

Havana's Zoo: What does the lion eat?

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Contemporary zoos (in the crosshairs of a debate) have a mission: to contribute to the environmental education of all citizens. One like the Zoo of Havana (on central 26th Avenue) does not fit precisely in the most modern conception of this kind of institution.

However, zoos are frowned upon by many people right now: and here there are still closed enclosures, bars and fences...animals living in captivity.

But Havana's Zoo has obvious patrimonial values: it was the first park of its kind built in Cuba, has been the playground of entire generations of Cubans, owns a valuable urban concept and treasures monumental works from important figures of Cuban plastic arts...

The previous characteristics and its privileged location have secured its permanence in years when trends favor open spaces and environments more appropriate to the nature of the animals.

Nevertheless, this institution, which almost all people from Havana know as "El zoológico de 26" (The 26th Avenue Zoo), was revolutionary in its time. Since its early years it conceived enclosures that somehow broke with the idea of traditional cage.

After the triumph of the Revolution, the institution consolidated a unique model of animal exhibition, which was combined with an architecture perfectly inserted into the bountiful nature.

But we are not going to make a historical count: this park has lived good and not so good

times. Let's focus on both its current conditions and functions.

For long, zoos (at least respectable ones) stopped to be just pure show, fairgrounds, exhibition of rare animals. Although many people, for better or for worse, do not understand it.

There are no elephants here

"Nowadays zoos have many detractors and a clear *raison d'être as well: they are no longer simple animal exhibitors*, since they are inserted into environmental education programs and contribute to the preservation of endangered species", says microbiologist Raúl Campos Talavera.

Talavera has been working at Havana's Zoo for several decades, so he's considered the historian of the institution.

According to the microbiologist, the idea still persists that there must be an elephant, a giraffe and a lion, so the zoo is worth visiting, but it is necessary that the population opens itself to new ideas.

Here, for example, there are no elephants for a long time.

"There won't be either —specifies Campos—; because we have neither space nor conditions for large animals that naturally live in groups. And it's not fair to subject them to our environment".

This means that when the hippo and rhino still inhabiting the park disappear, people who want to see large animals will have to go to the National Zoo, which meets other requirements.

But Havana's Zoo has and will have other attractions: it has given priority to the work with chimps, jaguars and Andean condors, species with which it has achieved significant results in their reproduction.

In fact, this is the only park in Cuba where chimpanzees are born in captivity. Some of the cubs have reached zoos in other provinces and even, countries such as Mexico, China and Japan.

Campos Talavera considers that each institution of its kind must have a master plan, which includes the kind of animals to be exhibited, how they are going to be exhibited, etc. That is, a clear line: primates, small meat-eaters, autochthonous Cuban species...

"And so we contribute to the preservation of those species and also provide information and knowledge to people. Without counting an indisputable fact: zoos still remain the only way for millions of people to watch certain animals in their natural captivity, not on TV screens".

The challenge of educating

This zoo has a very broad awareness program that even exceeds the limits of the park: workshops with schools, courses for elderly people, artistic presentations of strong commitment with the environment...

Bachelor Ernesto Guevara Ibáñez, Environmental Education specialist, could be proud of everything they've done with the community (which is a lot), but prefers to draw attention to what remains to be done:

"When you pay attention to the attitudes of many of our visitors you realize all the way ahead: there are those who mistreat animals for fun, without even being aware of the harm they

cause”.

We witnessed: bottles, wrappers, cigarette packets (elements that endanger the health of animals) thrown into the ditches.

(Dozens of coins were found in the stomach of an ostrich; the last tapir of the zoo died of an intestinal obstruction caused by a nylon bag...)

“People even throw stones at the chimps for fun and have managed to hurt them —denounces Miguel Rodríguez, one of the most experienced caregivers of the facility. And then, they wonder why monkeys sometimes get aggressive: they usually act by imitation, this is their nature”.

The stories amaze, but are common: every day there are visitors who venture beyond the containment barriers to take a photo or to touch the animals: there are many who have got a good scare or have lost their cameras and cell phones.

“And then they even claim —gets amazed Campos Talavera—; you rebuke someone for doing something wrong and far from apologizing, this person gets upset and protests. I am convinced we need more education, but it is necessary the force of the law too”.

There are days, particularly during the summer, when over 3,000 people coincide in the premises, it's hard to control this. Now the center owns a new signage, posters are livelier, better designed, and provide more information about the animals... but there are people who seem not to notice the signs.

“The zoo is conceived to spend a good time, and the environment invites to that. We will continue working, but it's necessary to talk more about the topic in the media, in schools, in the family”, concludes Guevara Ibáñez.

One thousand questions, one thousand answers

Who wants to know, just needs to ask. A visit to the zoo can be an instructive adventure.

What does a lion eat in this zoo? Mainly horse meat, although sometimes we offer them live preys, so felines do not lose their hunting skills (some people would find this procedure cruel, but some dynamics of nature aren't suitable for accentuated sensitivities).

How many babies does a female chimp have per delivery? Generally one, although occasionally they have twins and even triplets..., as human beings (we should not forget we share 90 percent of our DNA with these primates).

How long does an alligator live? Between 50 and 80 years, obviously, those bred in captivity usually have the highest life expectancy....

And as such, many more questions. Havana's Zoo has a highly professional team of workers, who live up to the challenges of these institutions in Cuba.

“We are a poor country —says historian Raúl Campos—, and a zoo is often very expensive. Animal food, for example, can become a real headache. We must buy at cooperatives, enterprises... at the usual prices, which we know are high... And we must even buy the grass!

“Many people's effort is behind the well-being of an animal, but we are convinced that a zoo

garden is needed”.

Over 77 years after its founding, Havana's Zoo intends to remain the meeting and entertainment place for families. But not only that, it assumes the responsibility to raise awareness over man's commitment with nature.

The debate on the legitimacy of these institutions remains open, but here they still have animals to take care.

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