

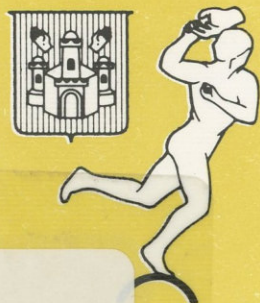


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The World Zoo
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Scientific Session



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VOORDRACHT OP IUDZG-congres - 9.9.93 - ZOO ANTWERPEN

TEJA, or the birth of an indian rhinoceros.

In this changing world of decreasing natural environmental quality and increasing criticism on zoos, it is not an easy task to preserve the organisation's credibility.

Breeding endangered species to save them from extinction is one of the contributions to the global conservation plan within the zoo-community. The final goal to reintroduce these species into their former or new suitable habitats is another challenge. But we all know about those many problems that arise when you try to work out such complex programmes. It's not only a matter of the enormous high costs, being involved in these projects, or the enormous need of well-trained staff to handle all the necessary coordination. E.g. an actual new problem in many breeding programmes is how one should deal with the current surplus animals and prevent this surplus from further increasing.

So, in reality there is often still a big gap between the nice and hopeful theorethical models, and the real work that has to be done, both in Zoos and in the field. Nevertheless, we have to go on that way, step by step in order to achieve some nice goals on the long term.

Meanwhile, we may not forget the vast potential of zoos - *those islands of animals in the world of men*- for the necessary short term goals.

Besides the conservational task of a zoo there is the educational one. And that's maybe the most important on the short term.

I think it is not only a matter of guiding groups, setting up nice displays or showing animal features in the course of exciting shows. Although these often well prepared educational tools have an extremely important value, there still is a lot of potential educational material, unexploited or even lost for ever.

I don't speak about the big news of the event of a birth, or the official opening of a new enclosure - in the presence of a lot of well-known people. These are highlighted topics, being taken care off by our press-service.

What I do refer to, are the small but interesting events that make up day to day life in a zoo. In fact these events can all be processed into a tool by which we can propagate our mission.

In our organisation, this mission is "Nature conservation" through education, scientific research and art.

In my function as curator in the Animal Park of Planckendael - the 40 ha park of the RZSA on the countryside near Mechelen, I'm daily confronted with a mass and an enormous variety of data concerning the animal stock and related works that we manage.

Every day something is happening somewhere in the zoo. It is as staffmember of the zoo important to remain alert to these things, to be sensitive to the newsvalue of the events and to be able to relate these event to other, more fundamental messages you want to make public.

Only by illustrating your goals over and over but each time packed in different stories people will get the point at the end.

Some of the events that we used recently to propagate our mission are: The recovery of an adopted hedgehog and his final reintroduction in a farmland; the funny story of a first introduction into the enclosure of a newly arrived animal; the damage to a wire-mesh door caused by an anoa, trying to join his mate; the boarding of przewalski horses for transport to Sweden; the report about the appearance of a large group Planckendaelstorks in the south of France during their annual migration...

Perhaps some people cannot agree with this policy, when they think about all the risks that we would take by giving publicity to all these *faits divers*. One can execute however a quite proper control on what is published or broadcasted if one respect the following things:

The first important thing to do, is to prepare the communication towards the written press or other media very carefully. A well-prepared presscommuniqué avoids the publication or broadcasting of nonsense-news.

The second important point has to do with analogous careful preparation of photographic material or scenes that has to be filmed.

And last but not least : you have to build up a good and reliable relationship with press and media people.

Our experience has shown that journalists in both written press and media - like radio and tv - can be made interested and kept interested even for these small news-items as I just mentioned.

With the next example I would like to illustrate how the birth of an indian rhinoceros has been maximally exploited to propagate our mission.

As you all know, people are fond off all newborn animals, and the news about recent births is easily made number 1 on the hitparade of regional or even national news. Even though in most cases the news is as limited as the mentioning of the event without presentation of audiovisual material of the birthprocess itself.

However, in this respect, we faced a big challenge past year .

Zutuma, a 20-year old female indian rhinoceros, an important member of the **EEP**-programme, was pregnant for the fourth time. We decided to closely monitor this pregnancy for different reasons. First of all, we aimed at gathering a considerable amount of data which we had been looking for in the literature ourselves but we had not been able to find. In addition, we

could make a very interesting deal with a video-production house, to be standby to be able to film the birth.

And last but not least, closely monitoring the animal was thought to be stimulating and motivating for the team-spirit amongst the rhino-keepers.

It turned out to be a great success because the keepers kept up their observations without problems for the last 30 days and nights of the pregnancy. The whole crew of rhino keepers, responsible persons and video-team witnessed the birth.

In preparation to the ensuing birth, we could persuade the press to inform the public about the ongoing pregnancy and all the special care and preparations that were made.

The actual birth of the female calf, called 'TEJA', occurred on the 15th November 1992.

Although this was a Sunday, only one hour after the birth, we were able already to send fax messages to press and media, all over the country. This quick briefing was part of a project of students of a school for communication-sciences, who had been carefully preparing the press communiqué in advance.

In this way the news spread as fast as possible. As a matter of fact, almost all newspapers were represented by journalists, a few hours after the birth. Even the different television stations and some radio-people visited Planckendael to gather some more information.

We had made a deal with the video-production house that every interested party could get a professional copy on betacam-tape for free. As a consequence of this, the four official recognised Belgian TV-stations broadcasted the video during their news presentations the same night. The sequence was even broadcasted worldwide on satellite.

The slides that were made during the parturition were used in a lot of popular and semi-scientific publications.

Now I like to present a part of this film that was made with the help of a lot of people.

The film was made after processing the original videotape. It shows the daily care given to the Indian rhinoceroses in Planckendael in addition to a documentary on the pregnancy and delivery of Zutuma. The film was partially financially supported by sponsoring. So, it was a low-budget product.

It was translated in English and French as well, and is available for all interested people, especially teachers.

In the next future, the well-grown indian rhinoceros calf will play her role of 'ambassador of nature conservation' once again when she will have her first birthday.

As you can see, from pregnancy till yearling-calf, is a story with a lot of zootechnical, educational and publishing value, build up around just one single event . I think it can be an example for a lot of zoo-news items which are having the potential to be used to express our aims.

The sequence I like to show, starts at the moment of the first signs of giving birth. I hope you will enjoy it.

Kris Struyf
9.9.93