

The First 21 Years

THE SINGAPORE ZOOLOGICAL GARDENS STORY



Strategically positioned as the trading, transportation and communications hub of the Southeast Asian region, Singapore has long been a natural collection point for the primary produce, and the animals, of the region.

The earliest animal traders were the piratical Bugis sailors from the Sulawesi region of Indonesia, or the Celebes as it was then known, who once a year rode their magnificent sailed vessels into the Singapore harbour on the monsoon winds, there to barter-trade. One of the earliest shops in Singapore dealing in exotic animals was set up by a Malay named Haji Marip in 1880, who carried on his business until his death in 1915.

The British colonial tradition of exploration, collection and scientific analysis also played a part in making Singapore an early centre for studies of Southeast Asian natural history, particularly through the Singapore Botanic Gardens and the former Raffles Museum (now the National Museum, with its important

A Malay bird-seller in Singapore, 1870s.



Raffles



Wallich

zoological collection separately housed at the National University of Singapore, as the Zoological Reference Collection), both well over one hundred years old. One selection of mammals stored with the Zoological Reference Collection came from British zoologist John Harrison, the father of the present Executive Director of the Singapore Zoological Gardens, Bernard Harrison.

Sir Stamford Raffles, who was instrumental in the founding of the London Zoo, and who founded modern Singapore under the British East India Company flag in 1819, pursued his zoological interests in Singapore. No sooner had he established his official residence in Singapore on Fort Canning Hill in 1823 than he was writing to his friend Nathaniel Wallich, Superintendent of the Botanic Garden at Calcutta in India, asking him to send down 200 head of spotted deer (also known as barking deer, or muntjak), to adorn the park he intended to create on the hill.

The dead wildlife specimens at the Museum then called The Raffles Collection were but dry and dusty things pored over by dry and dusty scientists. Singapore's first real live zoo was at the Botanic Gardens, started by the Agri-Horticultural Society which managed the Gardens, some time in the early 1870s. After the government took over the Gardens in 1874, the zoological collection grew rapidly through donations. But the zoo was always cash-strapped, perhaps not surprisingly since no admission charge was levied. The standards of both physical maintenance and animal husbandry were poor.

Yet, by 1902, the Gardens collection had become an important zoo holding most of the significant animals of the region. In 1901, however, the government refused to approve more capital expenditure on improvements, recommending instead that the Gardens get rid of the larger animals.

Contemporary reports say that about 2,000 tourists visited the Gardens from 1903 to 1904, just to see the zoo, only to find it closed and leave in disgust, as there was "nothing else to see in Singapore." The Gardens reflected on the zoo's fate in 1903, concluding:

"It may be hoped that at some future time the Government might found a suitable Zoological Garden in Singapore which with a low charge for admission would easily be made to pay for its upkeep as is done in many colonies where the expenses of procuring the animals and keeping them are very much greater than they would be here."

Indeed, several more attempts to set up a Singapore Zoo would be made even before the foundation of today's Singapore Zoological Gardens in 1973. Rising interest in collecting wild animals during the 1920s and 1930s was closely connected both with hunting and with the lucrative export of animals to foreign zoos. This was the era of "Great White Hunters" like the flamboyant Texan of movieland fame ("Bring 'Em Back Alive"), Frank Buck, who based his zoo-supply operations in Singapore. In 1939, Buck gave a "partial list" of the animals he had exported safely over the preceding 25 years, chiefly from Southeast Asia, to zoos in the USA. They included 5,000 monkeys, 500 small mammals, 60 tigers, 60 bears, 63 leopards or panthers, 52 orang utans, 49 elephants, and an astounding 100,000 birds, among many others.

WHEN IN SINGAPORE

WE HAVE OVER 200
WILD ANIMALS
AND 2,000
BIRDS
EMBRACING
A WIDE
VARIETY

A PLEASANT MOTOR CAR DRIVE TO PONGGOL

A CHEAP,
PLEASANT,
& INTERESTING
AFTERNOON
OUTING.
BRING YOUR CHILDREN.
Call at our cafe for Afternoon tea.

VISIT THE ZOO

1936 ad for the Ponggol Zoo.

Smaller dealers than Buck, mostly Chinese, were centred at shops around Rochore Road about this time, while others ran their collections both as zoos and as wholesale centres. One such was Herbert de Souza who held his animals at an East Coast Road menagerie, a family business that persisted into the late 1960s.

In the 1930s, the young Dr Ong Swee Law used to visit the true heir to the Singapore Botanic Gardens' Zoo and the first collection to carry the name "Singapore Zoo", run by animal-lover William Lawrence Soma Basapa. This zoo, established about 1925, was located at Ponggol Road at the end of Track 22, close to attractive views of the Straits of Johor. Among other things, Basapa kept orang utans, and a tame tiger named "Apay" who at four years old could still be led around on a leash. His collection from time to time included non-Asian animals, such as the two chimpanzees housed there in the mid-1930s. Willis' Singapore Guide of 1936 advertised Basapa's zoo as a major attraction featuring over 200 wild animals and 2,000 birds. Admission cost 40 cents and an open-air

"refreshment room" offered tea, biscuits and lemonade "at a very low price." Says Basapa's grandson, Lawrence Basapa, another animal-lover who now works for Exxon Chemical Company, "The zoo never turned a profit, but my grandfather didn't care!" Although the zoo survived most of the Japanese Occupation of 1942-1945, it was in the end razed to the ground in 1945.

A newspaper report in 1961 also tells us that one L.F. de Jong had been running a zoo off Tampines Road since 1954, allegedly featuring 100 cassowaries, besides tapirs, leopards, gibbons, crocodiles and snakes. Ponggol was the site chosen once again for a zoo in 1963, by the Chan Brothers. In its heyday, the Chan collection featured a lion, tigers, tapirs, monkeys, kangaroos, seals and a large number of crocodiles and snakes, but this second "Singapore Zoo" finally went broke and auctioned off all its stock in 1970.



Basapa with his tiger Apay, at the Ponggol Zoo.

This left only the 1956-vintage Van Kleeef Aquarium at River Valley Road/Fort Canning, and the fairly distant Johor Zoo in southern Malaysia, to mollify the public demand for a wildlife attraction. Things improved more than a little with the opening of the much-acclaimed Jurong Bird Park in January 1971. And the Singapore Zoological Gardens at Mandai was already taking shape...

THE ELEPHANT MAN

Vijaya Kumar Pillai had just come out of National Service in 1972 and rather fancied himself riding horses, like the men in the cowboy movies he loved. When he heard there were ponies at the new Zoo – the terrain was still so rough then, they were used for “transport” – he thought it might be the place for him, and took a part-time keeper’s job. He is still there, now Assistant Curator (Night Safari).

Rhinoceroses and elephants are Kumar’s “thing.” “I got the rhinos, especially Jenny the female, responding to me so that I could stroke them,” he explains. With his voice alone, he was once able to prevent the two rhinos, Toto the male and Jenny, from charging colleagues who had entered the enclosure to help him. When Toto fell sick, it was Kumar who lovingly force-fed him for a week, lifting his head and stuffing Napier grass into his mouth. Toto survived.

But elephants are Kumar’s favourite. “Fantastic animals,” he declares. He collects anything and everything about elephants – books, articles, pictures. Closest to him are the two grand old ladies Anusha and Komali. “Komali’s a little spoiled,” Kumar admits, “It’s my fault – she came to us when she was still very little and I never disciplined her, never hit her, I just loved her. She

would walk around holding on to my index finger with her trunk.”

One of Kumar’s most memorable experiences, he says, was his epic 40-day voyage from Rotterdam, Holland, to Singapore, in sole charge of three delicate giraffes packed in gigantic crates. He had been told by the Dutch that he would never get them to Singapore alive. In the event, it was Kumar who suffered most. He was seasick for three days amid the rough seas of the notorious Bay of Biscay.

Kumar’s practical expertise is unassailable, but like many other Singapore Zoo keepers, he has enhanced it with theoretical knowledge well beyond the simple GCE “O” levels he started with: among others, he holds a Certificate in Animal Management from the City and Guilds of London, 1987, and a Certificate in Endangered Species Management from the Jersey Wildlife Preservation Trust, 1991 (he is now completing a Diploma course at the Trust), besides a Diploma in Business Administration. He serves as a member of the Asian Elephant Specialists’ Group in the World Conservation Union (IUCN).



DESIGNING A RHINO LOVE-NEST

Singapore Zoo keepers were alarmed and puzzled one night to hear loud thuds and thumps emanating from the rhinoceros den, apparently from something banging on the concrete ceiling. When they crept up and shone a torchlight into the den, they found the two rhinos enthusiastically copulating, their heads hitting the den ceiling as they did so. The den had been perfectly designed for a nice calm rhino lying down to sleep, but nobody had taken into account the possibility of amorous activities overnight.



"A little pool of water in a burning cement floor is no substitute for an ecstatic mud-wallow in the dream-life of a rhinoceros."

DR DESMOND MORRIS
ZOOLOGIST AND FORMER
CURATOR OF MAMMALS
AT LONDON ZOO,
LIFE MAGAZINE, 1968

What does this animal need? the architects and the horticulturalists will ask the Zoological people. Does it need trees to spray with distinctive scent-markings so that it can "label" its own territory, or to hide behind? Or does it just need bare rocks with lots of footholds? Does it need a very private corner, or den, for courting or for giving birth (as Singapore's polar bears did)? Does it have delicate feet, as many deer or other hoofed animals do, requiring a special kind of ground, level or hilly, rough or smooth, wet or dry? Does it need water to bathe in (elephants), mud to wallow in (pigs), or salt mounds to lick (deer)? Is its normal behaviour destructive to vegetation? – bears dig everything up, orangutans tear up branches and foliage, ostriches too scratch up the soil. Will it need a regular "toilet corner" for depositing its dung (rhinoceros)? Does it prefer sunlight or shade? What kind of structures are needed so that the keepers can enter and get out of the enclosure safely, or so that they can clean the place easily? Will the Zoo vets need an area for isolating single animals to give them medical attention? Lastly but importantly, what is the budget, what kind of design can we afford?

One aspect of zoo design that is not often discussed is the fundamental matter of which animals to select, and why. This choice is usually based on a combination of key factors such as what animals visitors like to see (certain "charismatic" large mammal species, such as the lion, tiger, elephant, giraffe and zebra are mandatory, to the point that visitors would not think it was a "proper" zoo if it did not show them), together with what the staff and the zoo's physical layout can cope with, the cost of the exhibit and so on.

