

ROME ZOO — ITS HISTORY, ITS DECLINE AND SOME PROPOSALS FOR ITS FUTURE

BY SPARTACO GIPPOLITI

Introduction

Rome could be the first European capital to close down its zoo (or radically transform it) if, in the November election, a 'green' candidate is elected as the new Mayor of the city. The present article will try to briefly summarise the 82-year history of the Rome Zoological Garden; I feel its story could be highly instructive for other zoo people working around the world under variable social and political pressures.



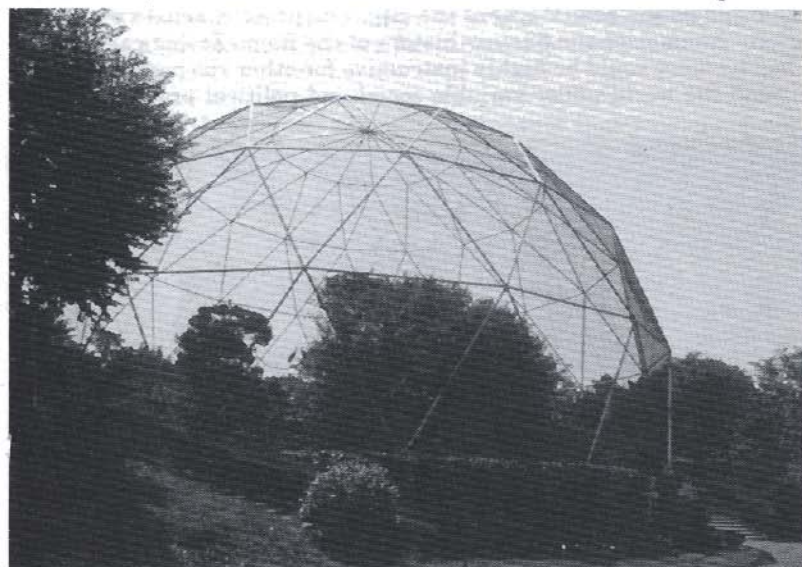
A characteristic Hagenbeck design — Rome Zoo's lion exhibit, built in 1911.

A Brief History

The Rome Zoo opened on 5th January 1911 thanks to the efforts of a private non-profit society. The zoo, which covered an area of 12 hectares in the historic park of Villa Borghese, was planned by Carl Hagenbeck and directed by the German zoologist Knottnerus-Meyer. Among its many free-viewing exhibits, the so-called 'Villaggio delle Scimmie' (Monkey Village) was particularly noteworthy, being, I suspect, the first enclosure of its kind ever made in a zoo. The original

Villaggio was replaced by an island for gibbons in the thirties, but a similar exhibit, the 'Aldeia dos Macacos', is still in use in Lisbon Zoo, Portugal.

The Municipality of Rome took full responsibility for the zoo in 1917, following the financial difficulties caused by the First World War. In 1925 the zoo became autonomous, while still receiving financial support from the municipality, thus making possible a long period of development that placed it among the best zoos in Europe. However, these improvements caused the abandonment of the original Hagenbeckian style and the adoption of more traditional systematic and 'stamp collection' criteria. In 1935 the zoo was enlarged by the addition of another five hectares. During this period the following new exhibits were developed, mainly by architect Raffaele De Vico: the Reptile House, the Great Flight Aviary, the Monkey House, the Ape House, the Bird Houses, the Pheasantries and some new enclosures for ungulates.



Rome Zoo's great flight aviary for storks, ibises and cranes, built in 1935.

At that time very strong contacts were maintained between the zoo and the then Italian colonies in Africa (Libya, Eritrea and Somalia). Thanks to this, breeding groups of little-known taxa were to be found in Rome – among them the Somali leopard, Somali and Eritrean lions, Nubian and Eritrean wild asses and Somali common genet. The exchange of animals with the most important zoos in Europe was also a common occurrence. For example, in 1935 Rome Zoo received its first gorilla, the three-year-old male Jacques, as a gift from the Jardin des Plantes of Paris.

Hoofstock have been one of the zoo's specialities. In 1930 a new subspecies of Barbary sheep from Libya was described by Dr Lepri on living specimens housed at Rome Zoo. In 1938 the zoo received a pair of the still undescribed Dahalac's gazelle, but regrettably no photos or

other data are available. In 1939 Dr Taibel was sent by the zoo to Ethiopia to capture antelopes, and in particular the legendary mountain nyala (*Tragelaphus buxtoni*). Three female calves of this species were collected and hand-reared, but two succumbed to rinderpest and the third was set free in 1941 when the Italian army retired from Ethiopia.

The zoo held the first pair of bongo in Europe (a male acquired from Kenya in 1934 and a female captured by Captain Gatti in the Ituri Forest in 1935). Other notable events of the pre-war period include the breeding of Sardinian deer (*Cervus elaphus corsicanus*), lesser and Indian mouse deer, pampas and brocket deer and scimitar-horned oryx. Among non-hoofed species, noteworthy breedings were those of Sumatran orang-utan (1930, 1931), chimpanzee (1932), golden lion tamarin (1937), bare-faced curassow (*Crax fasciolata*) (1940) and rusty-margined guan (*Penelope supercilii*) (1940).

The Second World War severely compromised the existence of the zoo, but just when it was trying to recover, a new and certainly heavier stroke threw its existence into the balance. In May 1949 some newly-imported antelopes from Somalia introduced rinderpest among the hoofed stock. More than 110 animals had to be put down, among them a breeding group of gaur, the above-mentioned herd of Libyan Barbary sheep, some four-horned antelopes, two gerenuks, a common duiker and some bush-pigs.

However, first Dr Lamberto Crudi and then Prof. Ermanno Bronzini, successive directors of Rome Zoo, worked very hard to restore the zoo to its former importance. In 1948 the first of four Indian elephant births took place at the zoo. The baby was rejected by its mother and so, for the first time in the world, a new-born elephant was completely hand-reared to adulthood. [Some details of the rearing of this and a subsequent calf may be found in Lee S. Crandall (1964), *Management of Wild Mammals in Captivity*, pp. 468-470. - Ed.] Moreover, in those years important parasitological researches were carried out in collaboration with Rome University.

Around 1960 the zoo held about 35 species and subspecies of antelope. Species which were breeding included lesser kudu, bushbuck, Uganda kob, Nile lechwe, white-tailed gnu, Coke's hartebeest or kongoni (*Alcelaphus buselaphus cokii*), springbok, and Soemmerring's, goitred and Heuglin's (*Gazella rufifrons tilonura*) gazelles.

The Decline

From the late sixties on, political and financial problems arose which prevented the adequate development of the zoo. Prof. Bronzini proposed the creation of a large park in a rural area to which to send the large collection of hoofed stock, while the zoo in Villa Borghese would manage the rest of the collection, but this project never materialised. Some of the structures designed at that time, such as the Penguin House, were never utilised. The only partial exception is the renovated Reptile House (1983), which has achieved good results in the exhibition and breeding of a number of reptiles, mainly snakes. The zoo lost its autonomy within the municipality, and since 1981 it has been directed by four different directors, none of whom was a zoologist or a 'zoo-man'.

Although it formally participates in some EEPs, the exchange of animals with other European zoos has been almost non-existent. For several years the zoo has held a solitary female black rhino of breeding age, a female pileated gibbon, a single black vulture and two female Grevy's zebras – all EEP species.

In recent years the municipality has (unsurprisingly) been incapable of providing and/or supporting clear political and technical guidelines for the development of the zoo, and also for opposition to so-called environmentalists and anti-zoo lobbyists. In 1988 the zoo, together with the National Academy of the Lincei, organised an international conference in Rome on the theme 'What Future for the Zoo?', but anti-zoo shows were more appreciated by the media than rigorous scientific presentation, and the conference did not achieve any practical result.

Some Proposals for the Future

According to a draft officially proposed by the management of Rome Zoo, the zoo should become mainly a breeding and rescue centre for Italian threatened species and injured wildlife. At the same time, more resources and space should be allocated to the zoological museum at the expense of the zoo. So what about this plan? Some major points need to be underlined:

(1) The plan seems to deny any value to the 'traditional' urban zoo, forgetting that for the last 20 years at least it has been (mis)managed by the municipality as a secondary public body, and not as a traditional zoo with all its particular needs;

(2) The plan still retains a 19th century dichotomy between the zoo and the museum, whereas these are in fact perfectly capable of integration, as has been done, for example, at the Noorder Dierenpark (Emmen Zoo) in the Netherlands;

(3) Not a word is said about the threatened species which are already breeding successfully at the zoo, such as the African wild dog, the pygmy hippo, the Nile lechwe etc.;

(4) Like other plans presented in the past, it seems to pay too much attention to the prevalent political climate, and not to the real needs of the animals and the wishes of the most interested visitors.

What, then, should be done? One or more master-plans should be prepared by professional zoologists, conservationists and zoo people. Points to be considered in the preparation of a master-plan are:

– The architecture, history and past experience of Rome Zoo. ('A zoo is more than just a collection of animals,' to quote John Tuson's words in *I.Z.N.* No. 246, p. 27);

– The educational, scientific and conservation value of the present zoological collection;

– The possible shift from systematic to biogeographical/ecological exhibition criteria (see further my Guest Editorial in *I.Z.N.* No. 236, pp. 2–3);

– A return to the Hagenbeckian/naturalistic mode of animal display, giving up as much as possible the sterile, concrete cage concept;

– The climate and geographic position of Rome;

- The full participation of the zoo in international breeding programmes for threatened species.

The selected master-plan should be accepted without trying to obtain the general consensus of any animal rights group, as is being done now. Hence it is absolutely necessary that the zoo become independent of the prevailing political scenario. This would be possible only if the municipality could be assisted by a zoological society able to supply technical and financial support. This society, through its membership, would be able to establish for the first time a real feeling of identity between Romans and their zoo. It is in such a feeling, in my opinion, that the long-term future of Rome Zoo, like that of any educational institution in the world, must lie.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to Ms A. D'Alessandro and Mr P.L. Florio for their friendly help provided during the preparation of this article.

Spartaco Gippoliti, Viale Liegi 48a, 00198 Roma, Italy.
