

## Training in India - Resource Person's Experience

Jon Coe\*

I really enjoyed participating in the Central Zoo Authority's Training Program in Bhubaneswar in April. This was only my second trip to India and everything I saw seemed both vibrant and exciting and tired and dusty. I thought perhaps it is time for people to take a fresh look at themselves, their environment and their future.

The conference began with profound remarks by Orissa Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik and MP Prasanna Patsani delivered at the inauguration at Nandankan Zoo. The Chief Minister suggested a good zoo should become "...a theatre of complex interactions between people, animals and staff." He also stressed "...*ex situ* and *in situ* conservation actions must be linked!" These two statements later became key features of my presentations during the training program.



**Jon Coe at Nadankanan Zoological Park, Bhubaneswar explaining the participants and director of the zoo S.K. Sinha during on site session on the values of an enclosure and its design**

The second keynote speaker, MP Patsani, was a powerful speaker with a commanding presence. Dressed in weathered orange robes, he looked like a force of nature. He demanded zoos "...create excellence", and a "...spiritual experience!" He further stated government spending on zoos should be doubled! I congratulate program organizers not only for convincing such prominent leaders to address us, but more importantly, for helping develop such knowledgeable and well informed political support. I have never heard American politicians speak with such insight at American zoo functions.

In my formal presentations during the training sessions I tried to present master planning as both an art and a science. As a science, the master planning process is a simple set of iterative steps that are easily learned and followed...something like the "scientific method". The art is in sensing how to modify the process to fit local needs...when to speed up or slow down, when to dream and when to be realistic. The process must be inclusive and participatory. It must encourage both dreams and practicality and must provide a venue for all stakeholders to

safely express their opinions. Good master plans provide a framework and vision which gives continuity through the tenures of changing administrations, but provides for change, growth and natural evolution. Some very experienced American zoos revisit their master plans annually as an on-going process of self-assessment while maintaining long term direction.

Too much emphasis on the science of planning could result in an uninspired "fill-in-the-blanks" approach. Too much art in planning could bring imbalance and bias. Either way every plan will be imperfect and can only be improved over time. "Planning paralyzes" occurs when zoos get lost in the details of the process and forget plans are not an end in themselves, but merely a means to an end. The goal is to improve the zoo and its management, not to create the perfect plan. In the end it is better to learn from mistakes than not to move at all.

Much of what I learned from the zoo director "students" and from the other presenters reminds me of similarities between conditions in Indian zoos today and conditions in American zoos in the 1960's when I first became involved in zoo master planning. In both cases there are or were similar embed "structural" impediments to growth: 1) "zoo work" was not respected by the community at large. Only in Western countries is "cleaning up after animals" a sought after profession for well educated people, 2) Zoo directors are/were political appointees or technocrats and were changed before they could initiate long term improvements, 3) labour unions and management have/had an adversarial relationship 4) women had not entered the zoo labour force in significant numbers, 5) the animal welfare movement had not yet forced change from the outside and 6) all this renaissance as supported by a sustained and widespread period of economic growth.

The revolution in American zoos which has produced such wonders today resulted over 40 years from a combination of factors, lead by a few "flagship" institutions. These included new naturalistic exhibits and animal management systems which captured public attention and approval (supported by the nationwide conservation and "Earth Day" movement), resulting for greater status for zoos in general and zoo workers in particular and leading to greater management autonomy, including increased tenure for directors. Most successful zoos eventually became public/ private partnerships, able to hire and fire, but also responsible for raising significant amounts of capitol funding. Zoos began to be managed like environmentally responsible business. Women workers changed workplace culture from a "time-clock" mentality to a "task oriented" work ethic with emphasis on personal care, higher education and professional training. Zoo workers began to see animals more as personal friends than as farm livestock. American zoos today have long waiting lists of qualified or over-qualified people wanting to become zoo keepers.

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There certainly are differences in the two situations, but I believe the situation in India actually favours more rapid evolution. In the US we didn't have government support in the form of the Central Zoo Authority strongly supporting and facilitation progressive ventures, as this and other training courses clearly demonstrates. Also we had no models to follow. While the coming Indian zoo renaissance will vary in important ways from the US experience, you do have other successful models to learn from, including Asian examples like the Singapore Zoo and Night Safari, Osaka Zoo in Japan and conservation oriented safari parks like Taman Safari Indonesia. Your growth and renewal can also be supported by India's present economic upswing and growth of the middle class and by the increasing number of educated working women, who you need especially to recruit.

There is also another area in which Indian zoos have an advantage, this is in integrating *in situ* and *ex situ* conservation activities. Much of the talk these days among American and European zoo officials is about how and how much to link to *in situ* programs. In India, all zoo directors are also experienced wildlife officers and or foresters. They are perfectly placed to expedite Orissa Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik's admonition to strongly link *in situ* and *ex situ* programs. However, this connection seemed to have been lost on many of the zoo directors in the training program. In fact at one time I had to admonish them that

"when you were wildlife officers or foresters you wore your field hat, but when you became zoo directors you replaced your field hat with a zoo director's hat and forgot everything you learned in the field! Zoo exhibits and other animal facilities and management programs must use nature as the model rather than simply following the traditions of zoos. You are all experienced field hands...use that experience, not your zoo hat, to guide your insights, dreams and decision making.

My visit to Bhubaneswar and participation in the training course gave me a sobering insight into the very real challenges facing Indian zoos. But I also gained a glimpse into your future potential, the seedlings of which are being forced by programs such as this. Among the participants were a diverse mix of ages and backgrounds. Yet within this one group alone I observed many self motivated and dedicated people ready and well able to take these theoretical sessions into their professional work, modify them through thoughtful trial and error and advance their own master planning programs. And as I hear, they are already spreading what they learned to other zoos in their regions.

Once again I want to thank the Central Zoo Authority for inviting me to participate in the training program. I learned much from both presenters and zoo directors and really enjoyed myself.

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