

Rethinking zoos

Had animals been as smart, selfish and insensitive as human beings, many of us would be in chains and cages, separated from our families and locked up in dark and dense forests - primarily for the amusement of rhinos, reindeer and rabbits. Now reverse the roles and consider for a moment, if that is not exactly how humans treat other animals. They keep them in chains and cages, in pitiful prison-like zoos, with screechy shrills of dodgem cars, loud music and occasional pelting of pebbles and trash.

Having been chained for 20 years, 'Saheli' the female elephant of Islamabad zoo could no longer bear the ordeal of life in confinement, standing in one posture, infections in her feet and agony in her soul. She died on May 1, 2012. Scores of other animals, elephants, lions, pumas, panthers, and chimpanzees continue to undergo a similar ordeal and await a similar death in different zoos of Pakistan. The American Association of Zoos considers solitary housing of elephants as an act of exceptional cruelty. To chain them is to multiply that cruelty a hundred times.

The Karachi Zoo, spread over 33 acres is a local replica of Guantanamo detention camp. Its precious and sensitive residents live in narrow cages, often chained, confined in solitary cells, ill-treated, ill-fed and emotionally battered condition. There is little or no debate on the cruelty and maltreatment that we officially extend to our captive animals.

Concepts on how animals may be kept in zoos have changed considerably since the Karachi Zoo was opened to public in 1890. There is an urgent need to rethink on how and what animals need to be kept in the Karachi Zoo and those that must be immediately moved out to greater freedom and more natural habitat. Our paramount consideration must be the need and comfort of the animals and not the amusement or financial gains that may befall upon others.

The fertile season for creating projects, allocating budgets and raising PC1s has arrived in full gear. The allocated 149 million Rupees is a lot of money to make major improvements in Karachi Zoo. Alternately, a callous and hurried approach could create a tasteless atrocity that must be suffered for next many decades. It is easy and lucrative to rush through the contracts in favour of cosmetic changes, marginally enlarged cages, painting of metal grills and creating yet more noisy amusement facilities. This is precisely the kind of progress that must be prevented at all costs.

There are at least four critical steps that must be undertaken to reform and rebuild the Karachi Zoo on modern lines. We must start with the most essential and urgent task of shifting out at least three categories of animals from the Zoo to the Safari Park. These are the two elephants, the big cats (lions, tigers, and pumas) and the primates such as chimpanzees, lemurs and monkeys. The 148 acre Karachi's Safari Park provides a large area that ought to be modified to create natural habitat for its new arrivals.

The next step ought to focus on completely revamping the housing, cages, aviaries and environment for the leftover smaller animals and the birds. This must follow the internationally recommended space and design for each type of animal. The iron, concrete and tiles must give way to trees, bushes, grass, mud baths, water bodies and landscaping so as to create conditions as close to natural habitat as possible.

A new participative management structure must be created to manage, maintain and improve the Karachi Zoo on professional lines. This task should be entrusted to an independent Board consisting of zoo professionals, concerned citizens and government officials. The Board should receive its routine grants from the government and also raise funds and receive donations from the private sector.

Animal behaviour is an important but highly neglected aspect of our Zoo. The Karachi Zoo and the Safari park must develop a variety of behavior enrichment programs to keep animals healthy, active and engaged in a wide diversity of activities. Enrichment ought to be a part of daily animal care, just like feeding and cleaning. Animals need mental and emotional stimulation, often provided by company of other animals, exposure to a variety of objects and encouraging animals to forage, hunt and handle their food in ways that are natural to them.

The Karachi Zoo does not need huge influx of domestic or foreign funds to make it an animal friendly zoo. It simply needs a basic shift in our thinking about animals – from objects of amusement to living beings that have their unique needs, habits and sensitivities.