

# THREE COLLECTIONS IN SOUTH AMERICA

By Ken Kawata



**H**OW MANY ZOOS are there in the world? For over 10 years, the late Harry Schram of Antwerp Zoo had made an effort to establish the number: approximately 7,400 as of April 2012. Those included 3,617 in Europe and 1,308 in North America. By contrast, South America had 356 (cited by Kawata, 2018). Such statistics, although accurately and objectively assembled, echo our own preoccupation. When we talk about zoos of the world, automatically the focus is on institutions in Europe and North America, maybe a little bit on Asia but hardly on South America. In fact, descriptions of zoos and aquariums on this continent are rare; should you find one, they are brief. To the best of my knowledge, the most authoritative volume on zoo and aquarium history published in the United States allocates 40 pages for Western Europe, while for Latin America only 16 pages (Kisling, 2022).

A view towards the reptile house from the entrance to Bioparque Buinzoo

Such a lack of interest in Latin American zoos is also



apparent in the public arena, based on publications for the general public. A hint is noticeable in two popular tour books on Argentina and Brazil, whose combined texts add up to a whopping 1,120 pages. Unsurprisingly, their indices completely ignore zoos (Albiston *et al.*, 2024; Anaza *et al.*, 2023). Yet the aforementioned number of zoos by Schram – 356 – is not that small, so I got curious. I looked at brief historical accounts on several countries, as shown below, before deciding to get on the plane to South America.

Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Buenos Aires, Argentina; Lima, Peru and Santiago, the capital of Chile. These are the powerhouses of South America and also, they used to have sizeable zoos.

Jardin Zoologico de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires received an annual attendance of three million, with a collection of 111 species of mammals, 125 species of birds and 16 species of reptiles and amphibians, in the late 1960s (Anon. a). Likewise, Jardin Zoologico Nacional in Santiago de Chile held 450 specimens of mammals, 2,700 specimens of birds and 45 specimens of reptiles and amphibians, with two and a half million visitors annually as of 1959 (Anon. b). Those large collections now belong to sepia-toned and crumbling pages of history, so my recent visit seemed all too late by decades. Reflecting a local way of thinking, the concierge of my Santiago hotel was unaware of the old zoo, although the location of that zoo is in a nice neighbourhood, not far from the current airport. Additionally, a local tour guide gave a negative view on the term 'zoo', hinting at an animal jail, as if to pound a nail in a coffin.

The website, however, continues to have the Chilean National Zoo with all its impressive facts and statistics. With a vague hope I took a walk from the hotel across the bridge to the zoo site. It was a sunny, pleasant day in March 2025. The area was eerily quiet with few people around, except for a middle-aged man who appeared to be a municipal employee. "Is the zoo open?" (I asked in English), "No, closed for a long time."



A long time meant indefinitely, I took it, and for a while I wondered if I had been at the correct address; I have no sense of direction, geographically tone-deaf. So back to the hotel. A faint impression came to me, stretching a thin thread between two unrelated phenomena: South American zoos' decline and American politics. In the late 1940s and 1950s there existed intense anti-communist sentiment and fear, associated with political persecution of left-wing individuals. Characterised as the McCarthy Era, a man called Joseph McCarthy, a crusading U.S. Senator from Wisconsin, became the most visible figure for all this. In short, combining unlikely periods in two continents, South American zoos could have been the victims of history just as McCarthyism did for liberals. But I should not have been discouraged so quickly. There was an alternative, an animal collection 35 km south of Santiago. To get there by taxi it takes about 40 minutes during non-rush hour traffic.

### BIOPARQUE BUINZOO, BUIN, CHILE

Located in Maipo Province, it is one of the largest zoos in Chile and said to house 250 species of animals. The zoo is on a rectangular, level site, running roughly east to west with the entrance near the east end. On a sunny day in late March 2025, during my visit, the zoo is crowded. Exhibits generally follow a geographical theme: Africa, Asia, Chilean, Americas (mainly South America) and Oceanic. The collection takes a taxonomically generalised approach from tarantula to orangutan, with emphasis on the popular stock (but the zoo had no elephants). Thanks to the mild climate, I assume, a good part of this collection is devoted to outside exhibitory. But there are indoor exhibits too, and my tour begins with one named 'Herpetoria' with a cave-like entrance. It has about 60 glass-fronted exhibit units, large and small, for a familiar line-up of players: Gila Monster, Burmese Python, Broad-snouted Caiman and the like (venomous snakes are absent).

Continuing indoors, Blue-and-yellow Macaw and Toco Toucan add bright colours and sounds. In general, animal inhabitants are given adequate living space throughout the zoo, indoors and outdoors. Continuing the indoor tour I find myself stepping into the aquarium section. 20 or so saltwater and freshwater tanks of various sizes house residents with familiar faces: arowana, electric eel, Red-bellied Piranha and Green Anaconda. Looking around at the visiting public, many are family groups of young parents, well-behaved. That might explain why the grounds are spotlessly clean. I also notice a group of blind children closely guided by chaperones. In one corner of the aquarium a person in uniform is giving a talk to them.

A small insect area comes next, lushly planted, and also indoors. This is followed by a small South American section of (mainly) birds with Southern Screammers, Greater Rhea and Patagonian Maras. Then off to the outdoor exhibits. Domesticated stock such

**Above from far left:** The entrance to Bioparque Buinzoo; a view of the zoo; the reptile house

The insect house at Bioparque Buinzoo



Photos of Bioparque Buinzoo: Konstantin Yordanov



Skunk enclosure at Buin



The empty sea-lion pool at Buin



A part of the Australian section at Buin

as sheep, donkeys and chickens are confined in 'Baby Zoo'. Whereas on the wild side, some species are clearly labelled but cannot be seen, probably staying in the buildings or behind the mock rocks. These include Puma, Snow Leopard and Bengal Tiger. South American Sea-lions may have been in their wooden shed, not in the pool. That observation is not meant to be a criticism, since we all know it happens in zoos.

Labels and graphics are mainly in Spanish, also with scientific names which helps international visitors like me. That aside, here stands something recognisable without written words, the international 'vocabulary' in zoos: the clear and frequent thunderous calls by a Siamese pair in a wire-mesh cage. From blocks away they advertise the Asian and Oceanic section of the zoo. Nearby sits a larger cousin, not so vocal: the Bornean Orangutan. At the walk-through Australian section I watch a half-dozen Emus, a male grey kangaroo and Bennett's Wallabies. Not in the walk-through area, of course, is a Southern Cassowary.

It is at this point that, clear out of the blue, words by good old W. Somerset Maugham begin to pinch my side. Am I absolutely sure of my taxonomy of species staring at me? About *Southern Cassowary*, *Bornean Orang*? Maugham once noted, "...the critic who has not a practical knowledge of technique is seldom able to say anything on the subject of real value..." Perhaps I am quoting him out of context? But I *am* confident about several species of cranes, since I had once learned about this group of birds from an expert. So, one complaint: On exhibit, an *Antigone* (formerly *Grus*) *vipio* or White-naped Crane, a CITES A I and II species, is incorrectly labelled as *Grus grus* - Common Crane. The substrate of its small cage is rocks and gravel. This species comes from wetlands, basically soft marsh. Their feet are naturally very delicate, I am tempted to catch this wader, flip it over and examine its feet; they may already have developed injuries and infection that are too late for effective treatment. In terms of zoo aviculture and animal welfare this is not acceptable; a shabby and scrubby environment, representing the frailties of mankind's carelessness towards wildlife. Enough said.

I keep walking, passing Mute Swans and a Dromedary, into a large section named 'Africa', and note, to my not-so-pleasant surprise, Black Swans and 20 or so Humboldt's Penguins! After shaking my head I come across two White Rhinos and two Servals. These are followed by a troop of Hamadryas Baboons behind a glass partition. Then a Pygmy Hippo, followed by a group of Meerkats with one of them playing sentinel. Awaiting your writer next: under a clear blue sky, in a wide open space, a large, mixed-species ungulate yard with Reticulated Giraffe, Somali Wild Ass and Thomson's Gazelle, calmly sharing food at hay racks.

Back to the human factor of zoos, let me play zoo critic. Zoo work is animal work. That's what the general public or even some zoo people assume. But in reality zoo work is about *people*, quite often more so than animal-related. You can fill your animal collection with endangered species and achieve remarkable breeding successes yet if visitors encounter even a small act by a rude employee, it would ruin the successes, turning the public's back on you. In that regard it is encouraging that during nearly four hours of this zoo visit I've found employees in uniform very kind and helpful.



**Above and left:** The “extinct in the wild” Alagoas Curassow

**PARQUE DAS AVES, FOZ DO IGUAÇU, BRAZIL**

The park is located where three countries meet, i.e. Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay. On this continent that may create at times delicate international situations. The borders meet at a tripoint where the Iguazu and Paraná rivers converge forming the Triple Frontier. The Iguazu Falls themselves are on the Iguazu River, forming the border between Argentina and Brazil. This area is a popular tourist destination, with the cities of Puerto Iguazú (Argentina), Foz do Iguacu (Brazil), and Ciudad del Este (Paraguay) and as expected the falls are the major attraction in this region. The bird park, a private enterprise, was opened in 1994 in a 16-hectare forest located in Foz do Iguacu, Paraná State, Brazil. Conveniently it is 300 metres from the Iguazu Falls. Brazil is said to be one of the top places in the world for wildlife viewing. In particular, the Amazon rainforest which covers roughly 40 per cent of the nation’s total land. Yet during my trip I cannot find any animal park that exhibits ‘the big five’ mammals of Brazil – Jaguar, Giant Otter, Giant Anteater, Lowland Tapir and Maned Wolf – as cited by Anaza *et al.* But that’s beside the point.

Parque Das Aves’ collection, entirely representing Neotropical avifauna, also emphasises its role as a sanctuary and shelter for rescued birds. That is due to the illegal bird trafficking so close to the borders of the three nations. In particular Paraguay is said to

face significant challenges with the illegal wildlife trade which is a major concern for that country’s biodiversity.

Earlier the sky had opened up with thunder and lightning and a downpour that slowed down gradually into a cloudy morning and my visit began mid-morning on the second day of April. A wire-meshed cage greets visitors with the brilliant red plumage of 50 or so Scarlet Ibis, along with a few Buff-necked Ibis and a Southern Screamer. The layout of this clean and well-maintained, rectangular-shaped park is quite straightforward. Turning to the right after entry a winding narrow foot trail, about one kilometre long, leads to various exhibits with signage and labels in Portuguese, Spanish and English.

Exhibits are entirely outdoors with no indoor areas. Rarely seeing the sky, visitors would hardly realise the topographical configuration as they are enveloped in a subtropical Atlantic rainforest. Later in the morning a

temperature reading shows a comfortable 24°C with high humidity. The air is filled with the sounds of birds, both from *ex situ* and *in situ* populations. The park is divided into large segments; some are aviaries in a traditional sense, entirely covered with wire mesh, their highest points reaching approximately 30 metres. Other exhibit areas are open. Yet visitors, surrounded by tall trees on the ground level, may not realise where they are when passing from an enclosure into an open area and back again. Some parts of the trail are elevated to allow a perspective and a chance to peek at the sky. Yet visitors are still under the impression that they are deep in the jungle, hence birds such as toucans and psittacines may make them believe that they are truly in the wild. The dividing line between *ex situ* and *in situ* gets blurred in this lush environment – a smart marketing strategy.

Visitors soon find a pond with Koi Carp, which, along with a couple of lizards, and a walk-through butterfly garden offer a break and add taxonomic variety to the park's chief avian occupants. There are short walks on a paved trail from one exhibit to the next, as no tram or mini-train is available. (Americans, who so heavily rely on motor vehicles, may have a hard time fatiguing their feet in the park, but they ought to know that in some parts of the world long walks are the norm.) At a midway point the trail makes a U-turn, pointing to the exit. It is here that a Harpy Eagle (I had not seen

'Little brown things' aviary (in the rain)



Photos of Parque das Aves: Nayer Youakim



Campo Flicker

one for quite some time) and King Vultures make an impression with a backdrop of towering trees.

The collection is said to hold over 800 species of birds (Anaza *et al.*) which is hard-to-believe! That's several times larger than the bird collections of major American zoos, including the Bronx and Houston. At any rate, zoo enthusiasts, particularly those into birds, would automatically look for the Alagoas Curassow (*Mitu mitu*), which became extinct in the wild in 1980 due to deforestation and hunting. Currently it is said to be found only in captivity.

Looking at the collection as a whole, there are minor players such as a few owls and frogs. To make an overall impression, however, the psittacines appear to be the mainstay of all species and no wonder. Officially, the national bird is a passerine, designated in 2002, the Rufous-bellied Thrush (*Turdus rufiventris*). Yet Brazil is the country with the greatest diversity of psittacines, reaching nearly 90 species. After viewing the nation's prominent avifauna in captivity this first-time visitor felt satisfied. On the way out the gift shop had no printed merchandise specific to this park, like a guidebook, postcards or brochures. Unfortunately is this recent trend is not only in South America but also worldwide.

At this point I must apologise for the big vacuum in this account. Somehow, my fossilised search methodology could not locate the current zoo in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

### AQUARIO, RIO DE JANEIRO, BRAZIL

Moving from the terrestrial to the aquatic, the Marine Aquarium in Rio de Janeiro is commonly called AquaRio. Located in the port zone of this city, it occupies 2.6 hectares (6.4 acres) and opened 31 October 2016, so is still in its infancy and it will be interesting to see how it develops in the coming decades.

After getting into a long line of mostly young people to purchase a ticket, it turns out that the aquarium is part of an amusement complex. I take an elevator to the third floor where a whale skeleton reminds you that marine creatures are the focus here. There are 40 or so exhibit tanks, both large and small, and the total volume of water is 4.5 million litres. They are divided into various segments, some geographically themed such as Amazon, Indo-Pacific, and Africa, mixed in with a small laboratory. Others are by animal groups,



**Left:** The entrance and main foyer at AquaRio.  
**Below:** The Great Oceanic Tank



Photos of AquaRio: Nayer Youakim

such as jellyfish or a more generalised grouping. Of the roughly 350 species on exhibit, visitors' eyes are drawn toward entertainers such as moray eels, rays and sharks, including Nurse Shark, Whitetip and Blacktip Reef Shark. What pleases the public most appears to be the walk-through tunnel – a large shark tank. That must be the 'Gee whiz' exhibit of this aquarium.

Signs and graphics, mostly electronic, are in Portuguese, Spanish and English with scientific names noticeable here and there. According to Wikipedia the aquarium offers activities (subject to separate charges) such as 'Sleeping in AquaRio', which allows visitors to spend a night in the tunnel in The Great Oceanic Tank, or 'Behind the Scenes' which shows visitors how water is circulated through the aquarium and how food is prepared for the occupants. Through the programme called 'Virtual Aquarium' visitors can create a digital aquarium with fish which reflects the technological advancements of our time and the 'Science Museum' is composed of a plankton station and shell exhibition.

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