

Zoo-illogical Exhibition

Jane O'Sullivan

Exhibit One



Figure 5 - Chester Zoo - Cheshire, UK, 24-06-2010

(i) It looks like seniors' day at Chester Zoo, here in the north-west of England's green and pleasant land. Young aged-carers, with pink or green hair and piercings, carefully steer their charges into position within the gridlock of wheelchairs along the railings of the enclosure. The elephants turn away, as is their wont when the crowds gather. All except the matriarch present their backsides to these squat spectators, while she faces the elderly square-on, eyes their snowy heads, hunched shoulders and idle limbs. Elephants and the elderly alike are in cages of a sort. Some are in harness, chin-on-chest, nodding forward in their chairs, others rocking from side to side – all wanting to go home.

(ii) Further to the south, in Cambridgeshire, the sign in Whipsnade Zoo reads, ‘One of our elephants sways her head. This is Azizah, who arrived at London Zoo in 1985 with this condition. It is believed that she picked up this behaviour after being orphaned near crop land in Malaysia.’

Elephants still wander into their old feeding grounds and still die there. Their calves still cry out from crates within the holds of ships and aircraft on their way to foreign lands. At least they are no longer sent to London Zoo.

Now there is Whipsnade Zoo, associated with London Zoo but located in the countryside. Like rural Australia’s Central Plains Zoo, which is connected with Taronga Park in Sydney, Whipsnade offers quite generous architectures of moats, steep embankments and relatively open spaces. It is far removed from the crush of cages that punctuate the maze of pavilions and other Victorian façades of the ‘zoological gardens’ that gasp and sway in the fug of a London summer.



Figure 6 - Taronga Western Plains Zoo – NSW, Australia, 31-08-2013

(iii) Twelve thousand miles to the southeast, at Taronga Western Plains Zoo, in regional New South Wales, our tour guide is busy explaining away the animal exhibits. In the elephant house, sheltered from the starlit frosts of a Western Plains winter, a fifty-year-old elephant sways from side-to-side before our scrutiny. We are told she does this as a hangover from her circus days when for lengthy periods a hefty ankle-chain confined her to one spot. We are told that the zoo was her salvation.

A flicker of scepticism crosses the face of the elephant-keeper, who has spent many years minding elephants, and is no longer sure of the zoo's rightful status as their salvation. The keeper worries that in the zoo, life is boring – the same place every day. The circus is more like the herd, constantly on the move, through changing landscapes, and with important jobs to be done, routines to learn.

Picture her balancing; carefully lifting and lowering, swaying ... waltzing, even.

Exhibit Two



Figure 7 - Colchester Zoo – Essex, UK, 27-06-2010

Close by the lion exhibit in Colchester Zoo there is a large wooden-backed glass case, like those seen in museums. The placard above it reads: 'This stuffed lioness was confiscated by HM Customs & Excise as it was illegally smuggled into the country. It was then kindly donated to Colchester Zoo for educational purposes.'

The lioness, wide-eyed, golden-haired, remains forever still, rendered beautiful by the taxidermist's hand. She is a princess in a glass coffin, clearly visible to her kin or kind, who pad back and forth behind bars, a breathing diorama or behind-the-scenes glimpse of the fairytale. She holds centre stage, telling of her past and their future.

Exhibit Three



Figure 8 - Whipsnade Zoo – Bedfordshire, UK, 28-06-2010

It is not long gone nine o'clock – too early for the crush of visitors – and the two lions take a stroll along the fence line. Side by side, they pass close to the viewing window, her shoulder brushing the glass, his mane magnificent in the morning light. They stop briefly, heads turning towards me, and beyond.

A bright green double-decker full of schoolkids lurches to a halt at the gateway, and a clamour of hats and blazers and folders shouts and scuffs towards us.

We exchange a look, then there's the two of them taking a sharp left turn towards the distant trees, and me heading back along the path, lucky to have missed the bus.

Exhibit Four



Figure 9 - Shooting the monkey, Twycross Zoo – Warwickshire, UK, 25-06-2010

The three of them stand in a huddle before the viewing window. They're in their late teens, a peer group peering through the glass, nudging each other. The lad whips out his mobile, and frames a photo of the animal within. The girls laugh and shriek, 'No, don't!' in half-hearted protest. Heartless, he takes the shot, checks the image, then shows it to the girls, who turn and wander away arm-in-arm – whispering. He follows, all the while keying digits into his iPhone.

It is now possible to approach the exhibit, to see what funny photogenic sight remains within the window frame.

A lone chimpanzee crouches on a bench against the glass, studying the partially erect penis he holds between his fingers and opposable thumbs.

Exhibit Five



Figure 10 - Darling Downs Zoo – Queensland, Australia, 20-06-2013

Claw-footed bathtubs are glimpsed through chicken wire and cyclone fencing; each squat rotundity is like a pygmy hippopotamus, bone-bleached beyond the shade of coolabah and corrugated iron.

It is a small, family-run zoo in country Queensland, for god's sake! Why? I am told it is part of a wider zoological mission to ward off extinction, and there are big dreams of acquiring at least one threatened species from each part of the world. But that shouldn't be *one* of each such threatened species, surely? Even an ignorant old geezer in the Middle East BC knew two of each was a much better formula. Besides, there's more to life than breeding, isn't there?

Yet, there is that one tiger, 'They often live alone in the wild, you know,' etc. etc.

Exhibit Six



Figure 11 - Darling Downs Zoo – Queensland, Australia, 20-06-2013

Beyond the faded photo and info sheet that hangs limp against the steel and Colorbond fencing, a tiger paces.

Read the notes. They tell you where I come from, where and how I live no more. Observe the photograph fading under an antipodean sun, with its tiger, more skeletal than striped. Spare me your pity. I am black and golden beneath the aspidistras; their alternating shadows blue-bruised leaves and ochre-burnt tips. Remember me. I rumble still, deep and guttural, a flickering flame.

Exhibit Seven



Figure 12 - Darling Downs Zoo – Queensland, Australia, 28-07-2013

Two dingoes lounge about in little more than a chook pen. Not much is needed to keep these two zoo-illogical exhibits at bay. The hedgerow of native shrubs surrounding the wire fence serves to dissuade our foolish fingers from touching those doggy noses, or maybe even scratching a golden ear. They could bite, of course. But, honestly, they seem such a pair of erstwhile puppies, one still lanky and alert, the other grey muzzled, and squinty-eyed, same as the old dog at home, who snoozes all day in the sun, dosed-up on fish oil and other such supplements for old bones.

Unlike all the other animals in the zoo, these two are interested in us, and we could kid ourselves that it's only the enclosure that renders them wild. But don't be too quick to imagine them happily taking their place in the family room, basking in the flickering light of the TV, cage door open, when the zoo is closed. Given half a chance, they'd be heading for the hills.