

INDIAN ZOOS: SEEDS OF WILDLIFE CONSERVATION

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Children feed animals at The Madras Crocodile Bank Trust and Centre for Herpetology. | Photo Credit: Special Arrangement

I'll start with a quote from my bestie [Jane Goodall](#) (whom I've never met, of course). Her message for the anti-zoo brigade was that in these on-the-brink times it is important, more than ever, to sensitise children to the importance of wildlife. And nothing, not even the best TV shows and films, can match the experience of seeing "a happy animal in a good enclosure" and "look them in the eye".

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This sensitisation is now an important part of the work of the zoo educator; a career that is growing all over the world. Many significant conservationists started their careers in a zoo: as visitors, volunteers, interns and part-time assistants.

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In fact, one of them is visiting The Madras Crocodile Bank Trust and Centre for Herpetology (MCBT) at the moment — Karthikeyan Vasudevan of Hyderabad's Laboratory for the Conservation of Endangered Species. His volunteer stint here, some 25 years ago, helped to germinate the seeds of his interest in wildlife conservation.

Vasudevan says in a recent mail, 'The opportunity I had to work at MCBT and other captive animal facilities has helped me understand the gaps in knowledge and challenges in conservation-breeding of endangered species'. His work has primarily focused on mobilising scientific data that would specifically help amphibians and reptiles. 'Through a coordinated effort involving a team of scientists and zoo professionals, a population of Indian chevrotain from a founder population of seven animals in the Nehru Zoo [Hyderabad] was captive-bred and enhanced to 260 animals.' Later, nearly 85 of them were successfully re-introduced into the wild in five different protected areas in Telangana State.

Going back to Goodall, she had also said that there are good zoos and bad zoos, and specific problems related to them are still to be fully addressed, such as the fact that some animals, like

dolphins, shouldn't be in a zoo at all. The answer to these concerns is not to throw the baby out with the bathwater, but to fix the problems.

With 80 million annual visitors in India, zoos play an increasingly important role as centres of learning, entertainment and inspiration. Interpretation centres are also becoming more innovative, such as our own at MCBT, where VR (virtual reality) equipment is being used to bring reptiles 'up close and cosy'. It is entertaining to watch the watchers, as they squeal and squirm and clutch each other when a large mugger or salty seems to be running at them.

Children take part in awareness activities at The Madras Crocodile Bank Trust and Centre for Herpetology. | Photo Credit: Special Arrangement

And today, post-pandemic, it is more important than ever to eyeball one of the most important benefits of zoos because green, quiet places are an acknowledged tonic for mental health. Zoos provide an opportunity for economically weaker sections of society to experience this, which is hard to come by in noisy, crowded, urban environments. Some of us have access to gardens and parks, and can travel to sanctuaries and national parks; but we are a tiny, lucky percentage of our population. I have described in *Chicken Soup for the Indian Spiritual Soul*, how nature helped me recover from the painful loss of my sister. Indeed, it is a common theme in literature and art.

Incidentally, the Central Zoo Authority (CZA), which oversees the development and evaluation of our zoos, requires a certain ratio of greenery in every zoo.

The CZA assures plenty of comfortable visitor space, by requiring every zoo to maintain a 30% green belt and natural vegetation; also, the area for animal housing should not exceed 30%. Trees are to be labelled to enhance scientific information.

Another big fist-bump for zoos is the role they play in the conservation of endangered and threatened species. Being based at the MCBT, I can mention several reptiles that would probably be extinct if it hadn't been for captive breeding programmes... the gharial for one, the iconic long-snouted crocodilian, which numbered only some 200 in the '70s. 'Ex situ' breeding programmes for endangered mammals include the red panda, snow leopard, thamin, rhinoceros, the sangai deer and many more. Some of the zoos playing an active role in the conservation of these species are the Padmaja Naidu Himalayan Zoological Park, Darjeeling (red panda and snow leopard), Manipur Zoological Garden (thamin), and Assam State Zoo (rhinoceros).

Behaviour and biological studies at zoos, such as the Mysore Zoo, help guide conservation policies for the animal in the wild. And, speaking of conservation, the role of zoos in human-animal conflict mitigation has become more and more important with time. 'Rescues' need to be placed in spaces with know-how and experience, which allow them to have as near a natural life as possible and not simply be kept alive. Recently, a video did the rounds of a rescued python being apparently moved to the Veermata Jijabai Bhosale Udyan in Mumbai. It may well have been an abandoned pet or a trafficked animal; when small snakes and tortoises grow too big, they are (not so lovingly) abandoned in public places, with hopes that someone will rescue them.

Conservation initiatives like breeding endangered species and education programmes are now so much a part of zoo activities and expectations, that seeing beautiful, exotic animals is just a small part of the zoo experience in India. Nandankanan in Odisha, the Mysore Zoo and the Arignar Anna Zoological Park in Chennai are some that do this very well. Zoos have become important centres for environmental education, and a 'zoo educator' is often listed as an option in wildlife careers. Gone are the days when a rusty old signboard was one's only source of

information; the need for meaningful environmental education at zoos is being addressed both by the CZA as well as zoos themselves, because the response from visitors is heart-warming and the interest in wildlife and its conservation is growing

Many zoos organise special programmes on the environment and its conservation, and climate change is increasingly a part of this. They are the ideal partners for the government to take this all-important message to different communities, from students to decision-makers. The International Zoo Educators Association, of which many Indian zoos are members, offers useful advice and information on how to enrich and expand these programmes.

Today, our zoos have free guided tours and programmes. The responsibility to do this is a serious one in these times of the coronavirus. Zoos are helping to create a battalion of our future nature guardians, an act of self-perseveration. Because as per the thoughts of many scientists, the present pandemic may, in times to come, look like a tiddler.

We should be proud of our zoos. It is a network that discusses husbandry, conservation and education plans, and shares information and ideas. They are spaces increasingly open to women; there are a number of women zoo directors and veterinarians. It is also a space where visitors can pay 40 per ticket and spend hours wandering in a 1,300 acres (Arignar Anna Zoological Park, Chennai) or 250 acres (Mysore Zoo) space.

The writer is one of the founders of the Madras Crocodile Bank, and currently its managing trustee.

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