Opinion : An Introspectrum into our Animal Collection Plan, Breeding Programme and Animal Exchange

N. Krishnakumar

Murky Politics is everywhere, but why should this enter into the field of Wildlife Conservation in zoos?. The zoos have now been asked to prepare on animal collection plan within a time frame. The recommendations of the recent Zoo Directors Conference held in Vandalur is laudable, but when it comes to the question of animal collection policy, endangered species breeding programme and animal exchanges, I am stuck. The reason is that we do not have a single responsible zoo planning for nature conservation support, collaborative breeding programme and reintroduction trials for any endangered species in the Country.

> "It does not matter in which lake you discover a spill of pollution, in the forest of which Country a fire breaks out (or) in which continent a hurricane originates. You are guardian of the entire earth"
> **Joeri Artjoechin)**
>
> " In the end we will only conserve what we love, we will only love what we know, we will only know what we are taught" **(Baba Dioum)**

Do the above 2 maxims find any meaning for zoo professionals here in our Country? It seems that these two maxims provide the premise for the conservation of threatened species undertaken by a large network of European zoos. Many of us know that our resources, space and infrastructure are very limited and that some species of our zoo collections suffer from inbreeding and loss of genetic variability. We also know, at least in theory, that good scientific guidelines for breeding programmes are essential and we need support of many founders. We also know that for this to happen we need co-operation among zoos. It is precisely to do a Scientific breeding programme that International co-operation in breeding programmes are being discussed today and have been under discussion for the last two decades by EEP and SSP, where breeding management recommendations are executed as per recommendation and guidance of the Species Co-ordinator and the coordinated programme of the Association. In spite of the fact that Europe is a large continent spread over many countries with different languages and laws as well as dissimilar political and economic backgrounds, animal exchange and animal collection plans go as decided between zoos. The EEP framework involves more than 200 zoos from 25 European Countries. India's success in other subject areas is "unity in diversity". Why, then, is our endangered species conservation programe so shoddy?

Animal exchanges are becoming a disturbing issue with us. Threatened animals in zoos serve as ambassadors of nature conveying the importance and urgency of nature conservation. Indian zoo managers and scientists have a fund of knowledge about role of zoos in nature conservation, education, zoo management, animal welfare, animal health, conservation of threatened species, genetics of animal management etc., which are discussed and debated sacrosanctly during every Zoo Directors conference.

I do not wish to project here the kind of animal exchange proposals available on the Zoo Directors table and the attention paid to the subject. Many Indian zoos are fighting for their maintenance and survival, and at this point in time would not like to put their resource into fruitless animal exchange. We have failure stories of zoos going to collaborative partners seeking for animals ordered to be exchanged by the Central Zoo Authority but being forced to retreat in the cover of darkness. We ourselves had a taste of this retreat very recently. What is the great idea behind co-operation and collaboration about which we repeatedly discuss during zoo meets ?

Arignar Anna Zoological Park had a collection of 75 Mammals when the zoo was started in 1985 but today has only 51 Mammals. I am not upset with this trend for I feel that if I manage the available species scientifically, my job is well done. This however requires co-operation from friendly zoos and Protected Area partners. I am in search of friendly zoos for animal exchange. Will this happen? Will our dreams of effective collaboration breeding programme succeed? I am not a pessimist. There definitely lies some snag somewhere and we will have to get over this, otherwise in this unified country the 193 zoos will remain as petty animal kingdoms bereft of communication, contact and co-ordination. The question is for whom are we transacting our business? All this tall claim of transformation from anthropocentric zoos to Bio-centric zoos, will remain only in paper if zoos do not co-operate, co-ordinate and carry out successful animal exchange programmes and plan for good animal collection policies. The mindset of managers the bureaucrats, the public, press, media and politicians in implementing animal exchanges have to changed and they may to realize that animal exchanges cleared by the Central Zoo Authority have to be adhered to for conservation success.

* I.F.S., Director, Arignar Anna Zoological Park, Vandalur, Chennai 4