Strategic Future Conference for Indian Zoos

Visioning the Ideal Zoo of the Future : A New Role for Education and Conservation

3-5 December 1999, Hyderabad

The Strategic Future Search Workshop is a unique approach to strategic planning which is ideally suited for organisations concerned with long term vision and change and in engaging their partner or stakeholder organisations in the planning process. It has been part of modern management for several years and grows ever more popular with the conservation community. In the last few years Strategic Futures workshops have been organised by the Conservation Breeding Specialist Group (one each in 1992 and 1995), the World Zoo Organisation, the Species Survival Commission, the South East Asian Zoo Association and others.

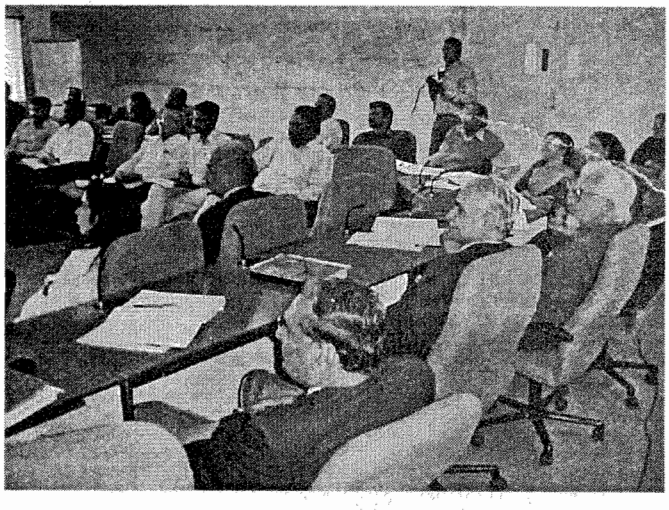
The Indian search had been in process for a long time and finally saw completion in December 1999. In India such workshops have been few and none for conservation organisations. Mr. S. C. Sharma, former Member Secretary, CZA deserves credit for initiating the process and dogging it for years and Mr. P. R. Sinha, current Member Secretary deserves credit for pursuing and planning until the event itself.

Strategic Futures workshops are normally scheduled to take place in a remote area, designed to remove participants from offices, telephones and other distractions which would take them away from the workshop. The group as a unit is very important. Participants are carefully selected for their diversity of outlook as well as experience and carefully managed to assist them to achieve consensus on the direction they as a community should take in future.

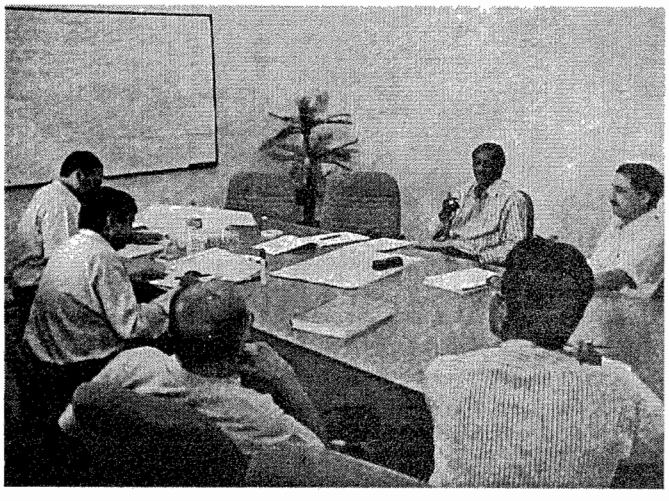
In order to fully expore the context of the community engaged in the search and to direct the thinking of participants in new directions, a series of tasks are planned :

1. ***A Review of the PAST*** : Milestones in the evolution of Zoos, origins, expectations of stakeholders, lessons from history.
2. ***PRESENT – external:*** Forces shaping the state of zoos in general and Central Zoo Authority in particular right now (contextual and institutional).
3. ***PRESENT – internal:*** mapping the institutional context in which Central Zoo Authority in particular, and zoos in India in general are positioned to respond to these forces; what assistance is needed right now to strengthen this response.
4. ***FUTURE – ideal:*** What would you like to see zoos doing in the year 2010.
5. ***PLANNING:*** mapping the path from the present to the future, critical response capabilities, design criteria, options, resources.
6. ***ACTION STEPS:*** "Responsible" groups are formed, from people who have formal responsibility and/ or are willing to take personal responsibility for bringing projects/ activities from ideas to realities. For some projects/ activities it is possible to implement plans immediately. For others it is necessary to make "plans for planning".

The final product is a search report, which summarizes past and present, contains a guiding vision for the future and details how to get there. This product is a result of common work and understanding, and common responsibility for follow-up. In a three-day workshop, with adequate technical back up, participants leave with this report in hand.



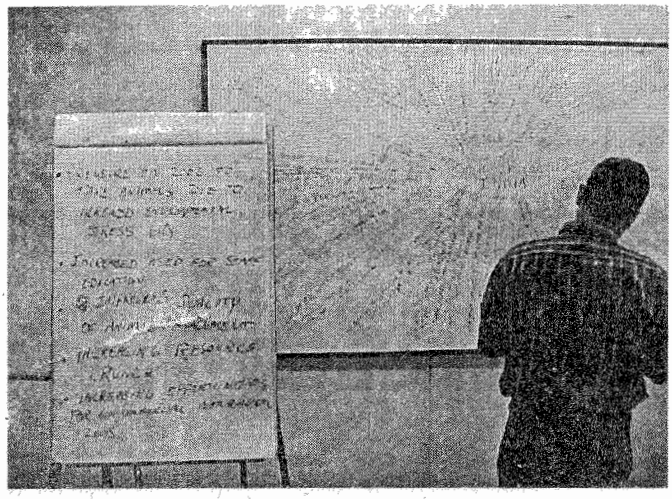
The workshop alternated between plenary exercises and small working group sessions.

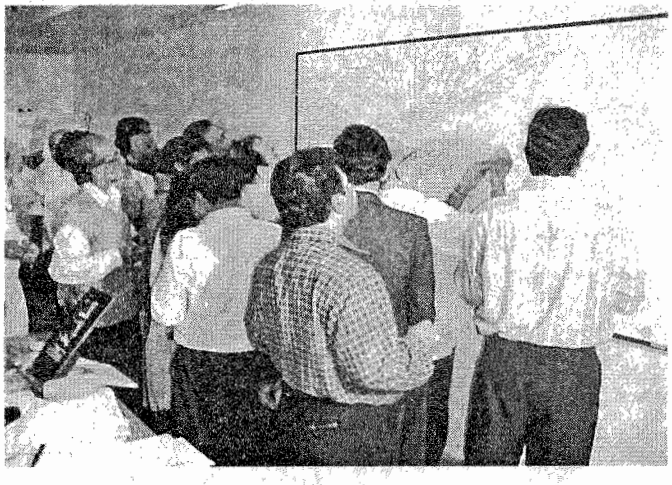


Ideas were refined in small working groups

Participants contribute information, discuss it, and decide what to do through a series of semi-structured discussions. Small groups report their conclusions to the whole group. Everything discussed is posted on flip charts and taped to the walls. Differences are explored and validated without over-stressing them.

In preparing for the workshop, there is a clear division of labour between facilitators or consultants who provide the context and structure and participants who provide the content, assume responsibility for action and write the report. Participants views and perspectives are the core of the exercise.





Participants first created a Mind Map of trends affecting zoo conservation and education and later ranked the trends in order of their importance and impact.

Dr. Frances Westley and Dr. Harrie Vredenburg, both Associate Professors of management in universities in Canada are the professional facilitators who have also led the workshops for CBSG and WZO as well as other conservation organisations.

Milestones

The participants were taken through a series of interesting exercises, the first of which was Milestones in Zoo Conservation and Education in India. They were asked to write events of importance in the history of Indian zoos from earlier 1800 through the present. Afterwards these events were discussed and analyzed for patterns.

Trends

Next a discussion of trends impacting zoo conservation and education in India prepared individual participants for a group exercise of creating a "Mind Map" of these trends. Participants prioritised the various trends which had been written on a large piece of paper by putting coloured dots beside the trends they considered most important, thus ranking them.

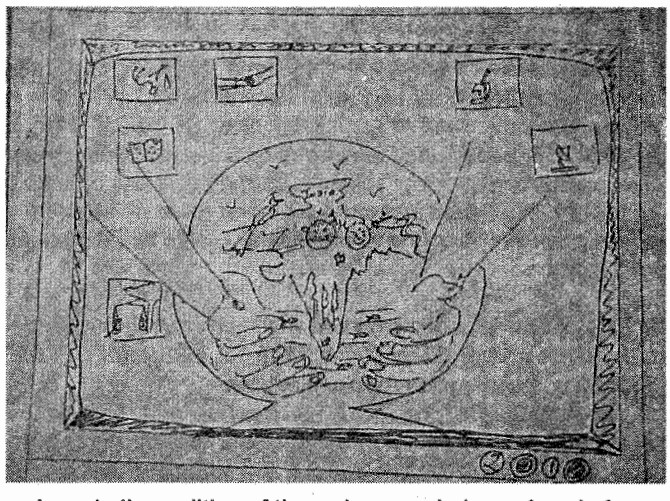
Ideal future zoo

The following day it was time to begin dreaming of the ideal zoo, a theme which was carried through the next two days. Participants were asked to forget the past, problems and obstacles and imagine their ideal zoo, if they could do and have anything they wanted. Working groups put these dreams into form -- some a news story, some a magazine report, some a play with symbolic illustrations of their dream. The several symbolic illustrations were later combined into one to represent the whole group's vision.

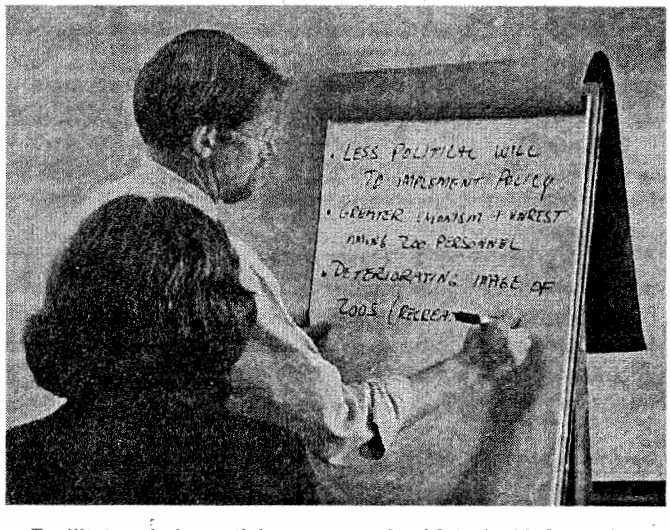
The remainder of the workshop was devoted to investigating ways and means of making the dream come true. Participants were invited to make personal commitments as to what they would do as individuals to improve zoo conservation and education in the future. They wrote these commitments on yellow labels and stuck them on a time line.

At the end of the workshop, a strategic vision was in place. A group of participants will meet and refine all the output of the working groups into an action plan or Strategic Futures Report. This Report is to serve as the guideline for the Indian zoo community for the next decade.

Note: This Report has been kept very brief so as not to pre-empt the impact of the Report. This will be brought out by the Central Zoo Authority in due course.



A symbolic rendition of the various symbols produced of the "ideal zoo" scenario.

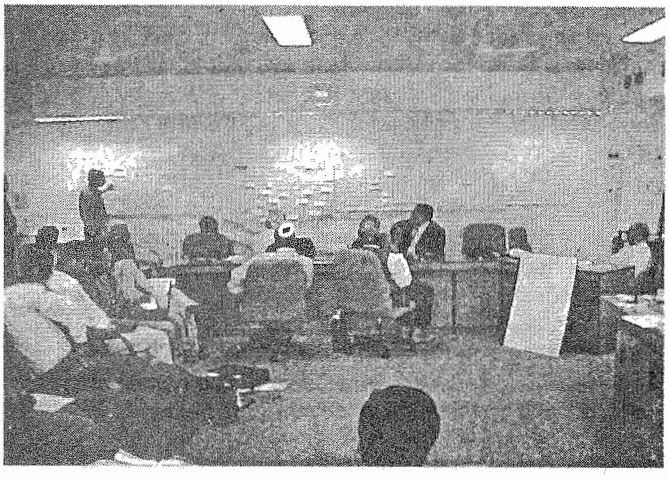


Facilitators help participants organise historical information

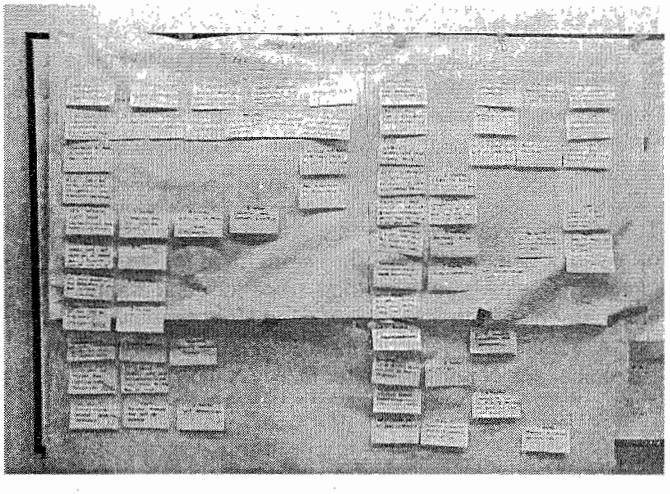
The futures workshop was not all work. There was time for tea and for excellent meals at the MANAGE facility in Hyderabad. The exercises were more fun than work quite often also.

Frances and Harrie, Facilitators for the Strategic Futures Search, watch with interest as participants give their reports.

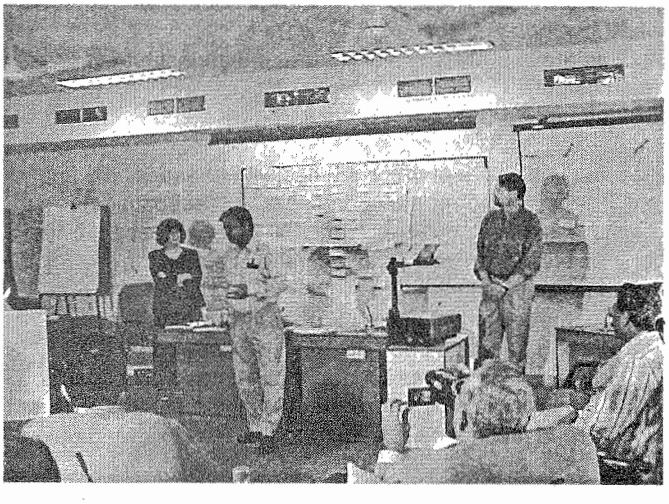
Individual commitments in Working Group were reported as a whole as they formed an year by year action plan for the zoos. This was the Education Group.



The entire group heard all commitments reports and could add their own commitments in plenary for any of the working groups.



Commitments were written on yellow slips and attached to the outline for timely action. This was the working plan of the Conservation Group.



Thanks, appreciation and good-byes. Mr. Sinha thanks Frances and Harrie and closes the workshop.