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Extract from Chapter Five: From Princely Menageries to Public Zoos. (pp.96, 108-110, 113-115)

PRINCELY POWER AND PRINCELY COLLECTIONS

The ownership of rare or exotic wild animals seems to have fulfilled several functions for the rich and powerful who had the resources to build such collections. The animals undoubtedly gave pleasure and stimulated curiosity in the animal world but they also indicated prestige, luxury and love of display. Various combinations of these elements can be found in the historical records of European societies.

An early example is that of Charlemagne, who it would appear shared some of the Roman emperors' love of the luxury of owning rare wild animals. In 797 there is a record of his receiving various animals including an elephant and monkeys along with perfumes and spices from Abasside Haroun-Rashid, the Caliph of Baghdad. Once again we have an example of the association of rare wild animals with other luxury items, regarded as valuable enough to be given as gifts to important rulers. Soon after these gifts Charlemagne received another visit from an ambassador, this time from the Emir of Cairo who sent him, among other animals, a lion and several bears.

The menagerie of the Muséum National in Paris, founded in 1793, was the first national menagerie in the world. As part of the reorganization of the royal gardens it was decided to establish a menagerie for the study of zoology. There were, however, few animals available for such an institution so in Paris the municipal police were ordered at the end of 1793 to seize animals of travelling showmen and take them to the museum.

After the establishment of the scientific status of the menagerie in Paris, the next most important creation was that of the Zoological Society of London and the associated Zoological Gardens in the nineteenth century. It was the foundation of this institution which provided a model and an impetus for the development of zoos in many parts of Europe. Sir Stamford Raffles, a colonial administrator and founder of the colony of Singapore, suggested to Sir Joseph Banks as early as 1817 that there was a need for a collection of animals for scientific purposes as well as general interest. It was Sir Humphrey Davy, the new president of the Royal Society, who drew up the 1825 prospectus for the Zoological Society of London. The wording of this is highly significant for the ideas contained within it were to be repeated many times in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as more and more zoological gardens were created.

It has long been a matter of deep regret to the cultivators of Natural History that we possess no great scientific establishments either for teaching or elucidating zoology, and no public menageries or collections of living animals where their nature, properties, and habits may be studied. . . . Should the Society flourish and succeed, it will not only be useful in common life, but likewise promote the best and most extensive objects of the Scientific History of Animated Nature, and offer a collection of living animals such as never yet existed in ancient or modern times. . . animals to be brought from every part of the globe to be applied either to some useful purpose, or as objects of scientific research, not of vulgar admiration.

(Quoted in Olney, 1980: 40)

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It should be noted that London's Zoological Gardens were not established in order to provide a recreational facility for the general public, for when they opened on 27 April 1826 only members and their guests were admitted. This restriction lasted until 1940, when it was changed to Sunday mornings only; it was finally withdrawn in 1957. It was as a result of the opening of the Zoological Gardens to the public in London that the word 'zoo' came into international vocabulary, for it was the music-hall artist 'The Great Vance' who, in 1867, sang 'Walking in the zoo is the O.K. thing to do'.

CIVIC PRIDE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

In the nineteenth century there was a period of rapid expansion of zoological-garden construction, and many of these gardens were municipal institutions established in connection with public parks. In fact the oldest European municipal menagerie is that of Madrid, the old menagerie of Charles III. Of other European countries it was only really Hungary, Germany and France which had municipal zoological gardens, although there were probably only ten major zoological gardens in the world, all of which were in Europe. By about the mid-nineteenth century many of the major European cities had zoological gardens, and from Europe the movement spread to other parts of the world. Many were founded by groups of prominent citizens who felt that their city ought to have a zoological garden, and thus the whole matter became entangled with questions of civic pride.

It is perhaps a crude generalization, but in the main the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century zoos consisted of 'postage stamp' type collections with as many creatures as possible represented, so that they were essentially museums of living creatures. There are two key features here. First we must consider the trends in the scientific zoological climate at the time of the formation of such collections, which can be seen as a representation of contemporary taxonomic interests in zoology and biology. Given the popular nature of the visit to the zoological garden this cannot be the whole story, and so we must also consider the general public which wanted to see a wide range of unusual and interesting animals. We must note, too, the increasing popularity of zoos during the twentieth century, for zoos have multiplied rapidly – up to 1920 there were about 120 zoos, by 1959 the *International Zoo Yearbook* lists 309, and, by 1978 883.

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In the latter part of the twentieth century there were changes of emphasis in zoology; animal behaviour was something which began to engage the attention of scientists, and this, combined with an interest in ecology and conservation, began to alter the nature of many major zoos. The visiting public, particularly those in north-west Europe, North America and Australia and New Zealand, were less interested in seeing the animals caged in the old menagerie-style buildings. This was combined with a general philosophical and emotional change in attitudes towards animals in these western industrial nations. In a nutshell, there developed what can best be called an anthropomorphic concern with animal welfare. Perhaps the key element in the modern progressive zoo is that nature is seen as an ideal to be copied and the animals, instead of being mere taxonomic specimens, are resituated in a replica of their environment. Instead of the animals having to adjust themselves to the zoo there is some attempt to have the zoo adjust itself to the animals. The complex interrelation of these themes brought about changes in exhibition philosophy in the zoos in many countries of the world.

Apart from the way in which animals are exhibited in zoological gardens, and the number and species actually exhibited, there have been few changes to the essential form of the zoological garden. Perhaps the only break with the mainstream zoological-garden tradition came in the late 1960s in Europe and particularly in England with the development of safari parks, a concept which is now found in many parts of the world. In these parks a range of animals are kept, but particularly prominent are those with big cats and other large African game animals. They are kept in open paddocks and are popular because the animals can be seen in spacious surroundings, and the public are thrilled at being able to drive close to them. In the early days many of these parks were associated with the stately homes of the aristocracy, and although the safari park was in some ways a novel development it is perhaps possible to see a precedent in the collections of wild animals which many members of the royal families, nobility and landed gentry have kept on their own estates. Examples abound in France, Germany, Hungary and other parts of eastern Europe, Scandinavia and Britain of parks where the owners attempted to acclimatize exotic species to a new environment. Often their motive was simply the aesthetic pleasure of having attractive creatures in their parks, but in many cases they hoped to produce a new creature for hunting or for some commercial purpose. For example, between 1892 and 1911, the Duke of Bedford in his park at Woburn had a collection of 2,000 mammals of some fifty-three species. The significant difference between these collections and the safari parks was that, in the latter, exotic species were introduced in order to bring paying visitors on to the land. The novelty of the safari park was, and is, that people could apparently enter the animals' territory. It was like being in the wild without discomfort, and with the additional guarantee that visitors *would* see the animals. Such a development could of course only come about with increasing affluence, because safari-park visits are dependent on car ownership.

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ZOO CULTURE

As we have said, there have obviously been changes in the nature of zoological gardens and there have been radical revisions of their exhibition philosophy, a result of the concern for what the zoological garden should be attempting to achieve. From about the mid-twentieth century in the major zoos of North America, north-west Europe, Australia and New Zealand those who were managing zoos became concerned about the nature of the zoo itself. It was no longer enough to have animals solely for exhibition; one had to think about why one had them and what to do with them. But fundamentally whatever the changes prompted by such thinking, zoos still consist of animals kept in enclosures of greater or lesser complexity which the public can walk past to view the animals.

Extract from Chapter Six: The Cultural Status of the Zoo. (pp.126-130)

ZOOS AND EDUCATION

We have argued that unlike museums and art galleries, zoos contain collections which are easy to understand because the items on display need no interpretation. For centuries and in all cultures this display was unproblematic (indeed in many modern zoos it is still unproblematic); the animals were strange and unusual and simply excited the interest and curiosity of those who came to see them – they wanted to know where they came from and whether there was anything special about them. Those who put them on display had to do little more than make them visible.

Although different publics go to zoos with different perceptions and interests, zoos are traditionally places of popular entertainment, and yet we found no director who suggested that the aim of his zoo was primarily to provide entertainment. It would seem that because of international co-operation among zoos, the ideology of conservation and education has spread. All directors claimed that education was a fundamental concern and more particularly they argued that the intention was to give people an understanding of the natural world in order to preserve that world. However poor the zoo, however restricted the resources and however close they were to having basic, bare cages, all directors paid at least lip-service to the ideals of education, to the aim of converting the zoo experience into more than the simple viewing of a caged animal. Some directors explained that, in positing education as their primary aim, they were not looking beyond the zoo and merely wished to persuade their public to respect and not mistreat the animals in the zoo. The problem which all of them face, however great their resources, is that because zoos are not traditionally places of education it is difficult to make them so. Most zoo visitors around the world see the zoo as a cheap place for a day of fun (in most parts of the world apart from North America, Europe and Australasia the price of entrance to the zoo is well below the cost of any other entertainment, and in most cases the ticket price is purely nominal), and do not come predisposed to learn about the animals.

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Extract from Chapter Six: The Cultural Status of the Zoo. (pp.126-130)

Zoos with considerable financial resources are able to offer formal educational services to certain members of the public. Many have paid teaching staff, classrooms and structured programmes for school groups. Here the zoo becomes an extension of the school. Not surprisingly the zoos of western industrial nations offer the more sophisticated programmes in biology, zoology and ecology, but even the less affluent zoos in other nations attempt to provide some teaching for school groups. Indeed with the international contact between members of the zoo world it seems that zoos must assume some sort of educational character in order to maintain credibility when making a claim for status above that of mere entertainers. The majority of the public, however, do not participate in the main programmes and the majority of directors realize that people do not come to the zoo for an educational experience. They accept that offering obtrusive formal instruction is unlikely either to attract or to hold attention. The requirements of the public on the whole are minimal – they want to know the name of the animal, where it comes from and perhaps some basic information about behaviour. Beyond this they are not much interested.

The sorts of information and programmes one finds in zoos do not vary in essence (although they certainly do in quality) from culture to culture. The essential message is always a similar amalgam of scientific zoology, ecology and conservation. Despite the enormous variety in responses to and attitudes towards animals in different cultures this does not seem to be reflected in zoo philosophies throughout the world. One does not even find the equivalent of the museums which are established to glorify a particular period of history or to give a sense of national pride. The story which zoos implicitly attempt to tell about the relationship between man and the natural world is an acultural one. The idea of developing zoos which are culturally specific seems alien to the modern zoo world. Perhaps the only significant exception to this is the Biblical Zoo in Jerusalem where the enclosures carry notices quoting biblical references to particular animals.

Wild animals are insignificant in the lives of most people who visit zoos, yet the aim of many directors is to make them significant. The thrust of educational programmes seems to be an attempt to neutralize particular cultural perceptions of animals and to take the visitor beyond the primary idiosyncratic experience of the individual animal in the cage in order to explain that the animal is a representative of a particular species with particular zoological and behavioural characteristics which are normally revealed in a particular ecological setting. In an important sense the individual animals on display are of little account in that the story of their lives in that particular setting and of their relations with others in the zoo is not the one the directors wish to tell. Information provided about animals does not focus on the lives of those in captivity but on how they would or should live in the wild. Indeed, in all but the best zoos it cannot be otherwise, for as Batten has argued:

Should one learn that the chimpanzee, for example, is a neurotic humanoid that cadges food from humans, and throws tantrums and excreta should this not materialize? Or that the orang-utan, which by nature seldom descends to the soft forest floor, is a pathetic bundle of matted red fur in the corner of a tiled cell?

(Batten, 1976: 22)

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To be fully successful this process of reorientation has to cause a shift of focus beyond the confines of the zoo and to prompt people to place the animal imaginatively in a completely different context: that of a natural habitat of which it might have no experience. For the majority of visitors, though, that is not the purpose of their visit; it is *that* particular animal in the cage in front of them which is important, it is *that* particular animal which provides interest, entertainment or excitement and not some abstract quality or set of relations associated with it. Most do not seek to understand the animal or to think beyond it. In many societies it is especially difficult to achieve this level of interest for it involves establishing a concern for an animal and a habitat of another country which the visitors are unlikely to see. It is difficult enough to persuade people in affluent western nations to take notice of the plight of fellow human beings in other nations, so to expect zoo visitors around the world to interest themselves in the plight of animals seems over-optimistic. 'Jungle World' in the Bronx, New York, was established to foster concern for the fate of the tropical rainforests of the world, but one wonders how many of those who pass through it and express admiration for it will continue to take an active part in what happens to the rainforest in Brazil for example. It is even more difficult to believe that the millions who visit Beijing or Bombay zoos can be persuaded that they ought to be concerned about Chinese or Indian habitats, let alone Brazilian rainforests.

Pegi Harvey, of the education department at San Diego Zoo, said that her objective was to get visitors to 'experience a sense of wildlife'. It would seem that if zoos are going to have any success in reshaping the public's view of animals then a naturalistic setting is essential. To achieve this of course requires vast financial resources to which few have access. There is, however, another element which directors are able to work with – the fact that most people seem to treat the zoo as though it were a variety show. People like to see animals acting and, as we have described, what many directors have done is to restructure the nature of the animal show to carry a message. Most of the shows are quite simple in that they demonstrate how certain animals can leap, climb or manipulate objects, and the presenter then explains why they are able to act in such a way. Perhaps the most 'pure' educational show is that in San Diego Zoo which features only North American wildlife. Here, for example, the trainers demonstrate how far a cougar can jump, and they then bring out a red-tailed hawk and emphasize its powerful sight by pointing to a wooden replica of a San Diego newspaper nailed to a distant tree and explaining that the hawk would be able to make out the words if it could read. A coatimundi is made to find hidden sweets and so demonstrate its powers of smell. And in order to show how an owl pinpoints sound and attacks its prey, the trainers explain the anatomy of the owl on display and allow it to pounce on a model skunk.

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In the cage or enclosure an animal is framed by a statement of what it is – its body itself is enough to identify it – whereas in the shows the message is that an animal *is* what an animal *does* – it is identified in terms of behaviour. Unlike traditional circus acts these shows of 'natural behaviour' do not aim to train animals so that they may be humanized; rather they are trained to be natural. As we have argued, an animal in a cage is an actor in terms of the visitors' perception of it – they wish to be entertained by its activity. In the shows, however, the idea of animal as actor is somewhat more complex. The animal is trained to perform on cue actions which are part of the normal lives of members of its species in their natural habitat. On stage in the zoo, however, these actions performed by these individuals are inauthentic, they have no object, they are directed to no end except the performance of the acts themselves and perhaps a food reward from the keeper, for in the zoo the owl does not need to (indeed it cannot) hunt skunks. The actions refer to a way of life outside the zoo which is denied to them. An owl is trained to play the part of being an owl, but it is only a role – it cannot be the expression of an authentic life. The zoo is a theatre of inauthenticity attempting to tell a story of authenticity.

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