

Distressed Animal Behaviors and Some Recommendations for Improvements at the Kuala Lumpur Zoo, Malaysia

Amber Haque

*Department of Psychology
International Islamic University Malaysia*

The artificial living conditions of captive animals present numerous challenges for animal caretakers. In this study I explored abnormal behaviors in certain caged animals at the Kuala Lumpur Zoo. Findings obtained from observations of animals and interviews of the zoo staff are followed by recommendations: including the development of standards and manuals, licensing of zoos and animals, and increased budgets from governments or alternative sources. Such interventions should bring considerable improvements in animal welfare at the zoos in the region.

As part of a class project in abnormal psychology, 3 undergraduate students from a local university interviewed caretakers of nonhuman animals and veterinary doctors at the Kuala Lumpur Zoo. The interview contained questions on whether animals exhibited unusual behaviors, unacceptable or self-defeating behaviors, and dangerous behaviors. The students observed the animals during the 1-week research period followed by the principal investigator's conversations with the chief veterinarian of the zoo.

Of course, the conclusions that can be drawn from this informal research are limited, but the study suggests important information about nonhuman animals who are held captive. The animals were seen as having limited opportunities to interact with their natural environment and express their normal behaviors displayed in the wild. They were observed to be passive and exhibited a variety of abnormal behaviors. The limited space of enclosures may contribute to feelings of distress and irritation in the animals, most notably in the primates.

Overcrowding in enclosures may lead to filth and fighting for territory, resulting in injury to the weaker animals. It also may limit animal movement and physical activities within the cage. The animals reacted negatively to harassment from the visitors and showed signs of depression. Passivity and anger, especially in large animals, may be associated with a lack of food variety. Depression and stereotypical behaviors in large animals were noted when their need to mate was unmet or delayed. Observations at the zoo also revealed that elephants played on cement slabs and had to make do with tree trunks made of cement. Daily elephant shows were interesting, but some exercises were quite unnatural: one-hand and two-hand hand-stands and standing on the hind legs. The enclosures for the primates were very small, and there were trees made of cement for animal amusement. Giraffe enclosures were also undersized, and the animals paced frantically on a tiny strip of land without grass or vegetation.

On the positive side, zoo caretakers reported that animals receive a balanced diet containing adequate nutrition, vitamins, and minerals. Besides ample quantities of fresh food, substantial effort is made in preparing a diet that is adequate and healthy for the animals. Feeding techniques include hiding the food around the enclosure in the grass or in tree branches or attaching poles on the roof to induce some effort in the animals to use their stealth, power, speed, and grip when obtaining foods. The Kuala Lumpur Zoo, which is partially government funded, is doing what it can to maintain both quality and standard.

This informal investigation led to recommendations such as staff education on species-specific behaviors and increased staff training in handling of animals by the experts in the field for consideration by the authorities: Some foreign organizations that have substantial funds for animal research and welfare may provide assistance through trained volunteers. Other recommendations included the following:

1. *Development of minimal standards and manuals with instructions on what is expected of the zoo and its staff.* A yearly inspection of the zoo by appropriate government body is necessary. Online resources that could help can be found at <http://www.aphis.usda.gov/ac/polmanpdf.html>, <http://www.waza.org>, <http://www.aza.org>; <http://www.izea.net>, and <http://nationalzoo.si.edu/default.cfm>.

2. *Licensing of the zoos and of the animals.* This would ensure a proper record of all animals (or at least endangered ones) with their health condition and discourage the smuggling or illegal importation of certain animals. Private collection of animals, such as those owned by individuals or companies, also may be certified by the appropriate government agency.

3. *Increased budget from the government or alternative sources.* Sponsorships from private parties and the Humane Society at national and international levels may also help in meeting funding needs. Local companies, private citizens, or groups may choose to sponsor a particular animal. A joint effort with the local

newspaper, magazine, or TV channel may help raise funds for zoo expansion or renovation.

Ethical handling and treatment of animals is yet another neglected area, unless written rules and inspections or surprise visits to the zoo by the authorities become a regular practice. It is important to phase out the cages and expand the enclosures. Consultation with larger and more modern zoos would help. This aspect is currently underway at the Kuala Lumpur Zoo.

New toys and games for the animals might be introduced. Operant cages, activity wheels and accessories, photo-beam activities, startle systems, mazes, and animal exercise systems should be encouraged.

The Web site <http://www.lafayetteinstrument.com/animal/htm> contains items of modern equipment for animal activity and training. Items for smaller animals can be modified to suit the needs of larger animals.

There is a dire need to develop research programs on animal disease, medication, and animals' emotional problems. There could be interdisciplinary academic programs on animal behavior at local universities, leading to the creation of jobs at universities, research centers, and animal facilities. It is also crucial to encourage volunteerism from the public—especially with younger students—to develop their interest, understanding, and sense of care for the animals.

It is very important to involve schoolteachers at the local zoo in studying the animals and for the teachers to share their knowledge with their classes. This would increase awareness in the schoolchildren, who could then pursue their own interests for improved animal research and welfare in the future. Involving members of animal protection groups also might be considered for the sake of improving quality and services at the zoo. The home page of the Humane Society and Animal Welfare Ring links the following site to many other home pages of humane societies and animal welfare organizations around the world: <http://o.webring.com/hub?ring=humane>

It is possible to merge some of the smaller zoos with the larger ones for cost-saving purposes. In Malaysia, there are many zoos of a variety of sizes and types: the theme parks with animals, reptile parks, bird parks, insect parks, aquaria, privately owned animal shows, and smaller farms. If some of these merge with larger zoos, cost savings, neglect prevention, and monitoring by government agencies would become more manageable.

Many zoos exist in developing countries, but animal care and welfare programs continue to be a low priority. A lack of professional interest in animal research and zoo-monitoring regulations exacerbates the problem. Although the Kuala Lumpur Zoo is a modern and a relatively well-financed facility, significant issues need to be addressed to ensure continuous quality improvement and care of animals.