

Zoos in China: Suffering on an Olympic Scale



23, rue du Chanoine-Poupard - BP 91923 - 44319 Nantes cedex 3

Tél. 02 51 83 18 10 • Fax 02 51 83 18 18

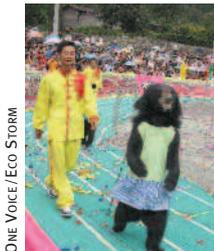
www.cirques.org • www.onevoice-ear.org

e-mail : info@onevoice-ear.org • CCP 2 869 76 R Strasbourg

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Grotesque parade: This bear is forced to parade for public amusement at Chongqing Safari Park’s notorious “Animal Olympics”.

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A report of a special investigation by One Voice

On 8 August 2008 the XXIX Summer Olympics opens in Beijing, China with a glittering three-and-a-half hour ceremony. The Chinese authorities aim to dazzle the billions watching on TV with “a splendid party”, featuring photos of 10,000 children’s smiles taken around the world to mark the Games’ theme of “One World, One Dream.” With Steven Spielberg and French multimedia show designer Yves Pepin as consultants, the ceremony promises to be the most spectacular yet.

But while the world savours the flags, fireworks and colourful choreography at Beijing’s National Stadium, captive wild animals across China will be silently suffering as they suffer day in, day out, in some of the most horrific zoos on earth.

One Voice sent a team of specialist investigators to eight zoos. What they saw and filmed there reduced these experienced professionals to tears.

China’s zoos are relics from a long-dead era of grotesque menageries, places where wild animals are humiliated, abused and cruelly treated for public pleasure. These often old and decaying places are animal prisons in which the pitiful inmates behave psychotically because of their barren incarceration. Alarmingly they are places where visiting families callously mock and taunt the already traumatised animals. In some, the bloodlust of the Roman amphitheatre is perpetuated : live farm animals are thrown to the big cats to be torn apart for visitor entertainment.

In China, zoo or any other captive or companion animals have no protection whatsoever in law, yet this is the country determined to use its Olympic Games to show it is the forward thinking, economic powerhouse of the 21st Century. It is a nation whose zoos are still in the Dark Ages, as this report graphically shows.



A cruel game :
Visitors taunt the big cats at Bedaling Safari Park with live chickens tied to poles: this one endured five minutes of terror before being caught and eaten alive.

Zoos visited

Bedaling - an hour north of Beijing, this safari park lies a few hundred metres from the most visited section of the Great Wall of China. It is a place of great animal suffering, with a grotesque big cat feeding “attraction”.

Beijing - proudly displaying pandas and bedecked with Olympic symbols, Beijing zoo is situated by a raging road of busy traffic and newly constructed sky-trains that will soon rush overhead. The 21st century pace of these modern surroundings contrasts with the medieval conditions for the animals in this zoo.

Chongqing - despite occupying a vast acreage in the plains of central China, most of the animals in this safari park are locked away in the tiniest of cages.

Datong - located in the centre of a coal mining city in Shanxi Province, Datong zoo’s position in a tiny corner of the city park provides a welcome escape for visitors from the chemical fumes that fill the air of this region. Its animal captives, however, have no respite from some appalling conditions.

Qingdao - Qingdao zoo was relocated to the city’s botanical gardens in 1977 ; 30 years on the rusting bars of the enclosures and the deranged animals that occupy them contrast markedly with this otherwise serene city park.

Zibo - two years ago this zoo in east China’s Shandong Province moved to the outskirts of this desperately polluted urban area, where visibility is generally less than 200m. Despite the move, conditions for animals here are primitive and among the worst we found during our investigation



No shade, no hope: Chained by the neck in a wheeled cage without drinking water, a monkey at Datong Zoo huddles in a corner as it tries in vain to escape blazing sunshine.

Animal Prisons

The conditions most animals endure at these zoos are disturbing. The norm is a bare concrete floored cell or cage scattered with faeces and food remnants. Some of these had no freely available drinking water when we visited. Most alarming of all is the inadequate size of these animal prisons.

Big cats in cells five paces wide ; a two-metre hippo in a bleak enclosure just twice its length ; a leopard cub in a bed-sized cell ; a monkey chained by its neck in a wheeled cage just two metres by one, shrinking from the blazing sun in a vain attempt to find shade... Around each corner lies a new heartbreak. Worse, many animals are housed singly, denied even the comfort of their own kind to mitigate the privations of their existence.

Beijing Zoo, a place filled with inadequate housing, typifies the lack of thought in providing conditions that meet animals' needs. Here, Asiatic and moon bears were living in a desolate bear pit, enduring continual noise from construction work on an over-land metro railway : astonishingly, it passes directly over their compound.



Pacing out the endless days : Like many big cats in Chinese zoos, this lion at Beijing Zoo resorts to stereotyped pacing to try to dull the monotony of existence in a tiny, barren tiny enclosure.

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Captive animals that are inadequately housed or lack stimulation can sometimes resort to repetitive, apparently pointless behaviour in an attempt to numb themselves to their predicament. This “stereotyped behaviour” is a key indicator of poor welfare : China’s zoos are a virtual text book for it.

An alarming proportion of animals at the zoos we visited were displaying stereotyped behaviour, often to an extreme degree. Animals from big cats to monkeys and bears paced relentlessly, some repeatedly licking the walls, others swinging their heads dementedly side to side. We saw animal after animal busily going nowhere in this psychotic fashion.

At Zibo Zoo we saw 20 squirrels jumping over each other in an endless, stylised frenzy : their cage measured just two metres by one. Nearby - in the worst big cat conditions we found at any zoo - panthers, leopards and jaguars continually paced out their wretched days in cells just three by four metres. It wasn’t just lack of space that tormented them : a noisy children’s playground was nearby, generating an endless cacophany of synthesised music and explosions.

“After 10 minutes filming these poor cats the noise was driving us crazy,” said a team member. “One can only imagine the hell these animals suffer every single day of their miserable lives.”



Nowhere to hide

In the 18th and 19th Centuries most zoo animals were kept in sterile environments purely for people to gawp at. While zoos in many countries have moved on, many of those in China have not. Their animals are simply an entertainment.

To facilitate this, zoos ensure visitors have a clear, unobstructed view of the animals by giving them nowhere to hide. Our investigators found burrows or sleeping quarters frequently blocked off during visiting hours at many of the zoos they visited, leaving animals with nothing to do but pace relentlessly or, in the case of apes, to hug and rock themselves for self-comfort.

At Qingdao Zoo this has reached a heartbreaking nadir. Our team filmed a female jaguar nursing newborn cubs on a concrete floor littered with faeces. “There wasn’t even straw for her to lie on,” says one team member. “We felt awful - like intruders spying on this wretched family.”

Solitary confinement: This chimp at Datong Zoo is the most miserable of prisoners, kept in permanent solitude in an otherwise empty cell.

The show that never ends

China’s zoos often require more of animals than simply to be visible : substantial numbers are trained to perform tricks at in-zoo shows. These recall an era of animal humiliation that has been consigned to history in other nations that, like China, view themselves as economic powerhouses. In this respect, Chongqing Safari Park is notorious.

Its “Animal Olympics” is a sick parody of the Games that degrades the 1,000 visitors who watch each performance. Backed by blaring techno music this anachronistic spectacle features a parade round a mock race track, featuring clothed chimpanzees, bears forced to walk on their hind legs and –a goose pulling a cart containing tiger cubs.

This was followed by “bear boxing”, in which two moon bears in boxing gloves were goaded into hitting each other for three rounds to loud audience laughter. The bears’ trainers hovered close by with metal spikes available in case the animals needed “encouraging” to punch each other.

Another Chongqing show, “The Performance of the Beasts”, saw young tigers forced to run in circles, leap over each other, pose on stools and jump through burning hoops. Like the lone and terribly sad performing wolf that followed them, the animals shit themselves frequently in terror of their spike- and whip-wielding trainers.

Visitors to Chongqing can also pay to have their photographs taken with lions, tigers, red pandas and bears chained to fake tree stumps. As posing families laughed and smiled for the camera, the lasting memory for our watching investigators was the terrifying listlessness of the animals being photographed with them.

Eaten alive

Some Chinese zoos feature a grotesque speciality : the feeding of live animals to big cats, either by staff or, in return for a fee, by the visitors themselves. The live prey is often chickens but in some zoos livestock, including cattle, are savaged to death for visitor amusement.

Badaling Safari Park lies in view of the Great Wall of China an hour north of Beijing and is a popular tourist destination. While the world watches athletes compete at the Olympic stadium next August visitors to Badaling will be paying to throw live chickens to the big cats, pushing them through special roof hatches and window chutes as they pass through the enclosures in tour vehicles.

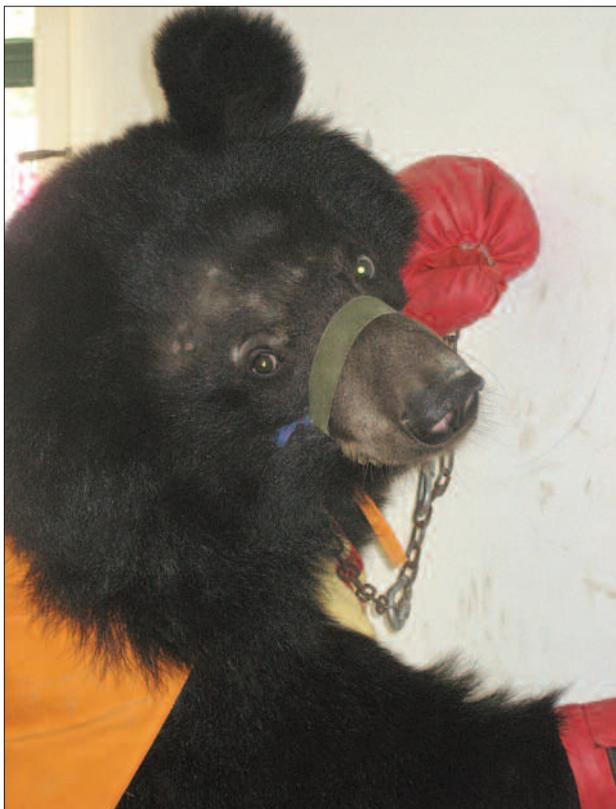
A chicken costs about 30 yuan (3 euros) - 300 yuan (30 euros) buys a live goat to feed to the lions.

Mocked and humiliated

The behaviour of large numbers of zoo visitors towards these pitiful animals is arguably the single most disturbing feature of China's menageries. Many, including families with children, treat the animals simply as objects of derision. Apparently oblivious to the creatures' misery they shout, growl and whistle at them, they rattle and kick the bars to provoke reactions, they laugh and jeer.

At Zibo Zoo, our team was sickened to see visitors spitting at wolves that were incarcerated in tiny cells without even water to drink. They also saw a laughing family provoking two neurotic Pekinese dogs to bite their shoes by kicking the bars of their bleak enclosure.

Worse followed at Badaling Safari Park. As well as feeding live chickens to the big cats, visiting families can also buy them to tie to bamboo poles by the feet and dangle over a pit-style lion enclosure. Our investigators watched visitors tease the big cats with the terrified birds until these were caught and eaten alive - watched all the while by crowds of cooing and laughing adults and children.



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China debates animal protection

China has laws to protect wildlife, most famously strict legislation preserving giant pandas : the penalty for poaching these lucrative cultural symbols is death. It has no laws at all protecting other animals.

In 2004 Beijing publicly proposed animal welfare legislation, which included the stipulation that “no-one should harass, mistreat or hurt animals” and amongst other humane requirements would have banned fights between animals or between humans and animals for gambling, entertainment for other commercial purposes. However, that legislation was scrapped soon after being first aired, apparently because the Government believed that China wasn't ready for it.

No life for a bear : Moon bears at Chongqing Safari Park are forced to box each other during its “Animal Olympics”, a cruel and demeaning parody of the real Games.

Dr Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, best selling author of popular books about animals, describes the zoo conditions we found as horrendous. “To believe that we will learn anything about the natural behaviour of animals in these very unnatural places is a delusion peculiar to humans,” says Dr Masson, a former psychoanalyst and author of *When Elephants Weep*. “The only education anybody could take from such places is as an example of how beastly we can be to other sentient creatures.”



The draft law caused heated debate in the Chinese media. Speaking against, Qiao Xinheng, a legal expert at Wuhan-based Zhongnan Zhengfa University, said it was unrealistic to expect China to keep animals to Western standards: “As soon as you talk about animal rights you’re talking about money... China just barely left the stage when people were wondering where their next meal will come from. They can’t think about animals yet.”

Speaking in favour, Song Wei, an attorney and Professor of Law at the University of Science and Technology of China wrote: “China, an ancient and civilized country, possesses a profound Buddhist culture which insists on no killing and the idea of equality of all living things, i.e. that all life should be treated kindly. Until now, most countries have enacted related laws and regulations. China has started fairly late, but we may not escape or be absent in the trend of universal love.” He pointed out that China was now a member of the World Trade Organisation, saying that its legal system and level of civilisation had to catch up with its economic progress to match those of other developed countries.

Time for Action

Opinion polling shows there is growing empathy for animals among Chinese people and that animal welfare is far from being merely a Western whim. In 2004 One Voice co-sponsored a Market & Opinion Research International (MORI) poll carried out in Asia on attitudes to animals. It found that in China a heartening 90 per cent of people believed “we have a moral duty to minimise animal suffering” with 77 per cent agreeing that the law should require that animals’ suffering be minimised as much as possible. And indeed, despite the attitude of many zoo visitors towards the captive creatures, our zoo investigators met many Chinese individuals who were ashamed and distressed at such appalling treatment of animals. Animal welfare groups are also reported to be springing up across China.

It is now time for China to introduce animal protection legislation. To encourage the Chinese authorities to take such action One Voice has launched an international online petition at http://www.onevoice-ear.org/combattre/petitions/petition_chine_english.htm and hopes that people within China and from around the world will sign it. One Voice urges anyone visiting China, particularly for the Olympic Games, to stay away from attractions such as these zoos where animals are so cruelly exploited for entertainment and to tell their country’s Chinese Embassy why they are refusing to visit them.

If a nation is great enough to be able host the Olympic Games it is great enough to be able to protect its non-human inhabitants.

Erin Pizzey, the celebrated international humanitarian and founder of refuges for women and children, warns that the kind of cruelty seen in Chinese zoos harms not just animals but society too. “If a small child is exposed to cruel acts he or she will be scarred, sometimes for life,” says Erin, who was born in China. “Such a child may grow up to commit cruel acts and be violent. I have seen this myself with families that I have worked with.”





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The unluckiest of tortoises

THESE TORTOISES AT QINGDAO ZOO ARE USED FOR TARGET PRACTICE: VISITORS THROW COINS INTO THE MONEY-STREWN TANK, ATTEMPTING TO HIT THE ANIMALS ON THEIR HEADS "FOR LUCK". THE ELASTIC BANDS ROUND THEIR NECKS PREVENT THEM FROM RETRACTING THEIR HEADS.