

A NEW ZOO IN ARABIA

BY LUCY VIGNE AND ESMOND MARTIN

A twenty-minute taxi ride south of Sanaa, the capital of Yemen, takes you to an open new suburb called Darsalm about 15 km from the city centre. Construction projects are starting in this flat area of rocky desert. It is here that the new Sanaa Zoo has just been built, covering an area of 5.78 hectares.

We arrived to visit the zoo on Friday 11 June 1999, 12 days after its opening. While women shrouded in their black veils with their colourfully dressed children waited to one side, men wearing their *jambiyas* (curved daggers) scrambled at the ticket windows, paying the 40 rials (\$0.25) per adult and 20 rials (\$0.13) per child entrance fees. On entering through the large iron gates there was a feeling of spaciousness and tranquillity, in sharp contrast to the dust and crowd outside. A plaque near the entrance explained in Arabic that the zoo was opened by President Ali Abdullah Saleh on 30 May 1999 to celebrate the ninth anniversary of Unification Day (22 May 1990), and was financed, constructed and supervised by the Capital Secretariat of Sanaa.

First in view was a line of seven large cages with crowds of people gathered in front of them. Despite the high wired sides, the cages looked attractive and well built, each with a round concrete water trough, a couple of eucalyptus trees for shade, and rocks for the animals to climb. There was also a cave-like area for each cage where animals could retreat, next to a locked door leading to a small inside enclosure. There were two floodlights in each cage, but these are not in use. In the first cage was a solitary gazelle, geese, a turkey and guinea fowl. In another cage were three hyenas, and between several cages of lions were two large vultures perched on rocks. The zoo has six lions, the only non-indigenous mammal species. Four came from the old and extremely decrepit (now closed down) Taiz Zoo in central Yemen [see *I.Z.N.* 45:1 (1998), pp. 22-25]. The President had given Sanaa Zoo two additional lions, a young male and female; he had apparently received them as recent gifts from Russia.

We then followed a wide concrete path to a large, rounded baboon (called 'monkey') enclosure. It was completely surrounded by men, women and children. The 13 sacred baboons could be easily spotted clambering over the many rocks, a very natural setting for them. There were also three stone purpose-built caves providing shade, and a large square water trough filled to the brim. We next saw two cages for birds. These were small. One had 27 doves and the other 18 birds of prey. Within the cages were five smaller cages, hardly bigger than shoeboxes, each holding three doves squashed together or one or two small hawks crouched forlornly.

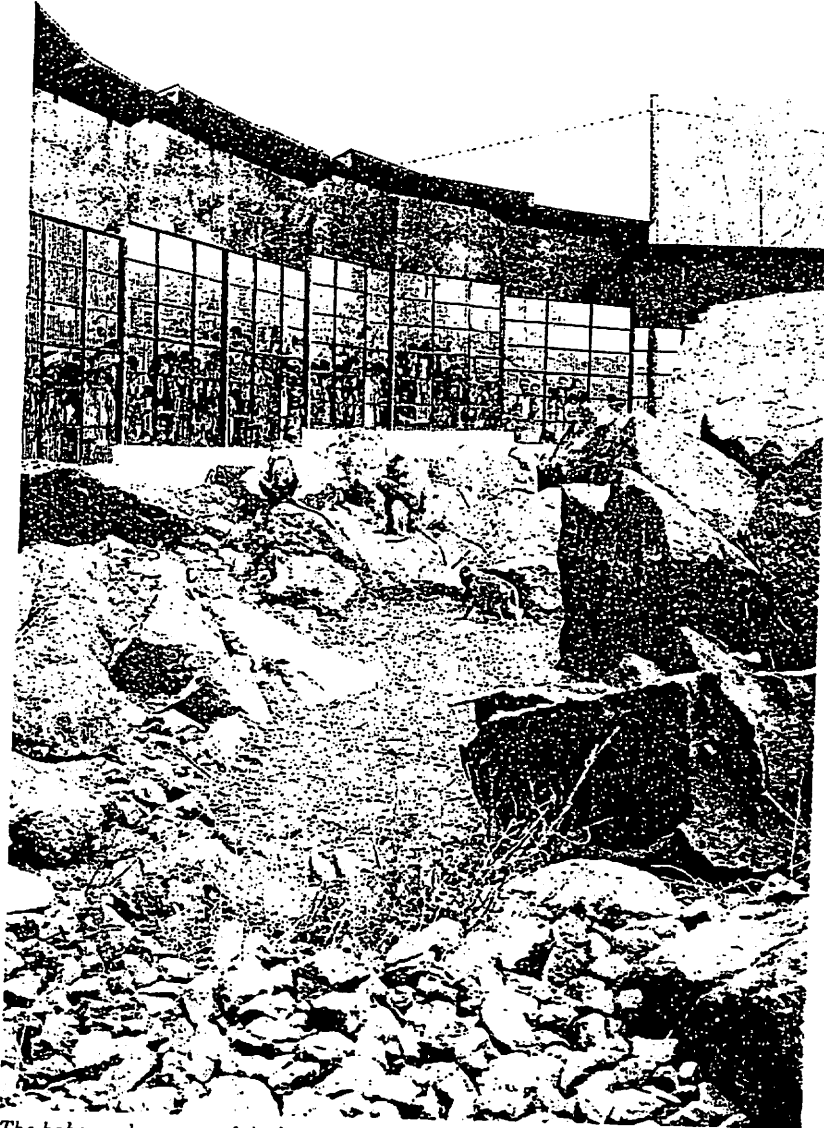
The final enclosure in the zoo was originally designed for giraffes, with three high doors leading into stables. The President had intended to donate his giraffes, which had been imported from South Africa, but they had recently died. Instead, there was a horse peering out from one stable, while a cow, another horse and a dog walked about the enclosure with



The newly constructed Sanaa Zoo is proving very popular in Yemen, especially on Fridays. (Photo: Esmond Martin)



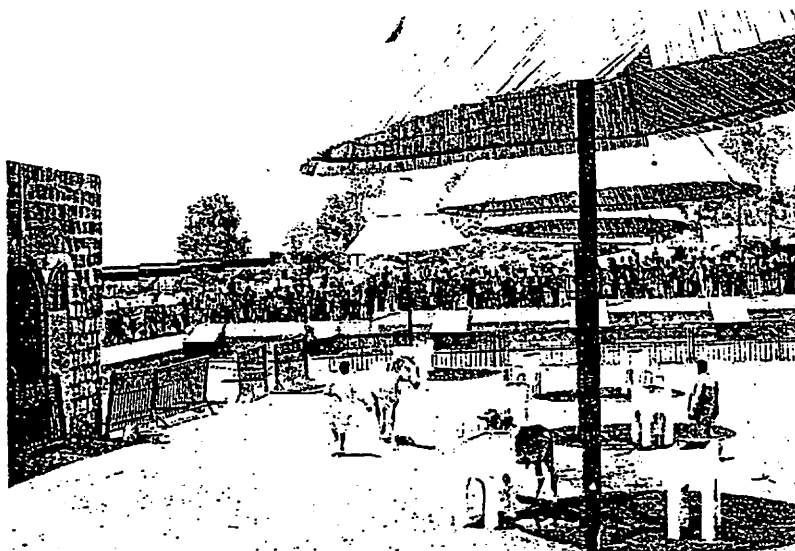
This lion in Sanaa Zoo is descended from lions given by Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia to a former Imam of Yemen. (Photo: Esmond Martin)



The baboons have one of the largest cages in Sanaa Zoo. (Photo: Esmond Martin)

a man. Crowds surrounded this enclosure, watching the scene with interest. Everywhere in the zoo, the visitors were peaceful, well behaved and curious to see all the animals. Along one side of this enclosure was a line of six green smaller cages about the size of dog kennels. The first had five monitor lizards; the second two porcupines, two hedgehogs and a plastic bowl of water with a turtle submerged inside; and the third had

two caracals. In the fourth were five genets, curled up in two balls which were prodded with a broomstick to encourage them to move for the audience. The fifth had 15 mongooses curled in a ball, one with a bleeding nose and very mangy. The sixth cage had two baby hyenas toddling up and down at speed, and a puppy dog asleep in one corner; there was a paint-tin for water overturned and empty. There were three other small cages inside the large enclosure. In one was a petrol can too dark to see what animal was inside; in another was a very scrawny and sick-looking fox asleep beside an empty fallen tin for water. In the third cage were nine more foxes huddled together. Apart from the petrol can, none of these cages had any form of shade or shelter.



This spacious enclosure in Sanaa Zoo was designed for giraffes, but none existed in Yemen when the zoo opened. (Photo: Lucy Vigne)

We visited the manager's office, where three hawks were being offered for sale in a small box. Many animals are captured by villagers in the surrounding mountains and are offered for sale to the zoo. Frequently they are injured, usually with broken legs from traps, in which case the vet does not accept them. Most animals captured and brought to the zoo thus die. If they are healthy enough for the zoo to accept, hyenas are bought for 15-20,000 rials (\$96-127), foxes 3-5,000 rials (\$19-32), and hawks 2,000 rials (\$13) each. This new source of income for animal trappers is a way for Yemenis to try to earn some money in a country that is very poor and in economic decline. Yemen's wild animal populations are going to suffer if this continues. The zoo must start to discourage this trade by stopping its policy of buying wild animals from villagers.

A further problem is that there is no vet at the zoo. One is on call from the Ministry of Agriculture if needed. Another problem is that none of the staff has been trained for their work. They are just the people from

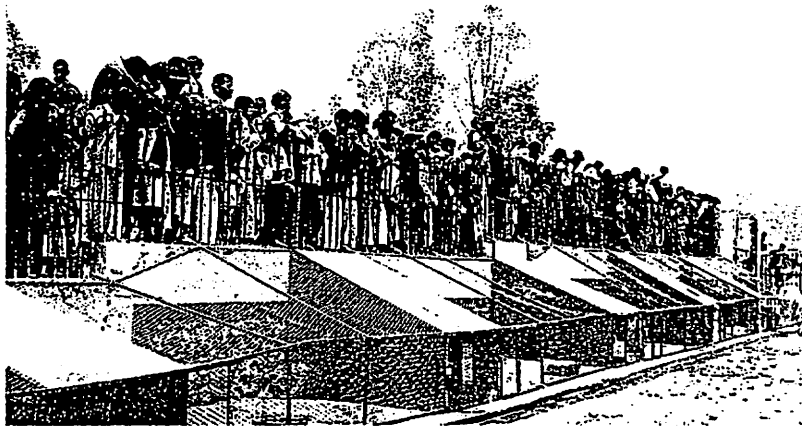
the market,' we were told, and are not familiar with the needs of the animals. Three of the lion keepers, however, were brought from Taiz with the lions, bringing with them much-needed experience with these large cats. Training and advice is greatly needed for the keepers and for the veterinarians.



A young lion plays with its keepers in Sanaa Zoo. (Photo: Esmond Martin)

Similarly, the zoo's enthusiastic architect, Abdulla al-Sobary, had had no education in zoo planning, having never even visited a zoo. 'I studied hospital buildings in Saudi Arabia, but not a zoo,' he explained to us. He obtained ideas from photos of Giza Zoo, from CNN television, and from friends. He had already noticed some mistakes in his designs, such as the lack of doors between the lion cages. He reassured us that some of the animals in the small green cages were there only temporarily, and that the fox and bird cages were also only temporary. The architect wants information about the animals' natural habitats and behaviour in order to make the cages appropriate to their needs. He and the zoo manager, Hashim Ahmed al-Handi (who is working on an M.Sc. in irrigation), need and want outside assistance and advice. The manager plans to put up signs and information about the animals, but requires help with their correct names and with translations. So far there are no names of the animals, nor maps showing their geographical distribution.

Phases 1 and 2 of the construction of Sanaa Zoo are completed, and in Phases 3 and 4 the zoo authorities are planning to build some better enclosures, such as for the foxes and birds. If the zoo staff can obtain information on which African animals would be suitable for the zoo, they would like to import from South Africa giraffes, zebras, different monkey species, ostriches and elephants. Advice on this is much needed. A restaurant and café, along with staff buildings and sitting areas, are



These small cages in Sanaa Zoo require some shade for the animals. (Photo: Esmond Martin)

also to be built. Plans for the expansion of the zoo are ambitious, and government funds are available. But funds have not been allocated so far for outside advice on enclosures and animal welfare, both of which are desperately wanted by the employees.

The zoo construction started in January 1998 and has cost 100 million rials (\$735,000) so far in total. This is cheap by international standards. The buildings cost 70 million rials or \$515,000, and the trees and other items 30 million rials or \$220,000. The land itself was obtained free, being government land. According to the manager, the zoo spends one million rials (\$6,369) per month for food and half a million rials (\$3,185) for the 40 staff. The zoo is open every day from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. On Fridays (the weekly day off) there have been 10,000 visitors, and on other days 2,000. The zoo is proving very popular as a great family day out. There are very few other places for public amusement and recreation for a family in this traditional Muslim city. As a result of the daily crowds, the zoo is more than covering its costs solely through entrance fees, which is extremely unusual. We estimate that the gross monthly revenue earned from gate receipts alone is 2,760,000 rials (\$17,580), well above the expenses of food and labour. If these crowds continue and if the zoo does not expand significantly in its number of animals to feed and care for, it should continue to be self-supporting. This is very encouraging for the zoo.

The Sanaa Zoo provides a perfect opportunity, with its large attendance, for education and increasing awareness on wildlife and conservation issues. This is greatly needed in Yemen, a country facing severe conservation problems. International non-government organizations (NGOs), governments and other donors could assist greatly by providing

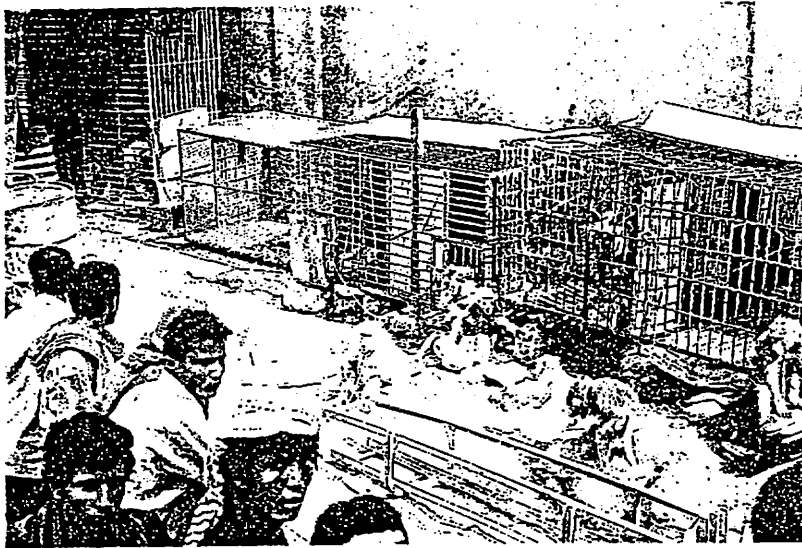
money and expertise for posters, maps and information boards for the zoo. Short videos and aural tapes are very important in a country with 37% male and almost 80% female illiteracy. An interpretation centre and exhibit area could be arranged for various subjects, such as the plight of the black rhino and Yemen's tragic role in the animal's near extinction due to the demand for its horns for *jambiya* handles. There is huge scope for many ideas in education and awareness in the large zoo premises. There is still no landscaping, and botanists might suggest that rockeries with labelled indigenous plants could be created.

The Sanaa Zoo has the President's backing and is an exciting enterprise for the Yemenis. The Prime Minister of Yemen, Dr Abdul Karim al-Iryani, who has a Ph.D. in biology from Yale University, is also personally interested. In a meeting with him, he asked us to report back to him about the zoo. Our suggestion to him that assistance would be useful was gratefully accepted, as it was by the zoo employees. It is vital, if the animals are to remain alive and live as comfortably as possible, that such assistance and training is forthcoming soon.

The new Sanaa Zoo has unfortunately not reduced attendance at a small private zoo that was established beside the cinema on Sanaa's main shopping street several years ago [see *I.Z.N.* 45:1 (1998)]. Called the 'Animals Tahreer Zoo', this growing collection is a disgrace. The number of animals squashed together in the cages has increased considerably since our last visit there in April 1997. At that time there were a leopard and three hyenas. The leopard has since been sold to a breeding programme in the U.A.E., while the hyenas have been joined by eight others dispersed among six small and battered cages, with a baby attached by a string among nine chained baboons. Another nine baboons fill a single small cage. In the other cramped cages we counted three vultures, ten eagles, three porcupines, a fox, four genets, a honey badger, five hedgehogs and nine mongooses, while in small glass boxes were three monitor lizards, other small lizards and at least 18 snakes of various species. The cages were small and the animals dulled into inaction except when prodded and poked by the keepers or, worse still, when a flaming box was thrown at them. On one of our visits, a hawk arrived in a small box for sale for 2,000 rials (\$13), dropping to 1,500 rials (\$10) after bargaining. This zoo is also encouraging Yemenis to capture endangered wildlife. A baboon and a hyena each had a foot missing, no doubt from traps. A man on the street calls for visitors to the Tahreer Zoo, who pay 20 rials (\$0.13) each. In the mornings about 40 people were gathered at any one time, doubling in the afternoons until around 6.40 p.m. There are perhaps 400 visitors a day, nearly all men.

During a meeting with the Prime Minister, we talked about the Tahreer Zoo, and Dr al-Iryani agreed to ask the veterinary service either to improve it or have the animals sent to the new Sanaa Zoo. A businessman from Kawkaban, north-west of Sanaa, owns the zoo; he is unlikely to improve it as he has very little space to do so and no economic incentive. Animal welfare and conservation are not familiar subjects to most Yemenis. This zoo should be closed down and the animals released into the wild, or if this is not possible, such as for some of the mammals, they should be put into the much more spacious Sanaa Zoo. This needs to be followed up as soon as possible.

Some caged animals are also found in restaurants. We visited two Lebanese restaurants in Sanaa with caged birds, rabbits, mongooses, foxes, porcupines and chained baboons. Again, expertise is needed to suggest how best to house these animals and which ought not to be kept in these restaurants.



Animals at the Tahreer Zoo are kept in appalling conditions. (Photo: Esmond Martin)

There is certainly a growing interest in wild animals in captivity which draw large crowds of spectators in Yemen. Many Westerners in Yemen were against the idea of creating a government zoo in Sanaa, as it is a low priority in a country desperately needing to feed and educate its people, and because Yemenis have no expertise in managing zoos. However, now that it has opened and the government wishes it to succeed, rather than international NGOs ignoring or trying to fight against the new zoo, it may be wiser for them to give assistance and expertise to improve the enclosures and animal care, and give advice on how Sanaa Zoo should be developed. For example, does the zoo really need elephants and giraffes? Importing South African animals should not be a priority under present management capabilities. It may be better to concentrate first on Yemeni species and the breeding of some of Yemen's endangered animals under appropriate supervision. The zoo needs to develop a conservation as well as a recreational role in Yemen, as Western zoos are now doing. The zoo could provide an excellent opportunity for people to learn about animals and their survival in Yemen, an interest that is so far largely lacking. Perhaps knowledgeable volunteers in Yemen could consider helping at the zoo to provide more assistance to the visitors and care for the animals. The Sanaa Zoo is a

bold undertaking, which can become a success if the number of animals is kept small and with appropriate guidance. If the zoo over-extends itself, then it will suffer, with both animal deaths and financial losses. We hope the zoo flourishes and receives assistance. Sanaa's captive animals deserve to be helped.

Acknowledgements

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