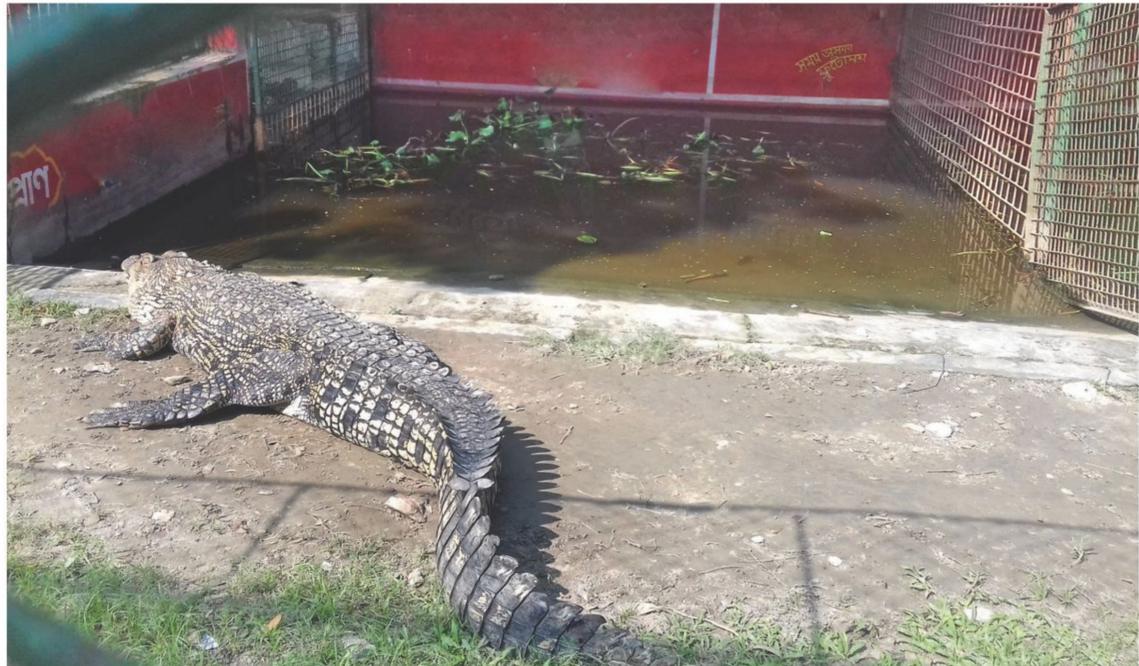


SPOTLIGHT

Juboraj, the 19-year-old ailing lion is awaiting death in a cage at Comilla Zoo. His skeletal body and the rotting wounds on his back are stark signs of the extreme negligence that put him in this fatal state. This near-dead lion has passed 13 years alone in his cage, with meagre food and no medical care. Now he has stopped eating. He does not move at all; he spends the whole day lying on the ground, as if he has no desire to live anymore.

After a video of Juboraj went viral on social media, the zoo authority called in veterinarians who reported that the lion's health had deteriorated beyond recovery. Recently, the lion's cage has been concealed as the zoo authority stopped putting him on exhibition in the face of public outrage. However, the cover-up could not prevent over-enthusiastic visitors from climbing on top of the roof of the cage to take photos of the ailing lion. There was no security guard or caretaker anywhere in the zoo to stop this blatant breach of the zoo's safety rules. In fact, the unfortunate fate of Juboraj is representative of the derelict conditions of Comilla Zoo.



The water is so shallow and dirty that the only crocodile of Bonobilash zoo spends most of its time on ground

PHOTO: DIPANKAR ROY

altogether stopped and the animals seem to have lost all interest in life.

Udoy Chandra Barman, a local journalist and a resident of Rangpur city, says, "This zoo is quite unpopular amongst the people of Rangpur because of these feeble animals. We feel so bad for them. Besides, the environment of the zoo is also unsafe. The mango and guava orchards in the zoo are filled with junkies and couples; nobody else dares to go. The only restaurant inside the zoo is also unusable." However, Dr Shahadat Hossain, the sole veterinarian of the zoo, claims that the maintenance and overall environment of the zoo has improved significantly. He says, "When I joined Rangpur zoo, the situation was even worse."

"The animals you are seeing today were introduced here in 1989. All of them are very old and have already exceeded their usual lifespans. From our end, we are trying to give them the best service."

However, in Khulna's Bonobilash Zoo, we did not find any veterinary surgeons or even any zoo officials who could talk to us about the zoo's condition. Situated in Jahanabad cantonment, the zoo is said to be operated by the army. In reality, we found that it is in fact operated and maintained by a gang of four cooks who have no knowledge about the care and nutrition of captive animals. According to one of these cooks, Kazi Rakib, "Our NCO [non-commissioned officer] sir provides us with the necessary food for the animals. We feed them and take care

waterlogging and excessive mud. The shallow, dirty water in the crocodile's tub is brimming over with thrown-away garbage so that the aquatic reptile spends most of its time on ground. Due to the lack of security guards, visitors roam around freely on the zoo premises. Many visitors were seen going dangerously close to the hungry, carnivorous animals to take photos. Many visitors were also seen throwing stones and sticks at the animals.

A total of eight kilograms of meat has been allotted for all the carnivorous animals of the park, of which seven kilograms of very low-quality meat is given to the sole surviving tiger. The remaining one kilogram of meat is distributed among the falcons and the wild cat. The crocodile is given only a chicken every week. However, on Monday, all the animals of the zoo are not given anything to eat. Asked why, Rakib explained that it was simply the rule of the zoo and could not provide any further reason. Despite several attempts, the NCOs in charge of the zoo could not be tracked and contacted either. "We don't have any contact number for them

And what did they have for breakfast? "Tea and puffed rice".

and malnutrition. However, the government is quite indifferent about the catastrophic conditions of these zoos. Md Kamruzzaman, Joint Secretary (Livestock-1), Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock, says "As there is no legal framework or directives for establishing and managing a zoo, the zoos in

However, on Monday, all the animals of the zoo are not given anything to eat.

Bangladesh are run by different authorities, which causes uncoordinated and unmonitored management."

"We have prepared a Draft Zoo Act but it could not be passed due to objections raised by the Forest Department, which issues licenses to private zoos." However, when contacted, Chief Forest Conservator, Mohammad Shafiul Alam Chowdhury, denied this claim. He says, "The Forest Department does not issue licenses or permissions for establishing zoos. We also have no objections against the Draft Zoo Act. These claims are not true."

Work to formulate the Zoo Act started in 2005, but for more than a decade, it remained suspended due to bureaucratic

"Currently the government runs zoos with veterinary surgeons who have no academic knowledge about the habitats, behavioural patterns, diet and nutrition of wildlife. To make these zoos liveable for the animals, the government should form multi-disciplinary teams involving zoologists, botanists, entomologists, nutritionists and veterinary surgeons who will work together to create customised natural environments and diets for every captive animal," he adds.

Another zoologist and animal rights activist, Dr Niamul Naser, Professor at the Department of Zoology, University of Dhaka, and ex-officio of the Zoological Society of Bangladesh recommended closing the zoos and relocating the wildlife to safari parks and sanctuaries. "We cannot expect natural behaviour from wild animals in captivity. Most of the animals are territorial and much of their food and breeding habits develop as they patrol their territories. So, in captivity, these animals become completely different entities," says Dr Naser. "Zoos are an outdated and inhuman concept. To preserve rare wildlife and learn more about them, we should establish sanctuaries where visitors will get the chance to have safari tours within a limited range," he adds.

However, at present, all initiatives for the improvement of the zoos and all suggestions made by experts have been stalled by the government's failure to pass the Zoo Act. In this deadlocked state, unmonitored mismanagement and indifference towards animal rights have

DEATH CAMPS FOR WILDLIFE

MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN

Established in 1985 on 0.5 acres of land by Comilla district administration, at present the zoo possesses only a couple of macaques, two deer and a turkey as exhibits. At least eight cages of the zoo are vacant and several others have been demolished. At the time of our visit, only one of the 11 caretakers were present and, on conditions of anonymity, he shared with us a shocking tale of irresponsibility and mismanagement.

The zoo started its journey with seven monkeys of different species, two bearcats, nine deer, several Indian peafowls, two rare Egyptian wild fowls, several rabbits, a couple of jackals and an Indian python. In 2004, Juboraj the lion was brought in at the age of four. Several initiatives were taken to procure a mate for the lonely Juboraj, but she never made it. According to the caretaker, the district administration mostly contracts the maintenance of the zoo to local politicians of the ruling party who hardly care about the treatment and nutrition of the animals. Furthermore, high-ranking government officials often make the zoo caretakers run their personal errands, and even their domestic chores. Only one or two of the caretakers spend their working hours in the zoo. They feed the animals just enough to keep them alive. As a result, in

the last 10 years, 90 percent of the animals have died of starvation and disease.

The zoo's infrastructure is also in a bad way. Lands surrounding the zoo have been developed in recent years and run-off waters from the surrounding high grounds flood it during the slightest showers. Garbage from the surrounding multi-storeyed buildings is often thrown directly into the cages and at the open deer pens. Through several broken parts of the boundary walls, local youths freely enter the zoo premises and tease and torture the helpless, captive animals. However, Sonjoy Kumar Bhawmick, Executive Officer of Comilla District Council, denies all these facts. He says, "We select the contractor through a free and fair procurement process and our officials regularly monitor the maintenance works. The animals are fed well and treated well. They have died of natural causes and old-age complications. However, we will bring in new animals after reconstructing the old, demolished cages."

Like Comilla Zoo, most of the district-level zoos in Bangladesh are extremely neglected and poorly maintained. Rangpur Zoo is the only zoo catering to the people of seven northern districts in Bangladesh. It is also one of the two zoos (the other being the Bangladesh National Zoo) directly under government control. However, due to the poor maintenance and unhealthy environment of the zoo premises, very few visitors come by. Needless to say, the animals are also in a



There is no caretaker or security guard at Bonobilash zoo to stop visitors from going dangerously close to the cages and injuring animals by throwing stones and sticks at them

PHOTO: DIPANKAR ROY

miserable state. Most of them can be seen sleeping and lying about with no trace of food or water in their cages. Noticing journalists in the zoo, a caretaker rushes in with a chunk of meat and a jug of water and takes them to the cages of a lion and an Asian black bear. When asked why he is so late to feed them, he replies, "Not really; I served them breakfast in the morning." And what did they have for breakfast? "Tea and puffed rice". However, according to experts, a full-grown lion in captivity requires 18-20 pounds (roughly 8-9 kilograms) of

meat every day, which should be supplemented with vitamins and calcium. The only Asian black bear of the zoo was very sick and too weak to respond to the caretaker's call for lunch. When the caretaker prodded him to move aside, his back exposed blood-stained wounds. Besides constant starvation, the animals of Rangpur zoo are also suffering from loneliness. Except the macaques and a couple of donkeys, most of the animals are confined to the cages alone. Without any mates, breeding has



Most of the animals at Rangpur zoo are confined to cages alone with no trace of food and water

PHOTO: UDOY CHANDRA BARMAN

of them. If they get sick, we give them saline and glucose syrup and they become well again."

Due to this inappropriate treatment, several animals died in the zoo in the last couple of years, including a tiger and several deer. At present, the zoo has only a tiger, a mugger crocodile, some spotted deer, a barking deer, a wild cat, some ostriches, macaques and four pairs of falcons. The deer have been kept in a low, sand-covered enclosed area where no grass grows. During every rainy season, they become sick due to the



Visitors often climb on top of the roof of the cage of the ailing lion.

PHOTO: NAVID NOOREN

either. We see them once or twice a month. We do all the works of the zoo on our own," adds Rakib.

Like these district-level zoos, Bangladesh National Zoo, although bigger in size and better resourced, is in no better shape. Much of its 186 acres of land—which makes it the fourth largest zoo in Asia—remains unused. Most of the animals are old and sick and many of the newly imported ones, such as the dingoes, oryxes and antelopes, have already died prematurely from the lack of companions, inappropriate habitat



Visitors often throw rotten foods, stones and sticks at deer through this damaged fence at Comilla zoo.

complexities. However, zoologists and researchers have expressed their concerns and termed this deadlock as just an excuse to justify the procrastination. According to Dr Mohammad Firoj Jaman, Professor at the Department of Zoology, University of Dhaka, says, "There might be no act but there are codified rules of running and managing a zoo which were promulgated during the establishment of Bangladesh National Zoo. The government can enforce the rules for running other zoos as well."

turned Bangladeshi zoos into death camps for animals. Zoos are where rare species are supposed to be preserved from extinction, where people can learn about the animal kingdom and learn to be respectful towards nature, but in Bangladesh, they have completely lost their purpose. In this situation, the proposition of dissolving the zoos and releasing these starving and languishing lives into sanctuaries is worth taking into consideration.

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