



Caring for the Wild: A Welfare Perspective of Dehiwala Zoo

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The latest advancement in scientific knowledge has brought forth an understanding on animal sentience. The field of animal welfare is a young and flourishing field of research. Animal welfare according to World Organisation for Animal Health is how an animal is coping with the conditions in which it lives. An animal is in a good state of welfare if (as indicated by scientific evidence) it is healthy, comfortable, well-nourished, safe, able to express innate behavior, and if it is not suffering from unpleasant states such as pain, fear, and distress.

This has led to many changes in modern zoo management practices. Also, the perspective of zoos has changed from being centers of animal display and entertainment to ex-situ conservation and animal rescue centers. Dehiwala Zoological Gardens is the first zoo to be established in Sri Lanka. It was first started as an animal collection by John Hargenberg and is now converted to be a part of the Government Department of National Zoological Gardens. It is home to more than 250 species of animals consisting of.

Being a predominant Buddhist country and having established one of the world's first wildlife reserves "Mihintale" third century BC Dehiwala Zoological gardens have taken a pro-active approach in establishing animal welfare standards and aspects for animals within their care. It follows the modern and scientific approaches and standards set by animal welfare organisations worldwide. The Zoo has set animal welfare as one of its five primary goals. It has taken up the challenge of transforming an "old zoo" into an ex-situ conservation and education center. The concept is to become chain-free and cage-free. The first steps taken were meeting the basic survival needs for food, shelter, health and safety of animals. For this the zoo management took significant changes to diets of animals, veterinary care and infrastructure of the zoo.

As a result, under a masterplan all sections of the zoo are undergoing infrastructural changes. The zoo has forgone its cage concept and has become open concept immerses enclosures. The modernized cat enclosures, bird aviaries, large primate areas, elephant free-roaming areas are some of the examples. Modern enclosures meet all of their needs of safety and shelter as well as comfort. The environmental conditions are regulated to be most comfortable for the animals. The management practices have been changed from daily routine activities to restructured, monitored evaluated activities according to animal needs. The diets are diversified to meet basic nutrient needs and to be palatable for the animals and to have a choice in their meals. Food is presented in different manners such as prey for carnivorous, as frozen food, hidden food or hanging food to arouse and encompass the appetitive and consummatory behaviours of animals. With the aim of expanding the Veterinary facilities the zoo has established a modern vet hospital. It is equipped with modern facilities equipment and treatment areas. This has contributed to the increased health and welfare of animals.

Going beyond meeting the basic needs the zoo also focuses on increasing opportunities for animals to have positive experiences, focused on their well-being, gratification, attentiveness and confidence. These are met by incorporating the aspect of enrichment to the daily zoo management. Any enclosure built for an animal will incorporate environmental enrichment. Which will provide them with stimulating and enhanced activity opportunities with exploratory behaviour. Animals are kept in conspecifics or mixed-exhibits rather than single species exhibits wherever possible which will stimulate near natural behavior. The zoo collection plans are based on the above needs and conservation needs rather than the beauty of the animal as expected in early days. Also, all human-animal interactions such as training for veterinary care is incorporated with

positive re-enforcement. These will establish confidence and sense of safety within the animals increasing their mental health.

Also, the staff uses tactile and sensory enrichments such as puzzle feeders and scratch poles to promote the important means of communication and are routes of gathering information about its surrounding environment with cognitive stimulation for animals. With the enhanced veterinary and infrastructural facilities Dehiwala Zoo acts as a rescue center for injured and abandoned wild and pet animals. With the starting of this venture the need felt was so large that the zoo is now undertaking the development of a separate land for the sole purpose of this.

Bearing the fruits of this welfare effort the Dehiwala Zoo has seen many a positives conservation results in the recent years. The zoo has seen the births of many an endangered species such as Black rhino, purple faced leaf -monkey, Arabian Oryx, Preziwal-skies horse. Dehiwala zoo is also the breeding and re-release center for local endemic fish. Also, with the enhanced welfare standards the positive response from the visitors have significantly increased. Dehiwala Zoo with their strife has managed to become a premier ex-situ conservation center in the Country [1-6].

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