Marine World Sri Lanka

Posted on



The aquarium exhibit in any tropical zoo is always a treat. An enthusiastic aquarist does not have far to look when collecting for his exhibit.

The Dehiwela Zoo, situated just south of Colombo’s city limits, is no exception. The tropical island of Sri Lanka, surrounded by the warm, rich waters of the Indian Ocean, is also a country well watered by a large number of rivers, streams and lakes. From these waterways and the ocean come hundreds of species of freshwater fish, seawater fish including shellfish, as well as other living forms such as coral.

You can sample some of the more interesting members of each group at the aquarium of the Dehiwela Zoo. Located conveniently next to the main entrance, the aquarium sports a medium-sized outdoor pool surrounded by a mini-amphitheatre.

You can sit here comfortably shaded from the heat of the sun by the large, overhanging branches of the flamboyant tree and watch the cavortings of a lively pair of sea lions. These friendly and very intelligent marine mammals seem to enjoy being the centre of attention as they play to the crowd which always gathers when the seals glide out of their inner pools.

As you enter the main building which houses all the aquarium’s built-in tanks, it will

take you a few minutes co adjust to the gloom inside. The bright sunshine world gives way to the submarine atmosphere of the curving corridors lined with rock walls that hold the fish tanks. The path that winds through the building, in between tanks and small artificial pools, is lined with sand. Although the sand can get between your toes if you’re wearing sandals, it is soft to walk on and deadens the sound of scores of feet shuffling past.

The first exhibition to meet your eyes is a large, deep tank filled with a long grey fish called mahsier. Some mahsier reach over one foot in length, and as they swim past you in slow motion strikes you that only in semi-darkness with the sun filtering through the waters by means of small openings above can you really appreciate the beauty of these fish. Since all the tanks are built at eye level, you can also enjoy the delightful sensation of having found yourself at the bottom of the ocean. The next tank features red-bellied piranha, also a lovely sight with round, blue-grey bodies speckled with silvery dust-like markings. A member of the Characidae family The Dehiwela Zoo, situated just south of Colombo’s city limits, is no exception. The tropical island of Sri Lanka, surrounded by the warm, rich waters of the Indian Ocean, is also a country well watered by a large number of rivers, streams and lakes. From these waterways and the ocean come hundreds of species of freshwater fish, seawater fish including shellfish, as well as other living forms such as coral. You can sample some of the more interesting members of each group at the aquarium of the Dehiwela Zoo. Located conveniently next to the main entrance, the aquarium sports a medium-sized outdoor pool surrounded by a mini-amphitheatre. You can sit here comfortably shaded from the heat of the sun by the large, overhanging branches of the flamboyant tree and watch the cavortings of a lively pair of sea lions. These friendly and very intelligent marine mammals seem to enjoy being the centre of attention as they play to the crowd which always gathers when the seals glide out of their inner pools. As you enter the main building which houses all the aquarium’s built-in tanks, it will take you a few minutes co adjust to the gloom inside. The bright sunshine world gives way to the submarine atmosphere of the curving corridors lined with rock walls that hold che fish tanks. The path that winds through the building, in between tanks and small artificial pools, is lined with sand. Although the sand can get between your toes if you’re wearing sandals, it is soft to walk on and deadens the sound of scores of feet shuffling past.

Another species of fish which catches your attention in the gloom of the aquarium is the tinfoil barb, a beautiful smooth silvery fish which can grow up to over 8 inches in

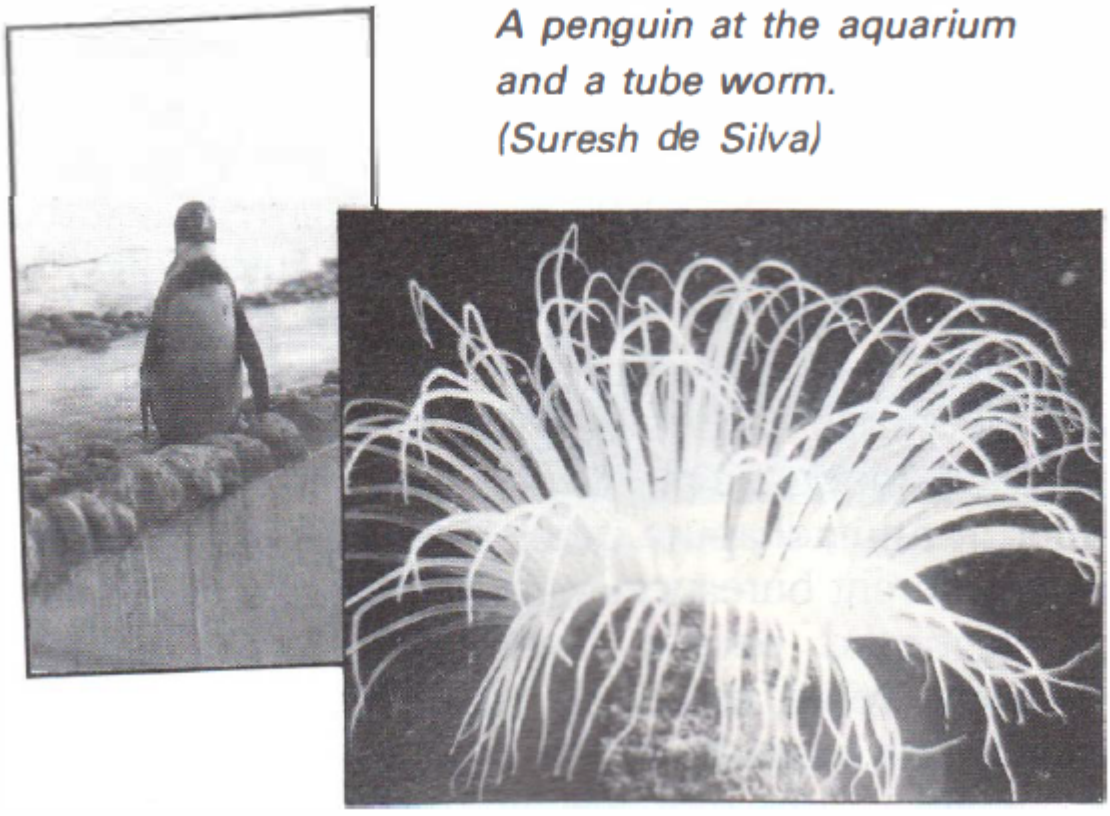
length. The tinfoil barb has a penchant for a vegetarian diet and will eat up aquarium plants if not fed on a proper diet. The silver batfish also attracts the eye, resembling to some extent the popular angelfish but sports a black stripe along its lower body.

As you come round the first big curve of the aquarium you emerge into comparatively bright light pouring in through a large, glass panelled exhibit area open to the sky. Humboldt penguins might seem to be out of place in a tropical zoo, but these small, foot and a half high specimens are very much in evidence at the Dehiwela Zoo. With the help of blocks of ice and whirring fans, these miniature penguins somehow see it through the hot, humid tropical days and nights.

From the penguin exhibit, you walk around into the tropics once again, but this time to marvel at the strange shapes and colours of the marine world The predominant inhabitant in this series of semi-circular tanks is the live coral-literally banks of them lining the bottom of the tanks. Amidst the coral you also find the giant clam with its distinctive scalloped top, the sea fan and the tube worm, the latter looking very much like a short palm tree crowned with live fronds waving gently in the water.

Perhaps the most fascinating of these extraordinary sea creatures is the sea anemone and its special relationship with the brilliantly striped yellow and black clownfish, both natives of the Indian Ocean. The sea anemone, with its fleshy tube-like tentacles that are highly poisonous to most species of fish, is a carnivore that will kill and consume these unfortunates most efficiently-with the exception, that is, of the clownfish, which for some reason the anemone tolerates. You will be intrigued by the almost sensuous interaction between the two species as the fish swim and hover, comfortable between the watchful tentacles.

The pennant butterfly-fish is another beautiful species which is characterized by its large pectoral or side fins. The butterfly-fish is supposed to “fly” along the surface of the water up to distances of 6 feet at a time. Also keep an eye out for the ringed angelfish, the blue trigger-fish and the cleaner wrasse. As. for the shellfish in this section of the aquarium, you can find banded coral shrimp, lobster and the hermit crab. So should you ever feel like spending time amid the fascinating creatures that inhabit the marine world, plan a visit to the aquarium at the Dehiwela Zoo, which is open daily from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. and charges a nominal entrance fee.



A penguin at the aquarium and a tube worm. (Suresh de Silva)