

Asiatic lion zoo scenario

Last issue we published a feature about the official opening of Zurich Zoo Asiatic Lion enclosure and this issue we have included reports on the *ex situ* population in India and the European Studbook for Asiatic Lion as well as clubbed together some translations of various press releases for Part II of this feature

The reason Zurich Zoo is being singled out for attention is because it is sponsoring a project associated with Asiatic Lion conservation, e.g. the Kuna Palpo Wildlife Sanctuary, which was selected from a group of three potential sites discussed by the Alternative Habitat Working Group at a Population and Habitat Viability Assessment Workshop held in 1993 in Baroda. The PHVA workshop was organised by the Baroda Zoo / Baroda Municipality and Zoo Outreach Organisation / (then) CBSG, India.

Since 1993 the Forest Department of Madhya Pradesh has shifted the villages which were in the proposed lion habitat and done some planting, but there has been no ecological study done of the forest at all. Now, a Delhi based NGO, the PEACE Foundation, has come forward to conduct very high level ecological assessment and monitoring over a period of three years. The Zurich Zoo is funding this study, which is crucial to the success of any complex project such as the translocation of a major carnivore.

Of course, there is much controversy surrounding this issue, and it is not known how it will be resolved, but this has not deterred the Zurich from wanted to assist in any way it could. Despite their investment in the project, the zoo director and staff have adopted a completely objective attitude to the situation, stating that an ecological study of such a unique and valuable piece of forest is always valuable, whether lions inhabit it or not.

Apparently one of the sources of angst regarding the project is the possible presence of tigers, which, some persons content, used to occupy the area and might still wander that way. Zurich Zoo says the worst that can happen is the lions will not come, but the Forest Department of Madhya Pradesh can develop one of the best tiger sanctuaries in Asia.

Western zoos today, at least "conservation conscious" zoos are interested in contributing to conservation in other ways than breeding threatened animals for reintroduction. They put their surplus funds which include gate collection, zoo shop, member donations, etc. into *in situ* conservation projects in localities of high biodiversity or for forests or even local communities supporting an endemic and threatened species. Sometimes the zoo does not even hold the species it supports, which is a quantum leap in attitude and philosophy from even two decades ago. The new face, which is WAZA (World Association of Zoos and Aquariums) of the former IUDZG (the former global zoo association, International Union of Directors of Zoological Gardens) has brought many zoos to a high enlightened state of collaboration in conservation.

Zurich Zoo is one of several zoos in UK and Europe which belong to a cooperative breeding programme for Asiatic Lion. All of the lions in the European programme have been certified as pure Asiatic Lions instead of hybrid and Europe is the only region besides South India (and only India in South Asia) maintaining a Studbook for pure Asiatic Lions and participating in a conservation programme for the species! You can see articles on the following pages about these two programmes.