

## Is it closing time for the big game attractions?

Last month the senior elephant keeper at London Zoo, Jim Robson, was killed by one of the elephants he loved. Robson had worked at the zoo for 26 years, the past 16 in the elephant house. Those who knew him say he lived for the elephants.

The sign beside the elephant house now seems tragically ironic: "The keepers are regarded as part of the herd and build up strong bonds with the elephants. It is important that the keepers are seen as the leaders of the herd, or they wouldn't be able to keep control. If the elephant is nervous he will run to the keeper. It must be funny to have four tonnes of elephant hiding behind you." Robson was crushed to death in front of about 100 onlookers. It was not funny.

Now there is another large sign, paying tribute to Robson's work. Beside it flowers and plastic models of an elephant and a rhinoceros. "We will miss your strange humour," says the bouquet from the zoo's events department.

A tragic death, and one that could also spark the end of London Zoo - perhaps of all Britain's urban zoos. Last week the zoo announced that its three elephants were to be moved to Whipsnade wild animal park, its sister organisation in Bedfordshire. A terse statement from the zoo said that said Robson's death had not forced a change of policy and that the intention had always been to move the elephants. "Even though the move cannot take place immediately, we feel it right to make this announcement now because of the high level of current interest following the tragic death of our colleague, Jim Robson," said the zoo's director-general, Michael Dixon, in the statement. "We will be sorry to see the elephants go; there have been elephants in London Zoo since 1831. But Whipsnade is very accessible, and these elephants will be able to benefit from the larger group." The zoo does not appear to welcome that high level of current interest.

There were several extra reptiles at the zoo last week, representing newspapers that wanted to know whether the departure of the elephants meant the beginning of the end for the zoo. The elephants were not talking - and the zoo's PR representatives were lying low, too. As one article put it, this is a crisis for the zoo, and by implication for all zoos, because once London Zoo admits that it cannot house "charismatic megaspecies", it is accepting that its days are numbered. Ultramarine grosbeaks, Congo peafowl, Pope cardinals and green imperial pigeons are a delight, but they will not make many adults part with the price of a ticket or children squeal with delight. Lions, tigers, gorillas, giraffes, pandas, rhinos - and most of all elephants - are what makes a visit to the zoo memorable. Despite this, London Zoo aims to try without the traditional star performers. The rhinos are going too - there is insufficient space to add the extra female that European breeding requirements stipulate. Most of the bears have already gone and the famous terraces where they were housed are, apart from two sloth bears, deserted.

Those bears - a female and its recently born cub - symbolise the dilemma facing zoos. The female used to be in Prague zoo where it learned that if it danced for visitors they would feed it. Now it sits rocking in a curious imitation of a dance: it has a beautiful cub who stays close to its mother, but still it rocks.

The sorrowful sight of this rocking bear seems to support the case against zoos. But then you read the sign on the enclosure: "Sloth bears are illegally killed for their gall bladders, which are used in traditional oriental medicine. They also suffer from loss of habitat and are used as dancing bears. Our bears are part of the European conservation breeding programme. The first cub was born in January 1998." So, do we mourn the bear from Prague that is doomed to dance? Or do we celebrate the fact that her cubs will never have to perform as their mother did?

A group of girls were in raptures over the cub. "Oh, bless him," said one. "She's lost the plot," said a young father more brutally when he saw the mother bear's perpetual rocking. "She's been in a zoo too long." "How do you spell colour," shouted one excited little boy clutching a zoo quiz. "C-O-U-L-O-R" came his friend's reply. Do we applaud an institution that inspires the young - that might even teach them to spell - or do we close it down?

Back at the elephant house a middle-aged woman called Mary was in no doubt. "I'm all for zoos. This is the only way the next generation can see animals without travelling abroad. Their work is invaluable." Zoos are not perfect habitats, but they have inspired children who have gone on to become eco-activists, enthusiasts, donors. Zoos have also aided conservation.

Alan, an elderly man who has visited the zoo - "an oasis in the middle of London" - every day for the past three years, was equally positive. "The alternative is to return them to the wild where they'll all be killed. There has been a zoo here since 1828, and this is the first fatality. The zoo is now under attack from do-gooders on every front. The seals have gone; the bears have gone; the rhinos and now the elephants are going; the gorilla will be next. Once you take away the big animals, attendance figures will fall and so will revenue. The zoo more or less pays its way at the moment, but it won't in the future."

The zoologist Colin Tudge, a former council member of London Zoo, believes its days as a home for large animals may be numbered. "It may no longer be very appropriate to keep elephants and rhinos in urban zoos," he says, "though it may be perfectly reasonable to keep all sorts of birds or smaller creatures." But whatever the arguments about ethics or conservation, he sees a financial

imperative for retaining urban zoos. "Everything has to pay for itself these days, and the revenue is in the cities."

Mary Rosevear, director of the Federation of Zoos, believes that urban zoos can survive the loss of their large animals. "A few years ago Edinburgh Zoo decided they couldn't keep elephants any more, but they did not see a downturn in visitor numbers. Certain key species are very valuable in terms of visitor numbers, but I'd hope that people would also be interested in less well-known creatures. Of course you have to inspire them first. More and more schools are using zoos to teach children and inspire them to look beyond the obvious." The actress Virginia McKenna, founder of the Born Free foundation, who has campaigned for the removal of the elephants from London Zoo, rejects Rosevear's defence of urban zoos. "She's looking at it from the human point of view. I'm trying to speak up for the animals' needs. This type of zoo isn't about wildlife - the animals are living museum pieces. An urban zoo is no place for large predators. This is a fabulous opportunity for London Zoo to transform the elephant and rhino pavilion into an educational centre where people can learn about conservation."

But will the crowds flock to a conservation centre if the star attractions are not there? "They've just got to make the smaller animals more appealing," says McKenna. "It's no good saying, 'We've got to have elephants to save beetles.' Beetles, ants, bees are absolutely riveting once we understand their lives and customs. We don't need to keep elephants to find ants more appealing." McKenna's argument ignores one thing - the interest of younger visitors in the scatological aspects of large animals. There is only one thing that excites them more than the sight of large animals - the smells. At the elephant house it was the excretory habits of Dilberta, Mya and Layang Layang that caused the greatest delight - the Niagara of urine, the football-sized piles of dung. Can that be worked into a shiny new conservation centre?

*The Guardian Weekly 8-11-2001, page 2*

## 1. Answer the questions

1. Which are the most popular animals with visitors to zoos?

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2. What are some of the problems faced by urban zoos?

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3. How can zoos help conservation?

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## 2. General Meaning

Which of these best reflects the general meaning of the text:

- a. Urban zoos should be banned.
- b. Only small animals should be kept in urban zoos.
- c. The question of whether to keep large animals in urban zoos is a controversial one.
- d. Urban zoos will close if large animals are removed.

## 3. Comprehension

Find the answers to the following questions in the text:

1. How was the elephant keeper killed?

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2. Apart from elephants, which other animals are leaving London zoo?

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3. Why did the bear learn to dance?

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4. How can zoos inspire children?

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5. How many fatalities have there been since London Zoo opened in 1828?

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6. What is the argument against returning animals to the wild?

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7. Why does the zoologist think that urban zoos should be retained?

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8. What was the effect on visitor numbers when Edinburgh Zoo got rid of its elephants?

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9. What is the actress's criticism of urban zoos?

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10. What excites young visitors even more than the sight of large animals?

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#### 4. Match the words from the text with their meanings

- |               |   |
|---------------|---|
| 1. keeper     |   |
| 2. urban      |   |
| 3. memorable  | a baby animal   |
| 4. cub        | a enclosed space where zoo animals live an accidental death |
| 5. enclosure  | fantastic   |
| 6. habitat    | a person who looks after zoo animals                        |
| 7. donor      | attractive  |
| 8. fatality   | impossible to forget  |
| 9. fabulous   | a person who gives money (or blood)                         |
| 10. appealing | belonging to a city natural environment                     |

#### 5. Vocabulary

Choose the correct meaning for each word from the text:

- terse
  - long and complicated
  - brief and unfriendly
  - sudden
- deserted
  - empty
  - crowded
  - clean
- habitat
  - dwelling
  - natural environment
  - custom
- in raptures
  - furious
  - ecstatic
  - saddened
- clutching
  - waving
  - filling in
  - holding tightly
- fatality
  - problem
  - death
  - accident
- fabulous
  - fantastic
  - growing
  - unexpected
- riveting
  - boring
  - interesting
  - fascinating

#### 6. Discussion Point

What are the arguments for and against keeping animals in zoos? What do you think the ideal solution would be?