

My zoo friends and others

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What can we do to improve the conditions of animals in zoos?

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Being confined in small spaces increases stress levels...

It was an odd life. I was pushing a wheelbarrow, with an injured pelican in it. My day consisted of feeding the chimps, checking to see if the birds had suffered any injuries, and reprimanding the gibbon that had escaped from its cage. I was a volunteer at the local zoo. The days are full of adventure. On the first day, Ruby, the female chimpanzee decided to hurl her steel mug at me as I assisted in the morning feeding. The second day, I had to wade into the water, tuck a pelican under my arm and take it to the hospital, watching out for its long beak that was sharper than a knife. This was hard work, sometimes dangerous and at first a lot of dirty work as well. But those days gave me a great insight into the lives of not just the animals but the human beings at the zoo.

I spent my mornings with the zoo keepers, cleaning out the cages and filling the earthen bowls with water, as the animals lazed around in the winter sun. At the back of my mind I was acutely aware of the jackal that paced up and down in its cage, the lioness who spent over 48 hours in a tiled cage, and the hoolock gibbon that spent all its time alone, moping. These were bored, depressed animals. A complex set of problems plague zoos in India. By addressing behavioural abnormalities in the animals and alleviating stress through enrichment of the environment they live in their lives can be improved. Environmental enrichment through simple measures like hanging of baskets, planting of trees, can be undertaken. Food can be hidden in different parts of the enclosure so that the animal spends time foraging for food and spends less time resting.

Addressing faulty management practices:

Animals, especially primates, are very social animals but are often housed alone. This practice may be convenient from the point of view of the management but is extremely detrimental from the point of view of the psychological well being of the animal.

Problem of too many animals:

Surplus animals in zoos create several problems in terms of management and inbreeding. For example in the Delhi Zoo, all the lions cannot be released into the outside enclosure at the same time, as they will fight. This means an animal spends more than 24 hours indoors in a cage, which increases stress levels.

Modification of enclosures:

Even if enclosures are large enough, their design may be such that they create stress as animals have little private space to hide from visitors. Hiding spaces can be created so that the animal has the option of being out of public view if it so desires. Mixed species exhibits can be encouraged especially with species that are naturally sympatric in the wild. This not only encourages natural behaviour but is also a good educative tool. The above measures do not require much infrastructure or funds. What they do require is sound knowledge of the animal's natural behaviour and the ability to recreate that in the captive environment of the zoo. During my stint of volunteering at the zoo, I felt the person who was crucial to the well being of the animal was the keeper. In western countries, the keeper is trained in animal management and is at least a graduate. In India, most keepers are barely educated and their role is mostly confined to cleaning and sweeping the cages.

The real change in Indian zoos will come about only when keepers take a keen interest in the animals, and the management of the zoos gives scope for it. Perhaps what is needed is more young people to be trained and who are willing to work with the animals. Maybe then, zoos can make a real contribution to preserving biodiversity.

Be a Friend of Zoos:

In India there are as many as 58 zoos across the country that house thousands of birds, animals and reptiles. Zoos in our country are frequented by people from all walks of life and in many instances provide the only contact that they have with wildlife. Visitors shouting, throwing stones and pulling animal's tail not only increases the stress levels of the captive animals but often harm them. "Friends of Zoos", volunteers can be recruited to keep in check the crowds, ensure that animals are not disturbed when sleeping or being fed.

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