

The HSUS Zoo Reform Program

Without some understanding of the specialized requirements of captive wild animals and relative criteria for judging whether these requirements were being met, it was not possible for animal welfare organizations accustomed to dealing with domestic animals, often housed for short periods of time only, to make credible criticisms of the inadequacies of zoos. One could more easily condemn them all on the basis of the conventional wisdom that captivity is too far removed from "freedom" to be truly humane. This was, essentially, the position that Frank McMahon, HSUS's Chief Investigator, took in 1970 when he was called to Tucson, Arizona, by some HSUS members to reinforce their criticisms of the local zoo.

McMahon avowed his fundamental disapproval of all zoos, a feeling not shared by all of the complaining parties, but he was unable to find the zoo as inadequate as the local people found it. For all his good intentions, McMahon was of little help to the people of Tucson in pressuring the municipality into improving the zoo (HSUS: Tucson Zoo File). It was clear that The HSUS would have to develop some criteria if it were to pursue an effective program of zoo reform.

At the urging of David Claflin, President of the Massachusetts SPCA, and Roger Caras, who had by this time joined The HSUS Board, Sue Pressman met with John Hoyt early in 1971 to discuss a six-month evaluation of a number of American zoos to determine what was causing them to be a source of increasing concern to The HSUS constituents. Sue had a Master of Science degree in Biology from the University of California at Davis and had completed a number of courses toward a degree in veterinary medicine, including some on zoo animal medicine taught by a well-known specialist in wild animal medicine, Dr. Murray Fowler. She had worked in both the animal hospital and the children's zoo of the San Diego Zoo and for

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seven years had been the Supervisor of Animal Health for the three zoos (Franklin Park, Stoneham Zoo, and Trailside Museum in Blue Hills, Massachusetts) operated by the Boston Zoological Society. She had had to pass a set of special tests designed by the Massachusetts Veterinary Medical Association to be considered certified to "practice medicine" as a non-public, non-graduate veterinarian. In her work at the zoo Sue had increasingly become a "spokesman for wildlife" and was eager to reach a larger audience with what she felt was an urgent message.

In March of 1971 Sue began for The HSUS a "fact finding" tour of a number of zoos, many selected at random and others discovered along the way. By the summer of 1971, Sue Pressman had examined 44 municipal and 27 private zoos. The worst of them, 17 in all, in what she would later call the class 3 zoos, received letters from The HSUS stating their deficiencies and pledging the Society would "take such action as is necessary to achieve the establishment of proper and humane conditions" (HSUS zoo files).

Sue reported to The HSUS Executive Staff and Board of Directors that many municipal zoos shared a number of problems which were causing them to become the focus of public concern for the welfare of the animals they held captive. The "meddling" of municipal officials in decisions that should have been made by zoo professionals was impeding the evolution of zoos: municipal bid systems might insure that animals got cheap food rather than food which met their dietary requirements; municipal maintenance systems were not always adequate--or prompt enough--to keep exhibits in good repair; and civil service practices might guarantee that woefully inadequate employees kept their jobs caring for animals about which they knew little and, in some cases, cared less. The professionals had insufficient autonomy. Their ideas,

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based on information of recent vintage from the field or from the work of the few zoo professionals who did have autonomy, were often not understood by the parks and recreation departments or other municipal bodies that regulated many city zoos and determined what money and resources the zoos would have. In many cases, zoos were under the direction of amateurs who had more parks experience than scientific training. Others had some "seat of the pants" experience as former keepers, but had not kept up with the growing body of information on the needs of wild animals and how best to meet those needs in captivity.

Archaic structures was the second major problem of municipal zoos that Sue reported to The HSUS officials. Many municipal zoos had been either built or renovated in the 1930's as projects of the Works Progress Administration before much was known about the behavioral needs of animals and the deleterious effects upon them of close, sterile confinement. Little was known at that time of zoo animal medicine; consequently, simple concrete and tile enclosures were preferred because frequent cleaning was the primary means of disease prevention available. Limited municipal funds were used to repair the old structures rather than to create new, more interesting, and as Hediger would say, more "biological" exhibits.

The third major problem in the municipal zoos as reported by Sue was the communications "gap" between many zoo directors and the general public. Some directors defended their exhibition of small numbers of a great many species on the grounds that the public demanded a large assortment in general and certain popular species in particular. Sue charged that the director should be shaping the public's changing opinions about captive animals rather than simply following its alleged whims.

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Hediger had described the changing relationship of the zoo to the public in his book, Man And Animal In The Zoo: Zoo Biology (1969):

Today the wild animal is considered to have cultural value; it is regarded as part of our heritage, to which the whole of mankind and particularly future generations, have a legitimate claim. Zoological gardens, to which these living items are entrusted, therefore represent cultural institutions. As such they are required to serve as recreation for human beings, particularly those in large cities, by preserving and stimulating their creative faculties. . . . It is obvious that a zoo has to serve the needs of the great mass of the public for recreation and relaxation. But it is by no means generally recognized that a great deal remains to be done to put this into effect. A zoological garden which contributes nothing to the promotion of the important subjects of education, research and conservation is just not a zoo in the modern sense, but only a garden with animals--and that is something completely different (p.8).

John Perry, the Assistant Director of the National Zoo, had expressed the shift in public interest slightly less academically in The World's A Zoo (1969):

What does entertain zoo visitors? Not individual animals lying listlessly in small cages. They want action, animals behaving as they do in nature or, of not that, animals demonstrating their physical and mental capabilities (p.263).

It was clear that some zoo directors were not attuned to this new view of "recreation". Still others were hampered by a tendency--increasingly unfortunate in the light of diminishing wildlife--to compete among themselves.

Although most comprehensive books about zoos make reference to this tendency, (Hahn, 1967; Perry, 1969; Hediger, 1964, 1969; Meyer, 1979), perhaps the best description of it is found in Sheldon Campbell's book, Lifeboats to Ararat (1978):

What was business as usual? For most zoos until the 1970's it was the continued reflexive response to two unwritten and seldom talked

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about rules of operation that had governed the zoo world for years. First, display as many animals of as many species and subspecies as possible, even if you have only one of a kind; and second, try to have some rarities. . . . that few other zoos have or can get. . . . The most virulent strain of this competitive bug caused some zoo managers to be more concerned about the opinion of their peers than they were about the reaction of the public that supported them or the health and happiness of the animals they displayed (p.36).

With the advent of The HSUS into the zoo world, this tendency would become known to a wider audience and thus less easy to perpetuate, and the "health and happiness" of zoo animals would become a national animal welfare issue.