

Typical Aspects of the Zoo Program

By 1973, The HSUS had visited 267 zoos, and in the nine years since Zoo Reform was made a program issue of The HSUS several hundred zoos of all three classes have been inspected by Sue or by The HSUS Regional Directors and their Investigators acting under her direction (See Appendix A). Some zoos have received considerable attention, such as the Tucson, Kansas City, San Antonio and Little Rock Zoos. Others such as Atlanta, and the Topeka and Wichita, Kansas Zoos, for example, have received very little. Some zoos have obviously improved and the improvements can be attributed in part to The HSUS's efforts; but because zoos are generally complex institutions it is seldom possible to attribute changes exclusively to any one individual or organization. In many cases The HSUS's criticisms of zoos have been extensively publicized, and the changes, when they came, have often been in keeping with HSUS recommendations--but it is still not always possible to attribute these solely to the intervention of The HSUS. In some cases, zoos have remained essentially the same in spite of the Society's repeated criticisms and offers of assistance.

It is neither possible nor desirable to examine in detail all of the zoo "cases" represented in The HSUS files, but a few examples of certain aspects of specific cases will serve to illustrate HSUS's approach to zoos, the relative strengths and weaknesses of that approach, and some of the circumstances which have reinforced or undermined the Society's efforts.

One of the first zoos to receive considerable attention from The HSUS was the Randolph Park Zoo in Tucson, Arizona. Complaints from citizens had continued since Frank McMahon had been there the year before. The zoo was only a few years old, but like many city zoos it had been started by accident when the Parks Director

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began to take in "pets"--such as monkeys--that people could no longer keep. Soon the common tendency to collect "popular" species led to the acquisition of a polar bear, elephants, and leopards with no apparent understanding on the part of the Parks Department of the increasing demand of the public that they be displayed in more naturalistic surroundings than simple barred cages. While the zoo did have a concerned staff trying to make the best of the circumstances, there was no professional director to provide the necessary leadership.

Sue recommended, as she would on many occasions over the next nine years, that a knowledgeable director be hired immediately. She also said that the number of animals had to be reduced to relieve the stress of overcrowding. She spoke of the need for the zoo to have a greater purpose than the mere exhibition of assorted creatures, and she expressed her opinion that the zoo violated the provisions of the newly enacted Animal Welfare Act. The HSUS along with the AAZPA, Defenders of Wildlife, The American Humane Association, and others had submitted comments to USDA as the regulations were being drawn up. Sue felt she understood the intent of the regulations, but the comments of the USDA veterinary inspector indicated the Animal Welfare Act was not to be the boon to zoo reform that animal welfare workers, progressive zoo people, and, doubtless, Congress had hoped it would be.

Not only did the USDA inspector, who came to Tucson in response to Sue's complaints, pronounce the zoo not in violation of the Act, he went a step further indicating it was "fine." An editorial in the Tucson Daily Citizen entitled, "Will The Real Zoo Please Stand Up", compared Sue's comments with those of the USDA inspector: "A person does not have to be a doctor of zoology to see that the Randolph Zoo

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cages too many animals in overcrowded, unnatural, inhumane conditions." Although Sue agreed with the USDA veterinarian that the cages were generally clean and the animals in good physical health, she said:

We have completely different interpretations of the law, completely different ideas on what a zoo should be. The Animal Welfare Act is a whole new philosophy on zoos. . . . [the law] requires that an animal be able to move and act in a natural way, to live in a normal social environment. The law is not a check off list for cleanliness, cage size and feeding schedules. Tucson's zoo violates all that the law was trying to do.

The response of the USDA veterinarian was simply, "How do I know what an elephant's needs are? How does anyone know?"

Fortunately, the Parks Department took Sue's suggestion to hire a professional director. The Director, James Sweigert, understood both the needs of captive animals and the public's desire to see them displayed in more naturalistic surroundings. By the end of his first year, Sweigert had reduced the inventory from nearly 1,000 animals to less than 300. He also renovated numerous exhibits to make them more comfortable for the animals and more aesthetic and educational for the visitors. The elephants were moved from a sterile, barred enclosure to an outdoor paddock with trees and a pond. Sweigert expressed the view of a growing number of progressive zoo directors when he stated to the Tucson Daily Citizen (July 12, 1973): "A zoo that is uncomfortable and unnatural for the animals is a meaningless place. It has no function, no reason for being." Another indication that Sweigert represented a "new breed" was his refusal to accept the city's offer of a mere \$60,000.00 to build a new exhibit for the polar bear. He knew that an adequate exhibit could not be built in the Arizona climate for that amount.

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Sue's response to Sweigert's actions also came to be typical of her approach over the next nine years: she offered praise and encouragement and indicated a willingness to "calm folks down" if the local citizens would not give him time to make the needed changes. Some of them by this time had become so skeptical of the zoo that they could not be satisfied with anything less than instantaneous change. The question of time has proved to be a problem of varying degrees in getting changes made in zoos. In Tucson's case, it was 1978 before Sue could inform the director who followed Sweigert that she had reclassified the zoo from a 3 to a 2.

One of the inherent problems with arousing a community's interest in its zoo centers around the question of what constitutes a reasonable amount of time in which changes should be made. On several occasions Sue has had to urge the local citizens, as in Tucson, to give the zoo's staff time to make changes. In other cases, the local people have been lulled into complacency with news of appropriations and professionally designed master-plans (as is the case with the Des Moines, Iowa, and Buffalo, New York Zoos) which never seem to be executed. Often Sue has given zoos specific periods of time in which to make requested changes. Sometimes, depending upon the municipality's perception of HSUS's strength and determination, this has proved to be effective. Getting action from the chronically uncooperative, however, has proved to be a major stumbling block in the Zoo Program.

If the municipality proved unresponsive to suggestions and offers of assistance, and the published accounts of the zoo's inadequacies failed to generate sufficient public pressure, and the pressure from within the zoo generated by the staff

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seemed inadequate to sustain the movement for improvements, Sue has threatened a number of municipalities with legal action. The possibility of a lawsuit against a recalcitrant municipality has long been considered by The HSUS as a means of demonstrating the seriousness of its intent to have substandard zoos either improved or closed. Some of the municipalities which have been threatened with legal action are Miami, Florida; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Lafayette, Indiana; Springfield, Massachusetts; Akron, Ohio; and Trenton, New Jersey. In his testimony before the Senate subcommittee considering bills to provide federal assistance to zoos and aquariums, HSUS President John Hoyt alluded to the possibility that the Society would take legal action against a zoo with the statement that: "The HSUS has moved to force the closing of certain zoos already and has put others on notice that unless substantial improvements are made immediately, we shall take action to bring about their termination" (U.S. Congress, 1974, p.73).

Yet despite these claims, The HSUS has never filed suit against a zoo in order to bring about closure or extensive changes. Cruelty charges were filed against the Director of the Birmingham, Alabama Zoo in 1977, but these charges were related to a specific incident and not due to the kind of sustained apathy which appears to characterize the class 3 municipal zoo (See: Criticisms and Praise of The HSUS Zoo Program). The Birmingham case will not be discussed in this paper because, as a result of a countersuit for malicious prosecution filed by the Director against The HSUS, the case is still under consideration in the courts.

The local news media have often supported The HSUS's criticisms of a zoo. An editorial in the Akron Beacon Journal in October 1974 expressed the sentiment that Sue had been firm but fair in her criticism of the Akron Children's Zoo. It stated:

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Mrs. Pressman's visit should be welcomed, not only by citizens who had been concerned about cruelty since a black bear died at the zoo in May, but by those who have been working hard to stir public interest in the zoo. The things Mrs. Pressman criticized deserve criticizing. There is a need for a qualified director who can help the zoo grow. The cages are archaic. The exhibits need to be more than 'little cages of animals' that just stand there.

The editorial writer seemed to be impressed with the fact that she found no deliberate cruelty and considered the staff to be praiseworthy (HSUS: Akron Zoo File).

In an October 1978 article in the Detroit Free Press entitled "Detroit Zoo Critic Wounds Some Feelings," the reporter appeared to take both sides, both agreeing and disagreeing with Sue's criticisms, but she concluded: "Listen Mrs. Pressman, it's still a super zoo. But maybe you're right: Maybe it's too good not to try for better" (HSUS: Michigan Zoos File).

The Tulsa World expressed a sentiment in a February 1975 article about Sue's criticisms of the Tulsa Zoo that has often been expressed about The HSUS's zoo investigations: that while no deliberate cruelty may be found, the report is still not considered to be a "whitewash." In this respect The HSUS has had an advantage over zoo evaluations conducted by zoo professionals. Sue had been called to Tulsa in the wake of a "keeper revolt" in which employees had charged the zoo's administration with cruelty and mismanagement. One article in the Tulsa World in January 1975 stated:

Sometimes, it is surprising how simple a much-ballyhooed public problem can appear when the emotionalism is stripped away, the facts examined intelligently and placed in perspective. This is exactly what Mrs. Sue Pressman has done with the big fuss over animal care at the Tulsa Zoo. Mrs. Pressman made a number of sensible recommendations for improving the zoo. . . . [her] report was no whitewash,

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but she turned up no villains either. [She] seems to have given City Hall a blueprint for solving zoo problems if it can find the money and the will to follow through.

An article in the Tulsa Tribune on March 15, 1975, revealed that a number of her recommendations--similar to those made by the zoo society which had asked for her help--were being carried out (HSUS: Tulsa Zoo File).

Typical of The HSUS approach to zoos have been Sue's recommendations to municipalities to get in touch with zoo professionals in neighboring cities. She has also suggested on numerous occasions that zoo directors be permitted to attend AAZPA meetings so they could keep up with developments in the rapidly evolving zoo world. Her most consistently made recommendation, however, has been for municipalities to consult professional zoo planners before renovating or enlarging their zoos. Zoo planning is a highly specialized field, requiring extensive knowledge of animal behavior as well as of materials and concepts. Too many exhibits designed by local architects have simply repeated the mistakes of the past.