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Zoo tigers to roam free

Monotosh Chakraborty | TNS

Kolkata: Imagine coming face to face with a Bengal tiger, separated only by a (toughened) glass wall. That's as close you can get to this ferocious cat and live to take a picture of it. And you can soon do this, right here in the city, at the Alipore Zoological Gardens.

The oldest zoo in the country is set to become the first to have a massive all-glass enclosure for tigers.

Severely criticized for decades by the zoo community and conservationists for its cramped cages, Alipore zoo is taking a step at liberating the king of beasts. The open air enclosure will sprawl over 90,000 square feet of trees, grass and waterbodies, where a single tiger will roam supreme.

The plan has been approved by the Central Zoo Authority of India (CZAI), say sources. This will entail a lot of modification of the entire zoo by rearranging the enclosures in a particular order. The white tiger and white fallow deer enclosures will be merged to make the glass enclosure (the erstwhile occupants will be moved elsewhere).

BARRED NO MORE

Over the years, Alipore zoo has grown somewhat unplanned, in an unscientific manner, admit officials. A lot of places have been left unutilised, while a few places are overcrowded. "The most important thing right now is a complete rearrangement of enclosures for optimum land utilization so that animals get much bigger space for movement. We have prepared a road map for the next 20 years, which has been approved by CZAI," said zoo director Raju Das.

The tiger enclosure is the first step in this reform process. "We already have two open enclosures for tigers. Now we are creating the biggest one. We will shift the white deer park and devote the entire zone for tigers. Two tigers will be housed there in adjacent night shelters, who will be released into the open area by turn every alternate day. Instead of an iron net, there will be 20mm thick glass wall so that people can see the tiger much better and in its true form, just as the way it is in the wild," said Das.

The zoo has 10 tigers now. It wants to decrease the big cat population by exchanging tigers with other animals in other zoos of the country. The aim is to give each tiger the maximum roaming space. The glass enclosure will also help in the tiger breeding programme.

"For quite some time, we have stopped accepting animals from other zoos," said

EYEBALL TO EYEBALL WITH THE KING

Subhash Chandra



(Left & above) Caged tigers at Alipore zoo. Soon, they will be out of the cramped confines and roam about a huge open-air enclosure with a glass wall. (Below) A glass tiger enclosure at a Manila zoo. At Alipore, too, visitors can get to within millimetres of the magnificent big cats



Das. "A zoo has certain criteria to fulfil to excel. One of them is breeding and we can do that only if we have greater and better managed areas for animals."

Tiger breeding in Alipore zoo has drawn flak in the past from the scientific community because of cross breeding experiments between lion and tigers to produce strains like tigon, and litigons (Panthera hybrids). The zoo bred two tigers in the 1970s — Rudrani (1971) and Ranjini (1973). A cross between a Bengal tiger and an African lion. Rudrani went on to produce seven offsprings by mating with an Asiatic lion, producing 'litigons'.

One of these litigons, named Cubanacan survived to adulthood, stood

over 5.5 feet tall, measured 11.5 feet and weighed over 800 pounds. It was marketed by the zoo as the world's largest living big cat. It died in 1991, aged 15. All such hybrid makes were sterile. Quite a few suffered from genetic abnormalities and many died prematurely. Rangini, the last tigon in the zoo, died in 1999 as the oldest of her kind. The zoo stopped its hybrid programme in 1985 after a WWF campaign led to a government legislation.

Increased number of open air enclosures has necessitated the moving of some animals to a suburban location. But CZAI has strongly recommended against this, saying the Alipore site is of historical significance.