such a challenging and unpleasant time for you. I can imagine that the trauma of it has been difficult to get over, but your contribution has been so significant - you are not defined by the actions of others who, I think, didn't always have what's best for the institution in mind. Very best to you both, Nigel Rothfels

...Very interesting. Unfortunately, one hears this again and again over the years - similar circumstances, different people, different zoos. Kristi de Spain

...Interesting story. Thanks for sharing. Some similar, but also different, events were going on in 'xxx' until the 31 of March when two people retired. Gordon Henley

...What a sad story, Ken. I remember the scandal. And I can understand why it still unsettles you. Judith Block

...Sigh. Stories like this seem to abound in the zoo world. (I was let go from 'xxx' suddenly, after 22 years, by the relatively new CEO. The zoo world protested ...EAZA sent a letter with over 300 signatures, including some of the 'xxx' board members.) When asked by the board to explain a) what I actually did for 'xxx' and b) how he was going to fill those gaps, I'm told (by board members at the time) that he couldn't answer. Laurie Marker

### **IZY Facing Graveyard**

*During two summers more than six decades ago, my mentor Dr. Tadamichi Koga, director of Ueno Zoo, Tokyo, gave me an opportunity to be a student intern. After a long train ride from southern Japan, I arrived at the capital. At the zoo I "shadowed" a keeper every day to learn the ropes of the trade. One day at the zoo office I found the International Zoo Yearbook Volume One, 1959, published by the Zoological Society of London (ZSL) and edited by Desmond Morris and Caroline Jarvis. It consisted of merely 160 pages. Still, it was a wow! moment, marking a dawn of the new era: There was now a communication channel for world's zoos. But time has changed ever since.*

The alert arrived by an email. Dated 16 September 2020 Linda DaVolls, Head of Science Resources, ZSL, said to Mary Kazmierczak of Milwaukee County Zoo, in part:

*"Dear Mary*

*Many thanks for your enquiry about the publication of the current volume of International Zoo Yearbook. I am pleased to say that the volume is almost complete, with articles being published online ahead of print. ...I am also sorry to confirm that following a review of ZSL publications, it has been agreed that the volume in production will be the last International Zoo Yearbook."*

A stream of comments followed from colleagues. Examples:

...Until the IZY ceased publication of breeding records and "rare animals" censuses after 1996, these were not only a vital source of data, but of much joy as well. They were fundamental in my development as a zoo historian and zoo professional. And the articles themselves captured the imagination of Teenage Me. By the late '70s, when my father made it possible for me to visit zoos across the US, I had already read a great deal about places I was delighted to finally see. Josef Lindholm. 4 November 2023

...I got my first zoo job because of IZY! I wanted a job in the warm southern US, and used the IZY zoo section to find out a bit more about the zoos. And because I wrote that I was interested in the two specialties mentioned for San Antonio Zoo, waterfowl and antelope, I became the first out of state person Russell Smith, the general curator then, hired for a zoo keeper position. I loved the birds there, and the people I worked with and for, it was an amazing time. So I am eternally thankful to IZY! And I always enjoyed reading it so much, so much information packed in each volume, and in the early days I relied on it heavily for information on zoos globally and breedings, like everyone did I suppose! Cathy King. 17 September 2020

...Yet another casualty of the digital era. I can remember back in the day of looking forward to one of the few quality publications on zoos and zoo animal husbandry. I even had one minor publication. Bummer. It's like the demise of the printed newspaper which I rue; I don't read the newspaper digitally near as much as when I had a real newspaper. Guess I'm getting old! Just

heard from Andy Baker at Philly Zoo who is retiring end of month. We dinosaurs are dying out!  
Ken Kaemmerer. 16 September 2020

...For me it is just another indication for the cultural decline of zoos. Gunther Nogge. 18  
September 2020

Zoos are no isolated islands. In historical context the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963 and the terrorist attack on 9/11 in 2001 cast huge impacts on the society. As for zoos, the largest outbreaks of Newcastle disease in California (1971) and the day CITES became effective in 1975 profoundly changed the way we operate zoos, such as the availability of animals. We no longer pick up a phone, call an animal importer and order a flock of king penguins or a baby elephant. Did that mark the end of innocence era for zoos? Be reminded: such a history should not be judged today in the good or bad, right or wrong context. And it is doubtful that IZY's death struck the current generation seriously. Still, to me it was an epoch-maker in our time.

### **Zoo Job is People Job: Flipping the Other Side of the Coin**

*I would rather spend my time in overseeing animals and staff growth. But for a small zoo curator the work requires so much time with employees. Not everyone is tailor-made for zoo work. Ideally, a curator should run a tight ship. Laissez-fair or country-club managerial style would be unfair to fellow keepers. That means a little undesirable act must be nipped in the bud.*

"Come to my office," I tapped on the shoulder of a man who had hands behind his head, casually chit-chatting. That was some two decades ago at Staten Island Zoo, New York. It was about 2 p.m. in the education department on the second floor of the red brick building. The man was a zookeeper, neatly dressed and medium-built in mid-20s; his dark hair was business-styled. He soon stepped in my office on the first floor, reached a chair in front of my desk in a sloppy manner, stretching his legs, "Get up," said I, in a harsh tone.

"Huh?"

"I said get up." This puzzled young man stood in a straight manner. Then I closed my office door.

"If you interrupt me while I'm talking it is taken as insubordination."

"Huh?"

"Recurring insubordination will require progressive disciplinary steps. Is that clear?"

"....."

It was unacceptable, I began, at two p.m. to act that way when his fellow keepers were working their tail off, carrying equipment and cleaning cages. Not even that, he was disturbing another department's work. That's got to stop.

"Do you have any questions?"

"Huh?"

"If you don't, remove yourself from this office."

"Huh?"

"Just get the heck out of here right now."

What in God's name did he think he was? For my part I can't please everyone; there are times you have to get a message, unpleasant or not, straight to subordinates. I did not care if someone hates me. Nothing personal, I'm doing my job. After talking to this young man, I



jotted down in my little book who said what and when. If a labor union confronted me about a worker's right, the data would be indisputable (perhaps). Luckily this young man quit after a while which saved cumbersome paperwork had I needed to fire him. Let me remind you, however, that encountering fellow humans is not always a discouraging event.

### **He is an Ex-convict. So?**

*Children's zoo is often a training apparatus for future full-time zookeepers. Those who prove themselves competent may be transferred to the "main zoo" to care for big guys such as great apes and large felids. Here follows an episode concerning one guy who wanted to get into the zoo field.*

Nowadays job applications are predominantly female, fresh from college campus. At a children's zoo they begin as temporary or seasonal attendants with no benefits such as medical coverage and pension. Incidentally, bringing in a topic of the circus would raise more than a few eyebrows. But zoos and circuses have something in common, having wild animals in captivity. Tegge describes work life. *"The circus is a well-oiled machine...and flippantly, that machine is often about two quarts low. As scrupulous as they need to be, its cast of characters...from the most daring of young men and women, to those who follow the animals with a shove...are immersed in organized chaos on a daily basis, often skating through life in sequins and feathers at breakneck speed by the skin of their teeth."* (2023) Not that hectic, but zoo keeper's work could fall into that mold.

Anyway, back to the Staten Island Zoo. At the children's zoo most are hard workers, eager to learn and stay low-keyed rather than being conspicuous. Who then are conspicuous? Those with entitlement mentality who want the job as birthright, that's who. We had one of those. Soon her protective mother got into the area of employer-employee relationship. That bordered on interference with the management, a straw that broke this old camel's back.

Around that time, a short, middle-aged man showed up unannounced at the zoo office. He said that he had just been released from prison, beating down the street but no one hired him because of his background. He had no car, needed a ride to work, he added. "What did you do?" I asked. He said that he was helping his buddy in robbery, got in jam with the police. I looked right into his eyes but he did not avoid eye-contact. Education and work experience on paper often matters little; you need to see through the personality. Let's call him Joe. It was odd that an ex-convict, about whom we knew little, stepped over young applicants to take a job. We decided to hire him, and all the while the inner voice told us we were on the right track.

So I called Joe, told him he can start any time. With a big sigh of relief, he was all too happy to take it. It worked out in our favor as he showed up every day. Although at one time, when a fellow keeper John was giving him a ride, Joe shared with him the robbery experience and that did not make John comfortable. Anyhow, Joe's zoo career turned out to be short; he died of cancer. Decades after retirement I remember Joe occasionally, and I am glad that we gave him a brief but (hopefully) a pleasant experience at our zoo.

### **Flood of Misconceptions**

*Misconceptions abound when it comes to the subject of zoos. An example: Some people think it is funny to work in a zoo. Some people chuckle after finding out we work at a zoo. Their*

*assumption: Zoo work is something of non-serious by nature. The average John and Jane Doe Public may believe we cuddle and hug cute animals (and still get paid). It came to the point that when a stranger asked about what I did for a living I'd say "An administrator, government and non-profit".*

Typically, one of the common misconceptions is that a zoo is for children. Back in my Oklahoma days in the 1980s I was going to give a behind-the-scenes tour to graduate students, and they were to meet me at the zoo gate. Being a graduate school, the student body was older than that of undergraduates. Prior to the tour I had emphasized that wild animals were dangerous whether they are in captivity or not, that no family member was to accompany them. Early that morning I saw small children with parents (the students). My word was conveniently forgotten. (Had it been a paper mill tour, would they still have brought in children?) Here is another example.

At Staten Island Zoo early this century, I was writing a book on the zoo's history. It was time to design the front cover and that job was for the publisher. When the cover design arrived, staff artist Ellen Palm and I looked at each other. Then we took it to zoo director Vin Gattullo. The content of my book was clearly for adults but the publisher apparently acted on their own preconceived notion.

"Send it back. Ours is not a children's book", he instructed.

So, we did. A new design came soon, and again, Ellen and I looked at each other in amazement.

"Send it back. Ours is not a children's book", said Vin.

Finally, the third time, the publisher sent an acceptable cover design.

Such a misconception is wide-spread across Europe too. Take, for example, Switzerland. Heini Hediger noted: *"In influential cities a zoo is still regarded mainly as a place where the children can go on a Sunday afternoon, to buy ice-creams and laugh at the alleged comic behaviour of the monkeys, and nothing more than this."* (1970)

An important part of my job was to select job applicants. When we anticipated a job opening we would go over a pile of job applications and begin screening for the first cut. After a second, the third cuts, a small number of applicants was contacted for an interview. "I am interested in zoo work," a young man said at an interview. (*Anyone* can say that.) "If you are interested in zoos, what zoos have you seen lately?" If he named one I would have asked his critique of that zoo, but he eluded a clear answer. In another case, as usual I stated that I was looking for someone with prior experience with wild animals. A young man replied: "My college education will surpass experience." Quickly I showed him the door.

Earlier in the 1970s when I interviewed several zoo job applicants they all said they loved animals. Perhaps, at their alma mater they had been instructed to say that, I began to wonder. My question:

"Snakes at the zoo are fed freshly killed rodents. That means you pick up a mouse, smash it on a hard surface and give it to the snake. Snakes have to eat too. Can you do that?" Somewhat reluctantly, a young woman said she'd do that.

Another example. Conversations during job interviews revealed the interviewee more than a hundred pages of curriculum vitae can. Once I was interviewing a young job applicant. She said she researched Russian hoofstock and sea otter.

"That's great. Which references did you use about Russian hoofstock?"

"?....."

"Did you read Sergey Ognev? His work has been translated to English in Israel."

We did not get into sea otter, since she hastily exited my office.

### History? Why Not!

*"We study history not to know the future but to widen our horizons, to understand that our present situation is neither natural nor inevitable, and that we consequently have many more possibilities before us than we imagine."* (Harari, 2015) History is another area that deserves everyone's attention.

Hidden from daily duties, and often pushed aside by immediate urgent concerns. That is one of the reasons history gets pushed aside. *"Learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for tomorrow. The important thing is not to stop questioning,"* noted Albert Einstein. Yet history is a forgotten discipline in today's zoos. Let us compare zoos with other American institutions such as baseball, movies and circuses. *"...it appears that in zoos, another American pastime institution, the past is often neglected and perceived as irrelevant. Indeed, corporate culture of zoos can be characterized by the lack of historical perspective."* (Kawata, 1991) That essay was published some three decades ago. True, history is not as sexy or eye-catching, yet knowledge from our past should not be thrown into the dustbin so quickly. Undoubtedly our zoo world is so stained by a recency bias.

Not too long ago it was said that three men dragged American zoos into the current century screaming and kicking. The three men? Bill Conway, George Rabb and Ulie Seal. I had the privilege to know them and worked with Ulie in the 1990s through CBSG (now CPSG) projects. Now I wonder how many in the current generation of zoo staff ever heard of these names? Laurie Marker recalled: "I worked with Ulie for 25+ years, no-one today knows his name." (Email, 6 August 2022) Nearly total negligence, or ignorance, exists on the accomplishments by our predecessors, upon which we all stand today (Kawata, 2023). Here follows an example: *"Effects of enclosure complexity and visitor presence on the welfare of Asiatic lions"* by Goswami et al. (2023).

So much effort must have made into their work. Yet a quick glance reveals little holes in that account. How about "enclosure complexity"? Such a concept had already been reviewed as *quality of space*, originally published in 1942 (the English version in 1964) by Hediger. Inevitable short-sightedness possibly comes from this: Roughly 80% of literature cited was published rather recently, the oldest being from 1988. Does this mean that literature published prior to 1988 was not worth looking into, or worse, does not exist? Herein lies another case of each new generation re-inventing the wheel. Where is the sense of history? Also, *"We attempted to demonstrate the differences in activity patterns and welfare indices of captive Asiatic lions exposed to three levels of enclosure complexity and visitor exposure (high, low, none),"* the authors state. Yet there exists little reference on how the taxon's in-situ cousins live in the wild. Nowhere does it mention the relevance of in-situ populations. Continuing on history, are authors of the above article aware of an organization called the Bartlett Society?

Its publication is "Devoted to studying yesterday's methods of keeping wild animals". Thus, persons interested in zoo history have a platform through which they pursue information. An example: A member wrote to Paul Murphy (email, 29 May 2023: the correspondence has been edited).

*Dear Sir or Madam,*

*I am writing to you as Gardens' Archivist at Waddesdon Manor in Buckinghamshire. In preparation of an exhibition on birds and bird keeping by the Rothschild family at Waddesdon Manor, I am trying to find out more about the history of aviaries. I wonder if any of you might know about a publication on the topic? I gather that there is a Shire publication about to be published (or perhaps just published) but wonder if you are aware of other writings on the subject? I would be most grateful for any pointers in the right direction.*

*Yours faithfully, Sophie Piebenga*

(After brief correspondence she wrote to Paul Murphy.)

*Dear Paul,*

*That would be very kind; yes, please do forward it to your members if that's OK with you. I have since come across the 'History of aviaries', only published earlier this month by Amberley Press (former Shire publications?), but I'd be very interested to know of other sources. Thank you very much,*

*Yours, Sophie Piebenga*

On this side of the Atlantic Ocean, E. D. Hirsch emphasizes the importance of a body of *core knowledge* (cited by Murray). "To live in the United States and not recognize Teddy Roosevelt, Prohibition, Minutemen, Huckleberry Finn, Wall Street, smoke-filled room, or Gettysburg is like trying to read without knowing some of the ten thousand most common used words in the language. It signifies a degree of cultural illiteracy about America. But the core knowledge transcends one's own country. Not to recognize Falstaff, Apollo, Sistine Chapel, Inquisition, Twenty-third Psalm, or Mozart signifies cultural illiteracy about the West. Not to recognize solar system, Big Bang, natural selection, relativity, or periodic table is to be scientifically illiterate. Not to recognize Mediterranean, Vienna, Yangtze River, Mount Everest, or Mecca is to be geographically illiterate." (Charles Murray, 2008)

How intriguing. Now let us turn the table around to the zoo universe, both American and European. To challenge yourself, see if the following looks enigmatic, straight out of hieroglyphics: William Hornaday, William Beebe, Harry Wegeforth, Belle Benchley, Edward Bean, Ota Benga, WPA (Works Progress Administration), WAPT (Wild Animal Propagation Trust), Front Royal, Lacy Act, Zoologica, Martha and Operation Oryx. Or how about Carl Hagenbeck, Oskar Heinroth, Jean Delacour, Abraham Bartlett, Stanley Flower, Bernhard Grzimek, aurochs, tarpan, Blijdorp, Jardin Zoologique d'Acclimatation, Askaniya Nova, Hellabrunn, Artis, Zolli and Skansen?

If any of these perks your curiosity, even casual literature search may let you stumble into something unexpectedly. History does not have to mean a list of dust-covered, impersonal and boring events (the term “boredom” should not exist in the zoo lexicon!), nor does it have to remind you of a school days of cramming in hundreds of figures overnight for an exam. Interest in zoos must inevitably extend to global perspective. Your writer wishes to attract your interest in this subject (Kawata, 1991, 2010). Wildlife does not recognize man-made barriers; migratory birds fly across nations’ borders without a passport and we should take a lesson from them. Apparently, over the last several decades tremendous improvements have been made in the zoo field. Still, a critical self-examination is necessary.

For now, let us turn the clock back some decades. The organizational structure was simple and linear, and middle layer was paper-thin. At the bottom a group of entry-level employees took care of the grounds and animals. Many job seekers sought out the stable and secure nature of municipality despite a not-so-great pay scale. Commonly, men who had little interest in wildlife were assigned to the zoo. But among job seekers there was a small number of non-college degreed men interested in zoos and wildlife (conversely, there were degreed men whose accomplishment was picking up paychecks). They possessed keen interest in wild animals from childhood. They ventured out to forests and streams to look for snakes and insects; also some were immersed in books on nature. They included volumes authored by Martin and Osa Johnson such as *I Married Adventure*. Internet was yet to appear on the horizon. Those men, small in number, kept the fire going. However, characteristics of that era faded away about the time the baby boomers began to enter job market.

Soon, waves of younger men and women from different types of childhood and value systems started to carve out the face of the nation’s zoos. The society was also experiencing the changing tide. *“For at least 25 years, we’ve been raising young Americans who are, by and large, historically illiterate. The founding of our nation, the Civil War, World War II...they all should be common knowledge, but they are not. History has not just been pushed to the back burner. It’s been pushed off the stove.”* (David McCullough, 2008) Here follows a test question: Do zoo folk, especially in the U.S., know the name Colo? A birth of a gorilla in a zoo is no longer an earth-shattering event. Yet the world was different on 22 December 1956 when Colo, first for her species in the world, was born in Columbus Zoo, Ohio. It was a sensational and seismic shift (Kawata, 2022). Be reminded that simply maintaining a gorilla in captivity itself was an unattainable goal.

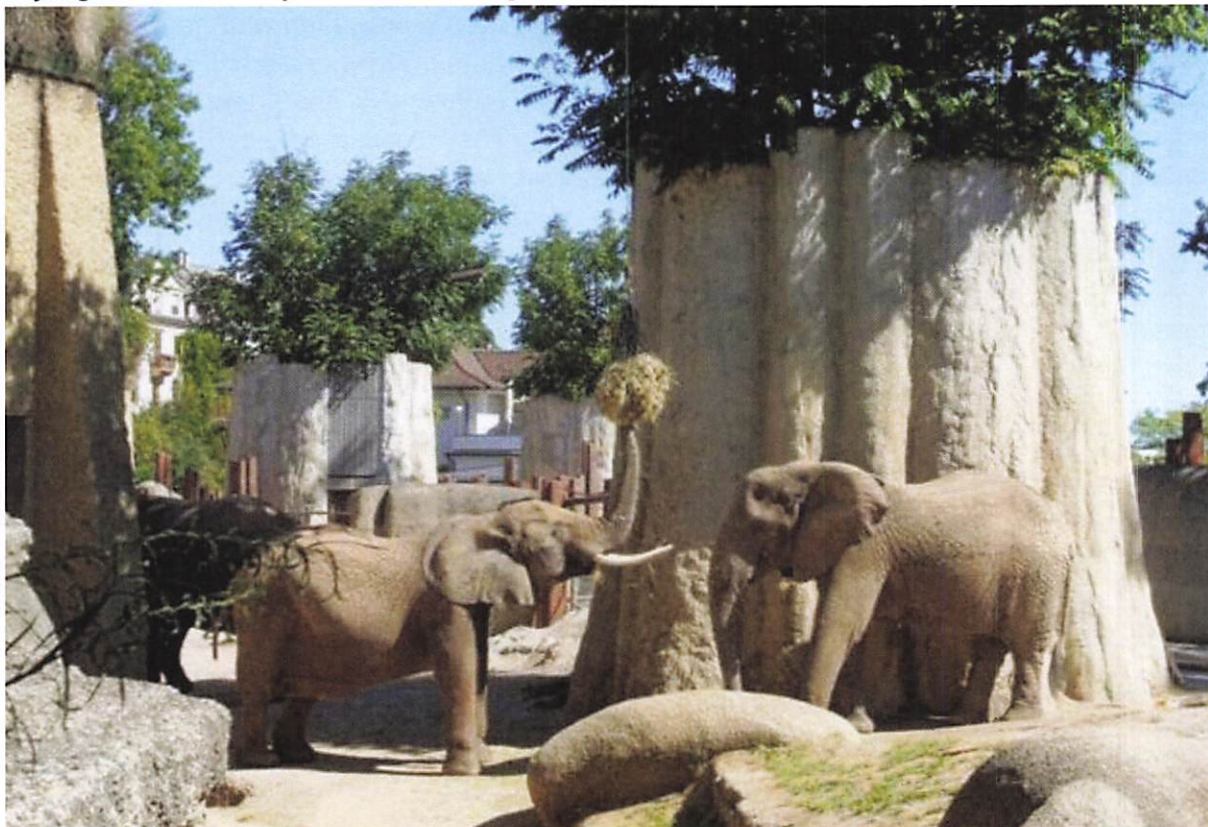
Let me state at this juncture that those fresh off college campus arrive at zoo employment with a basket of enthusiasm (*perhaps*) but very little knowledge. Also, to *truly* realize their ignorance, they’ve got to have a small amount of knowledge (a seed). Without that *small* amount they are lost. What do they need? To realize their own smallness. I clearly remember, after a conference in the mid-1970s, what a fellow keeper casually said. It was at Chicago’s airport while waiting for our planes. “The *more* you learn, the *less* you know”, he commented. Very true, but how many of us ever reach *that* point? We should take a further step into awareness of our collective yesterday.

That awareness can take us back to Colo. She represented a historical benchmark, into the realization that gorillas in zoos today stand on an accumulation of struggles of our predecessors, of trial and error and bitter disappointments that left heaps of dead gorillas. And Colo symbolizes but one example of zoos’ accomplishments. Without knowing our yesterday,

how can we build a foundation to know where we stand today, let alone figuring out a course for tomorrow?

### **Generational Chasm? Maybe So**

*Recently, at a zoo in the Southwest I was chatting with a couple of senior staff members when a manager used the term “habitat” to describe what I would call cage or enclosure. Habitat, to me an old timer, means a place where a plant or an animal **occurs naturally**, not a confined captive space. But wait a moment, the term “cage” seems to have fallen off zoo lexicon. Come to think of it, the term “captivity” may be politically incorrect and gradually being replaced by “under human care”. Yet softening of terminology does little to ease the reality of a wild animal in confinement by us. It may even border on naive and untruthful outlook that numb our sense of judgment. That may also reflect the generational shift.*



*Habitat, cage or enclosure? African elephants in Basel Zoo, Switzerland 2023*

Lions roar the same way in any zoo of the world, and family members enjoy zoos, also across the world. Yet a close attention will reveal differences in visiting public, although subtle, depending on ethnicity, certain religious sects, race or regional and local cultures. One sunny day in Staten Island a ticket booth attendant alerted me: Come to the front gate, there is a dispute here. A leader of a French group is insisting on being admitted in free as a special tour group. I was the duty officer then, and told the leader we won't make any difference, that you have to pay. The man became belligerent and the line behind him was getting longer. My answer stayed the same. The man and his group left the gate forming a single file, shaking fists in unison and shouting something. The crowd in the line was quite amused.

That was an exceptional incident, and certainly did not represent a typical French behavior. I have fine French friends and an individual's behavior does not represent a typical sample of an

ethnic or racial group. Also, with passing time people's behavior, beliefs and terminology may shift in a rather unobvious fashion. Looking from universal to micro view, work groups reflect the national trend in varying professions. Zoos, as a work group, are not immune to the flow of the society. Over the decades, even in the nation's zoo circle, a microcosm of our society, the chasm between generations has been crystallizing slowly. One of the widening generational gaps may come from how we treat each other across age differences.

Occasionally I get to meet with young staff members at zoo conferences. Mostly they are nice and enthusiastic, and we get into casual discussions. At one meeting the topic was maintaining invertebrates. It apparently alerted one person when I said that I kept a few documents on firefly husbandry. So I emailed her a bit of information. It would have been nice had I received acknowledgment of receipt. In fact I was ready to send a hard copy of an article, still in an envelope on my desk. But there was no response. Making a bridge with her seems to be an act of throwing a ball far into an imagined catcher in the dark sky, and the above represents just one recent example. Is it my fault? Exceptionally a catcher may be found at the other end and perhaps, I can start a dialogue. Yet that is as rare as finding a bird of paradise in a canyon of Antarctic icebergs. It is easier, to me, to expect a two-way communication with those born before 1960, a cut-off point. With European zoo people it is just a bit different, and "a bit" makes a difference. A two-way street can be established easier across the Atlantic Ocean; it often lasts for years.

How does this happen? Learning methods by younger people seem to differ considerably. They seem to rely on internet as opposed to corresponding with others, or looking for print media, i.e. books and periodicals. Books have been with us for thousands of years with proven value. By comparison internet resides in a machine; learning from a machine is so impersonal. (I must mention, though, that I too use internet occasionally.) For the younger generation so used to machine-learning, expressing gratitude to breathing humans could be alien. And that is not an isolated experience. *"Zoo people will call you up and say, 'Jeez, you know, I need some help with this or that species of animal.' Then you'll spend some time getting it together, you'll send it off to them, and most never think about sending you a card saying thanks for that information. You assume they got it, but you just don't know. Things seem to be more impersonal these days,"* observed Marvin Jones, adding, *"They don't seem to be doing very much these days with manners, which seem to have gone out the window."* (Rosenthal and Kawata, 1986)

### **Environmental Awareness**

*Honestly, the world surrounding young people, and those not so young, does not give an encouraging outlook for tomorrow. The clock has been ticking, and it sounds louder every minute of every day.*

Onto our daily life, the human population stood at 3.6 billion in 1970. In half a century it increased to 7.821 billion. In short, billions of little hands of ours are chewing out, destroying and polluting the Earth's resources including forests, grasslands and oceans, damaging the home of wildlife every day. And it is being carried out away from the public's eye. While "ecosystem" and "endangered species" have become household terms on one hand, on the other hand one has to wonder how many of those of us consumers have an environmental awareness. "There are some who can live without wild things, and some who cannot," noted

Aldo Leopold in his environmental classic *A Sand County Almanac* which was first published in 1949 (my copy is from 1966). He terms those who cannot live without as “the minority”. “*For us of the minority, the opportunity to see geese is more important than television,*” he added, concluding, “*We of the minority see a law of diminishing return in progress; our opponents do not.*” (Leopold, 1966)

Three-fourth of a century later, his book has increased its importance. Merely half a century ago, CITES noted that there were 6610 endangered animal species, and the number is bound to increase every year. I, for one, would like to think that those who work at zoos and enthusiastic zoo supporters belong to “the minority”. Providing an oasis in an urban society is a vital function, but zoos need to do more than that. Amongst the tasks that fall in zoos’ hands, increasing and promoting the public’s environmental awareness should not be taken lightly.

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**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup>After Ken had submitted this article came the sad news that Lillian had died in June 2024.

Photo on page 52 by the author.

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