

BIOPHILE 10 – September 2008

TO THE ZOO – BOO HOO!

Some of my best friends love zoos. One even works at Jo'burg Zoo as a volunteer. My favourite radio station, *Talk Radio 702* has parties there, encouraging its listeners to celebrate Mother's Day among sentient creatures who are not allowed to be mothers – or who have their babies wrenched away from them in the world-wide trade in animals between zoos. It's anathema to me.

For a couple of decades I have refused to enter the gates of this hell-hole. When friends visit my town and want to spend an afternoon there, I drop them at the gate and amuse myself elsewhere until they've had enough gawking and gasping at all the despair contained within those walls – not that they see it that way. You see, for them it's entertainment. Bored animals providing entertainment for bored city dwellers.

But maybe I'm being unfair and, worse still, uninformed. So last Sunday I took myself off to the Jo'burg Zoo with someone who's an expert in these places. "Compared with" comes into her vocabulary a lot. "Well, compared with the bear enclosure here a couple of decades ago, this is great." "Well, compared with what you'd see in an Egyptian zoo, this is fabulous."

Well, what about compared with the wild? Compared with what's natural? Compared with what's *right*? Everywhere I look, humankind's ability to kid itself about what's 'right' is in tragic evidence. Sure, the 'sexy' species, guaranteed to bring in the biggest revenue (bears, elephant, lions, chimps and tigers), have large enclosures, compared with the past. But am I alone in seeing their misery? Am I alone in feeling their boredom, loneliness, lack of exercise and stimulation? Seems so.

"Jeez, babe, check the double chin on that Orang-Utan!" burbles some chap with his cap on backwards. Behind him, a chimpanzee thwacks a metal door in frustration. "Holy shit," he quips, "that dood could give you a headache if you came across him on a dark night." But the moron would never come across the chimp on a dark night, of course, because the bars prevent him from ever experiencing a real, equal, honest interaction with the animals he's observing. The system is designed to keep the chimps and other inmates *in their place* so that we Homo sapiens can celebrate our power and ingenuity

over them, and further our complete lack of respect for their needs, their emotions and their senses. They have no choice – and that’s how we like to keep it.

Everywhere around me, families come and go from cages filled with dead-eyed exhibits – for that’s what the animals have been reduced to. ‘Kyk dars’ spend 40 seconds at the Honey Badger, share an inane comment or two, and then move on. Meanwhile, the badger paces compulsively and interminably in a small circle. The worn path tells me he’s been doing this for months – maybe years. And when the kids go home with their faces smeared with ice-cream, and their T-shirts with chip fat, he’ll still be striding. He’ll be doing it next week, next month, next year. He’ll be doing it till death.

Just as the Pygmy Hippos will try, till death, to have an uninterrupted, underwater afternoon kip while some brat thumps the glass near their hairy chins. Just as the reclusive Bongos will try, till death, to cower behind some bamboo and escape the rap music which blasts away in the picnic area next door. Just as the Polar Bear will try, till death, to keep his temperature down in the shady corner of a cement pit that radiates intolerable heat long before the punishing Jo’burg summer. Just as the gorilla will sit, till death, without a female partner, because his potential lady-love is in Pretoria Zoo, and they too want a gorilla. And just as the lions will sit, till death, perched like exhibits in a waxworks museum, on a small triangle of grass surrounded by viewing rondavels, a facility sponsored by AngloGold mining company and touted as state-of-the-art and luxurious. The lions can never get away. They can never be unobserved. They can never have a choice. That’s the way we like it.

And the fact that we continue to buy the bullshit that zoos and their fans have thrown at us for so long is also anathema to me. In the ‘80s they justified their existence by saying that they were there for the captive breeding of endangered species for reintroduction to the wild. That was successful in a mere handful of species - literally. All told, it’s been a resounding failure. To add insult to injury, animals which are far from endangered continue to suffer abominable treatment in zoos around the world. In the ‘90s, zoos would have had us believe that they were there for education. Well, after all that ‘education’ we have even less of the planet and its biodiversity to show for their efforts. Our behaviour remains completely unaltered by what we’ve experienced of a sunny Sunday afternoon at Jo’burg Zoo. It’s been another resounding failure. No, zoos are

not about education, or rescue, or welfare or captive breeding – they're about money. And ego. And control.

At the top end of Jo'burg Zoo, but outside its fence, is an imposing war monument - a memorial arch topped by a cast iron effigy that serves to remind all who gaze upon it that the good fight was fought (and won) by good people with good values. But it's also a monument to power and authority and myth-making. That it stands guard over the Jo'burg Zoo is utterly, tragically appropriate.