

South Africa: Rhinos and Lions ... Hippos and Zebras ... Giraffes and Kudus ... Hyenas striped and spotted ...Oh My !

Sarah Pappin*

Rhinos, lions, and other imperiled wildlife are being exported from South Africa to a Bangladeshi zoo with a dark and suspicious history. After purchasing at least 19 wild animals from a "safari park" in South Africa, government-run Dhaka Zoo apparently received its first shipment last week – pairs of white rhinos, white lions, striped hyenas, and a spotted hyena. [The New Age](#) reports the new captives are among some 270 animals (many of them threatened or endangered) that the zoo recently bought from other countries to add to their collection.

However, Dhaka Zoo's past is riddled with corruption, scandals, and an alarming number of concerning and even suspicious deaths – including those of many wild animals imported from South Africa. As the circumstances at the facility have even been described as "an insult to the concept of a modern zoo", one wonders why anyone would consider selling an animal to the establishment. It is unclear from whom they purchased the rhinos and other animals, but the zoo appears to have bought wild animals from the [private sector](#) of South Africa's game industry in the past.

One Indian rhino dead, another dying

Dhaka Zoo received a pair of six month-old Indian rhinos (also called Greater one-horned rhinos) as a gift from the King of Nepal in 1992. The male of the duo died in 2004, reportedly from self-inflicted injuries sustained in a violent episode they say stemmed from an unsuccessful attempt to mate with the female.

In a scientific report published in [Zoo Print Magazine](#) two years later, researchers suggested that the bull's injuries had not been properly cared for. Larger zoo animals are really difficult to manage for treatment (Acharjyo 1999) and even more difficult with inadequate facilities. The researchers also explained that the rhinos' enclosure was not suitable for the animals to be kept in. The clay soil is not comfortable and there is no gradual sloping which is a very major problem for this species. There is no jungle or enough area to maintain privacy from visitors over the day.

Indian rhinos are known to live for 35-40 years and even the Dhaka Zoo [website](#) says this species lives for as long as 47 years in captivity, meaning the female currently in their possession would be far from "old" at her current age of 20 years. But that didn't stop the zoo's curator from claiming, in a 2009 article from [The Daily Star](#), that the rhino was expected to die soon from "old age complications" and (along with several other animals) was already in "critical condition". It was later [confirmed](#) that she was suffering from pyometra, an extremely painful uterine infection that requires surgery — one that the zoo was apparently unable or unwilling to provide. Amazingly, photos taken a month ago prove the pachyderm was still alive — although she appeared quite thin and her overall condition seemed concerning. (A disturbing photo can be seen [here](#).)

South African giraffe scandal

In June 2008, Dhaka Zoo imported five giraffes (and 22 other wild animals) from South Africa – and a scandal was born. Instantly the star attraction, [The Daily Star](#) reported that the zoo had not had any giraffes since 1998.

In July 2009, the zoo apparently told the publication that the giraffes all had [Foot-and-Mouth Disease](#) (FMD) – a potentially fatal virus that affects even-toed ungulates, which the curator claimed had probably spread from a

"slum" area that borders the zoo. He added that other animals in their establishment were also infected. Two months later, three of the giraffes died within a month.

September 7, 2009: [The Daily Star](#) reported that a giraffe less than three years old had died of dehydration, after refusing food and water for a week.

September 30, 2009: The zoo told [BdNews24.com](#) that a three year old giraffe died suddenly, despite being in "good condition" up until that point. A **graphic** and disturbing photo (seen [here](#)) of the dead animal seems quite unnatural and certainly seems to warrant an explanation.

October 4, 2009: A three and a half year old giraffe died after falling ill a few days before, according to [BdNews24.com](#).

After the third death, the zoo curator admitted that, not only is the climate in Bangladesh unsuitable for giraffes, but that the zoo also lacked adequate facilities and equipment to care for them. Mounting controversy over the 2008 purchase of the giraffes in South Africa and their subsequent deaths prompted the Ministry of Livestock and Fisheries to investigate the issues in 2010. [BdNews24.com](#) said evidence of corruption and misappropriations of funds in the transaction were discovered. The probe body also found evidence of corruption and misappropriation of funds in the purchase of the five giraffes, as officials falsely represented the animals as younger and more costly, which incurred a loss of nearly Tk 5 crore [around US \$611,277] for Dhaka Zoo.

The investigation committee claimed that despite being specifically instructed to purchase five giraffes between the ages of 18 and 24 months, their procurers had instead bought five aged five and a half to six years old and failed to submit the required documentation on the animals' ages and health statuses. This, the Ministry said, was the reason the three giraffes had died – from "old age complications". However, giraffes live an average of 25 years and even the Dhaka Zoo [website](#) says they live up to 26-30 years of age in captivity, which means none of the animals they bought in South Africa could have truly been considered "old".

In July 2010, [BdNews24.com](#) reported that a fourth giraffe was sick, and yet the zoo has already purchased more giraffes in South Africa and plans to fly them in soon. (It's worth noting that this is not the only case of corruption allegations and financial discrepancies. [BdNews24.com](#) reported on a scandal involving funding allotted for the purchase of food for the animals in 2010.)

Animals from South Africa dead within one year of arrival

Dhaka Zoo imported 27 animals (including the five giraffes) from South Africa in June 2008, according to [The Daily Star](#).

The publication later reported that [twelve](#) of the animals (44% of all imported) from South Africa died within a year. In addition to the three giraffes, there were also: *Two kudu* – one of which died in quarantine within 15 days

*Pappin, S. "South Africa: Rhinos and Lions Sold to 'Hell Hole' Zoo in Bangladesh." *Rhino Horn Is Not Medicine*. Ed. R. Cota-Larson. Annamiticus Media, 29 Apr 2012. Web. 30 June 2012. <<http://www.rhinoconservation.org/2012/04/29/south-africa-rhinos-and-lions-sold-to-hell-hole-zoo-in-bangladesh/>>.

of its arrival at the zoo and the South African supplier of the animal, "Hoor and Company", was forced to repay the amount it was purchased for.

Two kangaroo, two oryx, and an impala that all died within three months of landing at their new home. A wildebeest died less than a year later.

A mountain zebra that died (fourth months after arriving) from a gangrenous leg injury it apparently sustained while being transported from South Africa. The zoo curator explained to [The Daily Star](#) that infection was a leading cause for many of the untimely deaths.

"Although timid in nature they reacted violently in their cages in the beginning and sustained injuries. Most of these animals died of infection in their hind legs while a few of them developed a type of infection in the horn," he added. Somehow, an investigation into the wave of deaths did not find any negligence.

Keepers killed tigers to sell skins

In 1996, four tigers died over a three-day period at Dhaka Zoo and it was later determined that the felines had been intentionally poisoned to death by their keepers. [The Daily Star](#) reported that the keepers had planned to procure the animals' valuable skins, probably for sale on the black market. Of 14 zoo staff arrested for the crime, [Dawn](#) said nine were acquitted nine years later and five were fined and sentenced to fourteen years in prison. Highly sought after body parts of deceased captive animals – especially tigers and lions – have been known to enter the trade from the back doors of unscrupulous zoos, safari parks, and [tiger farms](#) throughout Asia.

A plethora of big cat deaths

Numerous tigers and lions have died at Dhaka Zoo under alarming and sometimes suspicious circumstances over the years. Apparently, all of the lions and tigers at the zoo are hybrids of multiple different subspecies – a fact that seems to have been withheld from the media.

In 1999, [BBC News](#) reported that four tigers had died from trypanosomiasis (a disease caused by blood parasites) over a four week period, while a fourth remained quite ill. At least four tigers and one lion died over the next five years:

2000: A tiger died of "acute renal failure and shock".

2001: [News.ch](#) reported that the zoo chief had been fired after it was determined that a lion's death had been caused by being fed excessive amounts of fat in its diet. (The same year, the zoo announced plans to begin breeding tiger-lion hybrids. A disturbing and **graphic** photo, seen [here](#), shows the horrifying condition of one of the zoo's lions at the time).

2003: A tiger died from a "severe cold" and another from an "inbreeding effect".

2004: While it reported in [Zoo Print Magazine](#) that a 16 year old tiger had died from "shock (senility)", the zoo appears to have told [The Daily Star](#) that it died of liver cirrhosis.

Another two tigers died in **2009** (one is said to have died from "old age complications"), as did a [lion](#) that apparently hemorrhaged to death after suffering from paralysis for at least a year.

Inbreeding in tigers and lions

Over the next few years, Dhaka Zoo's tiger and lion populations multiplied to overwhelming levels – and so did inbreeding amongst the animals. In fact, the business considered castrating the male felines to control the problem in **2005**, but later opted for non-permanent measures in case they decided to breed the animals again. In **2004**, a report in [Zoo Print Magazine](#) explained that Dhaka Zoo only had the resources to sustain a maximum of

eight lions and nine tigers. However, the zoo has consistently had far more than that for over a decade.

Despite sending seven tigers and two lions to other zoos in **2004**, [AFP](#) reported in **2005** that 36 tigers and lions were crammed into enclosures that were meant to hold no more than 16 of the felines. Today, it purportedly holds 10 tigers (down from 18 in 1999) and thirteen lions (down from 22 in 2007) – including the two new white lions from South Africa. [BdNews24.com](#) reported that the inbreeding had caused physical abnormalities in the big cats and other animals at the zoo – including a crippled lion and a tiger with painful spine curvature.

Researchers reported other observations resultant from inbreeding in a **2006** [Zoo Print Magazine](#) article. Due to inbreeding effects, weak Kittens with various nervous syndromes, developmental anomalies occur and many unnatural behaviours are observed.

A **2007** study in the [Bangladesh Journal of Microbiology](#) suggests that the inbreeding problem could've been prevented fairly easily. Here in the Dhaka Zoo, the inbreeding effect is a serious problem by not having any breeding policy or road map.

Unusually high numbers of reckless deaths

Dhaka Zoo has a long and dark history when it comes to deaths stemming from unsanitary conditions, negligence, and a general lack of proper equipment and expertise. [BBC News](#) reported that over 250 animals had died at the zoo over a six month period in **1999**.

The **2007** study in the [Bangladesh Journal of Microbiology](#) said that a total of 144 had died between February 2002 and September 2006. [News Today](#) reported last year that 80 animals died at the zoo in **2009** and 50 in **2010**. There was little media coverage of negative events and accounts of death at the zoo in **2011**.

Infectious disease disaster waiting to happen?

The Dhaka Zoo curator recently told [The New Age](#) that their policy requires imported animals to remain in quarantine for a period of 21 days. A **2006** report in [Zoo Print Magazine](#) explains that the zoo's quarantine block is situated in very close proximity to a commercial poultry farm that abuts the zoo. Obviously, this raises grave concerns over the risk of diseases spreading from the farm animals to zoo animals and even potentially to the three million human visitors that patronize the zoo each year on average.

In fact, in **2008**, an avian influenza (bird flu) outbreak at the neighboring poultry farm resulted in the culling of 19,000 chickens. A [Daily Star](#) article reported that a rhea died suddenly a few days later and showed signs of bird flu. ([IRIN News](#) also reported that both an emu and a rhea had died.) The zoo claimed the exotic bird had died of enteritis (a cold-like disease), but felt it necessary to put the zoo on high alert for bird flu – which included spraying disinfectants throughout the zoo grounds and disinfecting all bird cages twice per day. It appears the zoo lacked a formal plan of action for dealing with urgent cases of infectious diseases at the zoo (e.g. avian influenza, tuberculosis, FMD, etc.) prior to their actual occurrences.

Tuberculosis outbreak

Failure to develop a long-recommended pathology lab (to diagnose diseases and assess the health of the animals) at the zoo likely contributed to another ticking time bomb situation. After tuberculosis killed a lion in **2005**, [BdNews24.com](#) revealed an extremely concerning situation unfolding at the zoo. Sources said though the authorities

fear that the disease has affected almost 90 percent animals at the zoo, many of those are yet to go through blood test. The article also claimed even staff had been infected.

A **2007** study published in the [Bangladesh Journal of Microbiology](#) reported that tuberculosis was responsible for 35 (24%) of the 144 deaths that occurred at Dhaka Zoo between February 2002 and September 2006. (It's worth nothing that the report also found that an additional 30 of the deaths could only have been caused by "physical/traumatic injurious death by any objects or by predators".) Indeed, the study found that tuberculosis and *Coccidioides immitis* (a fungus native to the western hemisphere) were the "most common causes of death" of animals at the Dhaka Zoo. Alarming, a 2005 [Zoo Print Magazine](#) article explained that an adult lion and five cubs were living in the quarantine block during this time because there were not enough cages to house them in.

Zoo's inabilities threaten animals' health and welfare

The aforementioned 2007 report suggested that the spread of infectious diseases at the zoo was being encouraged by zoo's inabilities, with the researchers noting:

- The lack of a proper veterinary unit and adequate laboratory facilities.
- Methods used to clean enclosures were not scientific and feeding areas were not hygienic.
- Water houses were outdated, poorly constructed, not cleaned regularly, and promoted algal growth – a recipe for "repeated contamination".

All of these things have been referenced as being serious concerns for the zoo multiple times over the years.

Earlier this year, Professor Anwarul Islam (CEO of the Wildlife Trust of Bangladesh) was quoted by [TheIndependentBd.com](#) in discussing the abysmal conditions in which the animals live at Dhaka Zoo. "The problem with such animals is that the zoo authorities do not know what to do with them. Obviously, hostile conditions and poor supply of food make it almost impossible for the animals to survive. The animals are brought from abroad at a huge cost, only to be pushed to death through utter neglect. The overall situation prevailing here is an insult to the concept of a modern zoo", Prof Islam said. He also said that the establishment did not have any zoologists on staff.

According to [BdNews24.com](#), the zoo only had one veterinarian on staff in 2009, but had requested funding to bring on two more. Despite multiple members of the zoo staff being suspended, fired, and replaced numerous times over the years, the zoo's conditions appear to remain the same.

"Overburdened" with animals

In **2009**, when the zoo apparently had 2,160 animals, an official told [The Daily Star](#) that they were "overburdened" with animals and were in need of more space. "Right now we are overburdened with some animals as we have 17 pythons, 17 lions, 14 tigers and nine hippopotamus and many deer. We need lots of space if we want to ensure proper management of these animals," he said. [The New Age](#) claims the establishment has some 1,974 creatures today, but plans to add 270 more to its collection within the next three to four months.

In 2010, the zoo told [The Daily Star](#) that they had submitted a proposal to purchase more animals, despite admittedly being unable to care for the animals. "We need more space to take good care of the animals. We are doing our best within this limited space and budget," said Shahid

Ulla claiming that all the staff of the zoo work hard all day long.

Last year, a zoo spokesperson admitted to the zoo's ongoing inadequacy for accommodating its animals in a [Priyo News](#) article. 'The current environment at the zoo is unfriendly for the animals because of sound pollution, visitor's aggressive behaviour to the animals and also the improper health care management,' he added.

At a total of 2,244 animals (if all of the 270 new ones survive), the zoo will continue to exceed its apparent threshold, as it appears that housing has not yet been expanded nor improved – another thing experts have urgently recommended multiple times over the years.

'New' zoo modernization project not new

The zoo reports the new animals being procured for their collection currently are part of a new 'zoo modernization project' – a plan that was first proposed eight years ago, according to [The Daily Star](#). The details haven't changed much since **2004** and include updating caging systems, importing more animals, constructing a railroad for a train to circle the perimeter of the park, erecting jumbotron screens at entrances for guests to watch what is happening inside the facility, and introducing boat rides to allow visitors to view caged animals from the zoo lake.

Although experts have long recommended that the zoo immediately improve the living conditions for their captive animals, establish a desperately needed pathology lab, and drastically improve veterinary care, it seems the zoo's main priority is to first replace their diminished collection – apparently starting with the wildlife they recently purchased from South Africa.

Additional sources:

Ahasan, S.A. and A.Z. Rahman, "Mortality in Dhaka Zoo due to Microbial Agents," *Bangladesh Journal of Microbiology* 24(2007): 154-156.
"Dhaka Zoo Activities," *Zoo Print Magazine* XIX (2004): 5-6.
Ferdous Ara, "Dhaka Zoo to have 270 new animals," *The New Age*, April 20, 2012, Accessed April 23, 2012.
Malakar, B., Hasan, M. K., et al., "The Zoo as Ecotourism Attraction- Visitor Reactions and Perceptions: The Case of Dhaka Zoo, Bangladesh", *Dhaka University Journal of Business Studies* 28(December 2007).
Pinaki Roy, "Lion dies in Dhaka Zoo," *The Daily Star*, September 11, 2009, accessed April 26, 2012.
Rahman, Z.A. and S.A. Ahasan, "Status of Bengal Tigers (*Panthera tigris tigris*) in Dhaka Zoo," *Zoo Print Magazine* XXI (2006): 13-14.
Raihan Sabuktagin, "Dhaka Zoo: Fund constraint stalls breeding program," *The Daily Star*, December 27, 2006, accessed April 26, 2012.
S.A. Ahasan, "Bangladesh: Seminar and Animal Donation Ceremony Held in Dhaka Zoo," *Zoo Print Magazine* XIX(2004): 8.
"South Asian Zoo News," *Zoo Print Magazine* XX(2009): 22.
"Zoo News from South Asia," *Zoo Print Magazine* XXII(2007): 21-22.
Source: <http://www.rhinoconservation.org> (<http://s.tt/1at0N>)