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**“You are a guest in their home. They are sensitive and have feelings.” – signage at San Francisco Zoo**

I am a retired zoo professional with over 30 years experience, including as General Curator of the Los Angeles Zoo and the North Carolina Zoo. I am an expert in the care, handling and maintenance of exotic animals. I was also a longstanding professional member of the American Zoo and Aquarium Association, or AZA, and chaired a variety of important committees for that organization.

On January 31, 2008 I had the opportunity to tour the San Francisco Zoo with a number of other zoo experts as well as some members of animal rights groups. Having done this numerous times with groups similar to this I did not feel exclusive of the group nor did I feel compelled to justify the animals that were in confinement at the zoo. My purpose for going was to evaluate the conditions in which the animals were held rather than have any debates about the morality of keeping animals in confinement. I was somewhat familiar with the SF Zoo having visited there before as well as coming from North Carolina Zoo to take a gorilla female back with me (on loan) in about 1987. At that time I toured the S F Zoo extensively with zoo personnel. Sadly, with very few exceptions, little has changed at the zoo since that time (20 years ago).

It was a cold and rainy day at the zoo and was very unpleasant for visitors. I am told though that this weather was not uncommon for the zoo. I was quite miserable as I trudged around the zoo and was surprised that most of the animals were on display and forced to endure this weather.



As I entered the zoo I was very impressed with the plaza and how fresh and inviting it was. There were statues, benches, gift shops, bathrooms, new buildings, and a new moated giraffe exhibit on my right. I felt that it was a great beginning and I was anxious to see the rest of the new zoo.

As we walked around the giraffe exhibit (which housed other animals as well) I saw the efforts of the architects to provide for the animals but they were just that, efforts. At the first covered lookout I saw a browse station on a pulley system which is intended to take a branch and pull it up to the level of the giraffe for both eating but primarily for “behavioral enrichment” of the giraffe – alas the branch dangling from the device was empty and devoid of any leaves. I saw the other branch feeders for this exhibit and they too were empty of branches or had already been stripped of their leaves. I did see the holes in the barn doors where the giraffe had been licking them so much that they had actually licked a hole through the wooden panels. I saw the patches on the wooden panels where the maintenance folks had put metal on the areas of the holes. So much for recognizing an issue and addressing it on a drawing but the reality of it is – it failed.

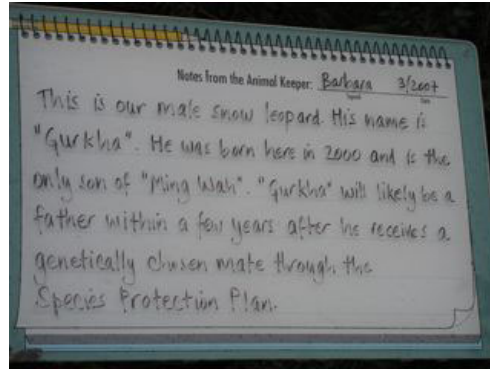
As I walked around the areas I saw nothing had changed since my visit of over 20 years ago – gorilla exhibit – same, Primate Discovery Center – same. I did stop at the patas monkey exhibit and looked to see if I could count the number of monkeys in the exhibit – I could only count one. I was saddened to see a lone patas sitting on a branch under a leaf looking pitiful – did he have companions? Cold? What was he thinking?

I continued my tour thinking same, same, same, same. I saw the old rhino exhibits, the old buildings that were of a bygone era, the horrible seal pool, a fairly pleasant penguin exhibit (which could have been made much better and become a real highlight exhibit), the cordoned off large cat exhibits (which I peeked at through the fencing), most of the exhibits were probably great when they were built but were terrible by today’s standards.



I saw the new signs telling people not to harass the animals or tease the animals. These were great but I looked closely and they were on what appeared to be a temporary plastic sealed cardboard which immediately caused me to wonder how long they would be there.

The signs did say that you (the public) were guests in the animals' home and admitted that the animals were sensitive and had feelings.



I trudged all the way to the rear of the zoo to see the "Feline Conservation Center" which was a hodgepodge of cages with leopards ocelots, and other small cats in them. The entire area was depressing. All of the cats were huddled under their tiny shelters and the signage was so outdated that it was impossible to read. It was easy to see where repairs had been made to the cages for most of it was galvanized wire while the other parts of the cages were either oxidized or painted brown.

The new grizzly bear exhibit was fine but as I looked at it I had to wonder how long it would be until it matched the other neglected and out dated exhibit I had just seen. I was a good feeling though when the signage mentioned about them being the result of being rescued from Montana and brought to the zoo. When you read information such as that you feel greatly relieved that they are here rather than being shot or euthanized. The grizzly bear exhibit also made the other bear exhibits look even more horrible. It demonstrated to me what could be done with other bears. The polar bears were pacing and even if they used the entire exhibit it was woefully inadequate for a species that has the pelagic sea as its domain.



During my visit I spoke to a number of zoo employees. Without exception all of them were not happy about working at the current conditions at the zoo and things were getting worse. Some told me about the dedicated keeper staff that had left and others told me

about retaliation should they say anything negative about the zoo. At a minimum there certainly is a communication gap.



All in all my visit was to a zoo that had fallen into disrepair and neglected. Deferred maintenance was the order of the zoo. I can understand not wishing to put more money into exhibits that are going to be renovated in the near future but it was obvious that most of the exhibits that I saw had been in need of repair for years! Most of the new and renovated areas were in the public areas not in the animal areas. To me this is a zoo administrator mentality – we gotta have something new to kick attendance up next year!

It is very important to remember who the residents of the zoo truly are – the animals. Is it used by the public and zoo employees work there, but it is the animals that are there 24/7 sometimes for life in their enclosures – left to be subjected to the next area of deferred maintenance or renovation. If the administrators of the SF Zoo would go out and read their own signage they would see that indeed these animals are sensitive and have feelings. They have no voice – they are completely in our care. If you were an animal would you like to be kept at the SF Zoo? My answer would have to be NO!

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