

ZOO INTERVIEW

Featuring A. K. Das, Director of Calcutta Zoo

ZOO: *Mr. Das, Calcutta Zoo is over 112 years old & has not been able to acquire additional area. What are some of the problems of running an old inner city Zoo?*

Das: The Calcutta Zoo was established at Alipore in the year 1875 in the outskirts of the city. With the passage of time, the Alipore area has become practically the city centre. The Zoo is now surrounded by built-in structures, having no scope for its further extension. One of the vital problems of the Calcutta Zoo is the non-availability of space required for construction of open-air enclosure for the animals which is the essential pre-requisite of a modern Zoo. Secondly, Alipore Zoological Garden is having only 45 acres of land, out of which only about 20 acres are available for the Zoo visitors. This Zoo is visited by 2.5 millions of visitors annually. It is very difficult to manage so many visitors (some times 1 lakh in a day) during the winter months especially on 25th December, 1st of January, 26th January etc. Thirdly, this Zoo also suffers from the universal problem of teasing causing much disturbance to the caged animals. Fourthly, due to the lack of sufficient space, the breeding of some animals specially the deer, antelope is being suffered as because these animals after attaining an optimum population no further increase in population can be made.

ZOO: *The press in Calcutta seems to be very hard on the Zoo. Are all the reports accurate?*

Das: As the people of Calcutta are very sensitive to any adverse happening at Calcutta Zoo, the press people always tries to invigorate the feeling of the city people by some false or exaggerated news. As such they do not always publish accurate information of the Alipore Zoo.

ZOO: *I have been told that the big cats in Calcutta Zoo have "Trips" Is it true?*

Das: It is not true. Some tigers and some Zebras were infected with Trypanosomiasis in the year 1967 and the Alipore Zoo had lost some of the above specimens due to the attack of this trypanosomiasis. When this infection was detected the Authorities of this Garden had ventilated the news throughout the world along with the preventive measures to be taken to prevent the disease and to protect the animals from the attack of this disease. As because these informations were communicated to different Indian Zoos, it may be the common belief that the big cats of the Calcutta Zoo are still harbouring trypanosomal infection which was once occurred in the year 1967, i.e. about twenty years back. Moreover, as a preventive measure, Alipore Zoo has been innoculating Tribexin pro-salt (previously Antrycide pro-salt) to all the carnivorous

animals of this Garden twice in a year. This vaccine acts both as prophylactic and curative drug.

ZOO: *It is also thought that the Calcutta Zoo animals have a higher incidence of Tuberculosis than other Zoos. Do you think so? What preventive measures do you take for Tuberculosis? Have you even cured Tuberculosis in animals?*

Does the fact that the Zoo is a small area with a large visitation affect the control of Tuberculosis?

Das: The Incidence of Tuberculosis amongst the Zoo animals is prevalent throughout the world especially amongst the monkeys and deer. It has also been learnt that the deer of the different deer parks managed by the forest department have been suffering from Tuberculosis. As because most of the Zoos of India do not carry out the post-mortem examination and confirm the cause of death by the pathological findings, they think that their animals are not suffering from Tuberculosis. But in Alipore Zoo post-mortem for animals and birds is a must and the post-mortem findings are always confirmed by the findings of pathological reports. In my opinion the incidence of Tuberculosis is less in Calcutta Zoo than any other Zoo in India due to the fact that the susceptible animals of Calcutta Zoo are being administered with anti-tubercular drug regularly. Among the Zoo animals, the monkeys and hoofed animals namely the deer and antelope generally suffer from Tuberculosis. These animals are administered regularly with Delone, an anti-tubercular drug. These drugs are being used along with the food of the animal for every alternate three months. In case of diseased animals, they are first isolated and inoculated with Streptomycin injection supplemented by isorex tabs and minerals and vitamins along with food for consecutive ninety days. After ninety days animals become healthy. In case of bigger animals suffering from T. B. such as Eland antelope and Nilgai, a long rope (say about 100 ft) is tied up around the neck of the animals. Ninety doses of Streptomycin injections are given one injection in each day by drawing the animal with the help of the long rope tied around its neck.

It is not the fact that large number of visitors to the Alipore Zoo affect the control of T. B. in the zoo animals.

ZOO: *In contemporary "Zoo Philosophy" the deliberate cross breeding of lion and tiger is very much unpopular and controversial. Why was this done and is there any plan to continue such experiment?*

Das: Although the "Zoo Philosophy" does not encourage the deliberate cross-breeding of any wild animals, the hybrid of lion and tiger has a great

public appeal and special attraction. The Zoo Garden authority will continue the experiment of hybridisation to satisfy the inquisitiveness regarding the ultimate fate of these hybrids. It is to be ascertained whether the litigons (hybrid of Tigon and Indian Lion) is a fertile or a sterile one. If the Litigon is a fertile one it would be able to produce its own kind in future leading to the formation of a new species amongst the carnivorous animals.

ZOO: *What are some interesting births and breeding success you have had recently?*

Das: This year a pair of Sundarban tigers gave birth of two cubs; a pair of tigers brought from Mysore Zoo gave birth of three cubs and the White Tiger Himadri Junior gave birth of one cub after being crossed with a Sundarban tiger. The brown-antlered deer produced four fawns and the Swamp deer gave birth of two fawns this year. It may be mentioned here that this is the first time that a Sundarban tigress gave birth of cubs to survive in captivity. Previously it was believed that Sundarban tigers do not breed in captivity. So this is the first birth of Sundarban tiger ever recorded in captivity.

ZOO: *You have been extremely successful in breeding birds in Calcutta Zoo. What are some of your techniques in bird husbandary?*

Das: The Calcutta Zoological Garden has been breeding some pheasants, pigeons, storks cranes, spoonbills, ducks and swans successfully. The birds of this Garden are fed with different kinds of food (six to eight items) supplemented by vitamins. Moreover, some birds are fed with ants' eggs, mutton liver and minced meat mixed with gram powder. Moreover, adequate nesting materials and hiding places are provided in the birds' cages.

ZOO: *You have housed a young tiger cubs eparately from its mother. Why is this?*

Das: It is noticed that as soon as a tiger cub starts feeding on beef the mother allowed the cub to feed on the beef as much as it can. This unlimited feeding by the mother is harmful to the cubs causing potbelliedness. Moreover, during long association with the mother heavy worm infestation is found to develop in the cubs causing development of transverse vision in the cubs. To avoid these unhealthy situations the tiger cubs when they attain the age of 4,5 months are seperated from their mother and fed seperately for proper deworming and other attention and care.

ZOO: *What do you see as the major problems of Indian Zoos to-day and do you have any solution to suggest.*

Das: The major problems with which an Indian Zoo has to suffer are the teasing of animals by the public and also the illiteracy of the Zoo Keepers

Unless the common people are educated and become interested about the wild animals and their conservation, the cruel teasing of animals can not be stopped Indian Zoo Keepers should be trained and taught about basic knowledge of cleanliness, medical care, behavioural observation and animal psychology.

ZOO: *The Calcutta Zoo is managed by an autonomous Zoo Society although it is under the administration of the Department of Environment of West Bengal. What are some of the advantages of this system are there any disadvantages?*

Das: The advantage of an autonomous Zoo Society is that it provides opportunity for quick implimentation of the projects and the Zoo administration is getting benefit by the help and assistance of the people from different walks of life. Disadvantages of such Society is much less in comparison to its advantages.

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'IT'S A WILD, WILD, WILD LIFE!'

BY SALLY WALKER

