



# NEWS VALUES & ZOOS' VALUES

Report on Zoo / Press Workshops  
with Jeremy Cherfas  
R. Marimuthu and S. Walker

Last year an article about zoos in India appeared in the popular and prestigious INDIA TODAY magazine. The initial intention of the article had been to focus on the "changing face of Indian Zoos" and report some of the new trends which are taking place in Indian zoos. However, in the end the same old, tired journalistic trends prevailed and the article read like the biased and superficial reporting characteristic of the contemporary press. When a publication like INDIA TODAY produces such a damaging article it is indicative of a real lacunae between press and zoos.

The press can be the best friend or the worst enemy of a zoo. Likewise, a zoo can provide relatively easy, yet interesting stories for press reporters to report, or troublesome obstruction to obviously newsworthy events. In India, zoos are criticised by the press even for simple things which are blown up in reporting. When people read these news items, it makes them think zoos are very bad.

Undoubtedly there are faults on both sides, e.g. the press being too "hungry" for "bad news" and reporting events without proper research and on the other side, the zoo deliberately trying to hide things that might be misunderstood. A good relationship of mutual understanding should develop between zoo personnel and press persons so that they can work together for positive and constructive results.

Clearly, the solution to the press/zoo problems is not a simple one, but communicating about the interaction between zoos and press as well as providing good background material could not hurt. The Zoo Outreach Organisation decided to try address the problem. The workshops described represents a first cut at trying to improve press/zoo relations.

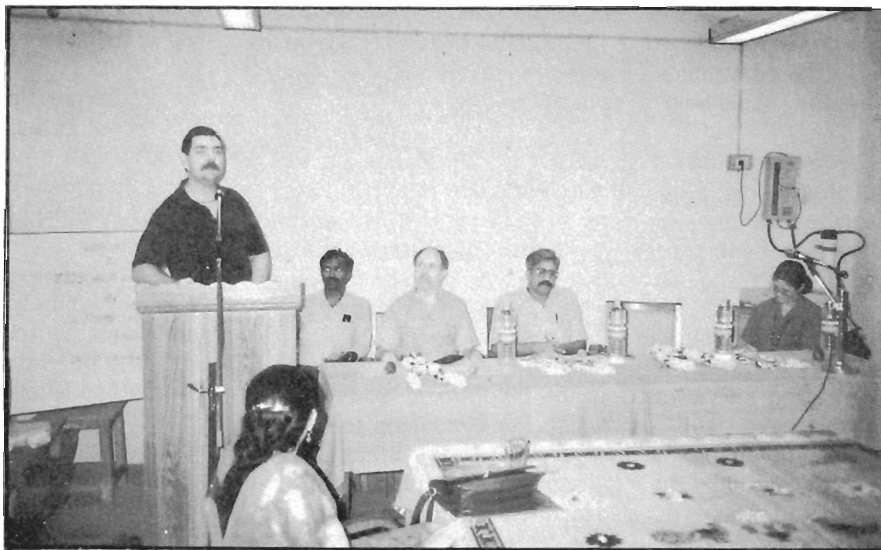
To draw attention to the subject matter, a well-known science writer from the United Kingdom was invited to give a series of one-day workshops. These, entitled "Zoos values and News values" were organised by the "Zoo Outreach Organisation and conducted by Dr. Jeremy Cherfas. Cherfas is well-known for his book and BBC serial ZOO 2000. His visit was underwritten by the British Council, Southern Region, Madras with workshop materials provided with funds from British Council and the Chester Zoo. The workshops took place at four different South Indian cities e.g. Coimbatore, Mysore, Madras and Hyderabad.

Jeremy Cherfas was selected for this programme because he has a high profile in India resulting from the television serial of his book ZOO 2000. As it happened, STAR TV ran his series again just before the workshops. Cherfas's work is noteworthy for its focus on the scientific aspects of zoos and conservation and for his fair reporting of both bad and good features of zoos. His

writing, and his television series were imminently interesting as well. His work was felt to be a good model to create a sense of "right writing" for journalists and "right relationship" with the press on the part of zoos.

Briefing material was prepared for the workshop in the form of a spiral binder consisting of different types of press articles on zoo issues, both good and bad, including a substantial portion of Cherfas's book. Other educational souvenir materials were prepared including stickers, t-shirts and carry bags with Zoo 2000 and journalism logos to reinforce the message of good writing and zoos.

The workshops were held in three states at four venues. Three zoos and one college journalism department served as the Venue. The Central Zoo Authority also hosted Cherfas to give a lecture in Delhi following the south India workshops. The zoo were selected for their interest and asked to set up the workshop in whatever way would be most helpful



Jeremy Cherfas giving a briefing of the workshop at Arignar Anna Zoo, Madras.

to them. They were asked to select a small group of invitees as they were most familiar with who in their surroundings would contribute positively to and benefit by such a workshop.

The Workshop consisted of three parts, an introductory talk, an interactive dialogue between zoo personnel and press persons, and a wrap up discussion.

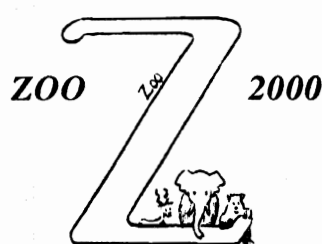
Dr. Cherfas began by speaking about the history of zoos vis a vis the role of zoos in the modern world. After that he spoke about the role of the press.

Zoos were menageries when they were started. Their origin was in two different ways, as symbols of power and as diplomatic presentations. For instance, in India the kings and Emperors (Rajah's and Maharajah's) collected animals for hunting. Even today animals are given for diplomatic reasons. Lions from India have been given to Singapore very recently as a diplomatic gift.

Cherfas spoke of the contribution zoos made to the conservation movement by the propagation animals for exchange with other zoos and as back up for potential reintroduction. Zoos are an ideal setting for research that is impossible to do in the wild and which can be applied in the wild. Education may be the most important work of zoos throughout the world. Zoos attract a great variety of people every day who can be taught all the aspects of conservation. Both education and research are inter-linked, as public participation is necessary for the success of some reintroduction programmes. The case of black-footed ferret was given as an example. He gave some examples of successful reintroduction programmes such as the Prezwalski Horse of Mongolia, Arabian Oryx of Oman and Golden Lion Tamarin of Brazil. He commented that if we don't succeed in our goal to conserve endangered species, most of the species will be extinct in the future.



#### Zoo's problems:

Cherfas described several problem areas in zoos such as enclosure design, social grouping of animals, sexing of birds and breeding problems. Carl Hagenbeck was a creative genius in landscaping and pioneered naturalistic enclosures with open moats. The same zoo can have a naturalistic exhibit but may show a chimpan-





**ZOO 2000**

**BRIEFING BOOK:  
WORKSHOPS IN  
SCIENCE WRITING:  
Zoo's values . . .  
and News values"**

Jeremy Cherfas  
author of Zoo 2000  
January 1994  
Coimbatore, Mysore  
Madras, Hyderabad Zoos

### **Agenda for Zoo's Values and News' Values**

**1. Lecture: Know thy Enemy** What are zoos for? How do they work? What is wrong with them? ... and then What are newspapers for? How do they Work? What is wrong with them?

**2. Discussion: Trading Places** Interactive discussion. Writing a piece, time permitting. Zoo people will write a story on "The News is a Zoo". Journalists will write a sotry "What's New at the Zoo". Stories are pinned up for everyone to read and then interviewees give their response to the stories.

**3. Lecture: What's Wrong and How to Fix it.** What's wrong with zoos? What;s wrong with reporters? Changing the zoo / reporters; changing the perceptions of the zoo and reporters.

**4. Discussion: Change what we can.** What we think of one another and how we might start to change that.

**Summary and appraisal.**

zee all alone, which is not natural behaviour for this highly social animals. Another problem in the zoo is overpopulation which causes financial and managerial problems.

#### Press

Cherfas observed that the main role of the newspaper is filling the page. The reporter's role is to gather information and send it to the office. Normally, he won't write the head lines. The head lines are written by Sub-editor. So the reporter is not responsible for headlines and even for editing the message.

For example once in USA a reporter had written about evolution and how it works and when it was published the head-line was "Evolutionary Theory under Fire". For this kind of thing the reporter is not at all responsible. The reporter should be responsible for the truth always.

On the other hand always people want disasters. If the reporter writes about Prince Charles and Diana being very happy, nobody will bother about this news. If he writes they were throwing things each at each other the people very much care about this news.

#### Exercise:

After his presentation, Cherfas asked the zoo personnel and journalists to split into small groups of equal mixture. The journalists interviewed the zoo people about their work at the zoo, their problems, etc., and the zoo personnel interviewed the journalists about their problems and limitations.

In the final segment of the workshop Dr. Cherfas suggested means of developing good relationships between zoo personnel and journalists. If the zoo has some problem they should call the press people and clearly tell them the cause of the problem and how it is going to be eliminated. This is in addition to good news, which should always be sent to the press. The relationship should be a symbiotic relationship like primates grooming one another.

Cherfas' final advice was a homely, albeit true, that "we can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar". Courtesy and politeness on both sides will result in better communication.

### **Cherfas' observations**

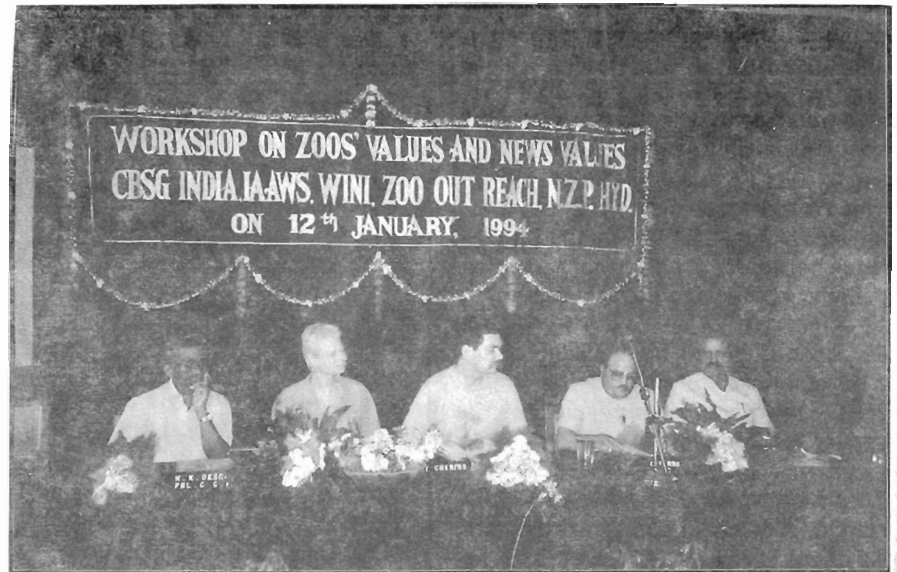
Cherfas later wrote with some observations about the workshops which he enjoyed. He felt that the most working journalists do not have the time to devote more than half a day and this should be considered in arranging future events. He also felt that more briefing should be given to journalists at the time of inviting so that they know they will be expected to make a positive contribution to the discussions, giving their own point of view and experiences.

Another observation Cherfas made was that nowhere he visited was there anybody specifically responsible for relationships with the press. The director was generally perceived to be the person to contact but several journalists commented that if the director was not available - which, in a crisis, he often is not - they have no option but to use other sources. Cherfas strongly suggested that the Central Zoo Authority press for the appointment in each zoo of a properly trained person to have full responsibility for press and public relations. Without this, even with the best will in the world, it may be difficult for ties between press and zoo becoming more positive and mutually beneficial.

Cherfas felt that several other suggestions which came out of the workshops would be worth exploring. One suggestion was that zoo directors hold regular (say bimonthly) meetings at their local press clubs. A very short talk on some newsworthy happening at the zoo, followed by informal discussions, would give the press valuable stories and help to build positive relationships that would come into their own in a crisis. As one press participant said "our values clash during a crisis, so before there is a crisis why not come and call on the press regularly".

Cherfas felt the Central Zoo Authority was an excellent concept and that the Rules were sensible and the procedures for implementing them efficient and fair.

Cherfas also commented on what seemed to be the lack of a "zoo profession" in India as compared to other countries. He noted that directors move in and out of the zoo sector, veterinarians only sometimes becomes specialists in



**During the inauguration of the Workshop at Hyderabad**



**A section of the Workshop participants at Mysore.**

exotic animals by experience, and those who take care of the day - today requirements of the animals, who are closest to the animals and who ought to therefore be the front line, receive little training and less recognition.

He felt that one of the best things the CZA could do would be to help create a zoo profession, extending from the director right up to the keepers. This would have the effect, ultimately, of revaluing the zoo and its efforts in the eyes not only of the people who work there but also in the eyes of the society at large.

Cherfas commented lavishly about the very fine exhibits in Indian zoos.

*The Workshops for Zoo / Press relations were organised by Zoo Outreach Organisation / CBSG, India Education Special Interest Group. They were sponsored by the British Council, South (Madras), Zoo Outreach Organisation with funds from British Council and Chester Zoo, and the host zoos - Coimbatore, Hyderabad, Madras, Mysore - which contributed lunch, tea, transport, etc.*