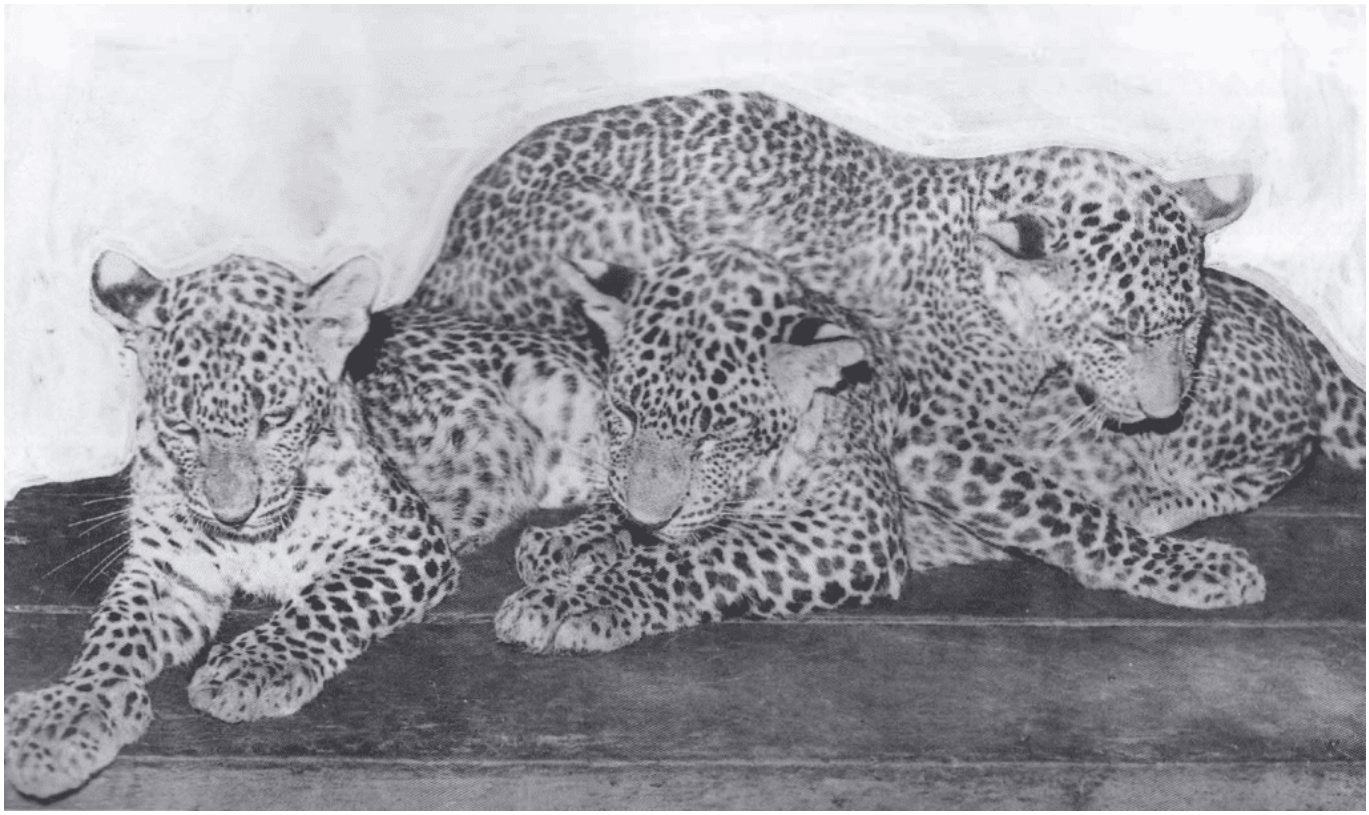
Spotted Delights at Dehiwela Zoo

Posted on

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Some of the many leopard cubs at the Dehiwela zoo.

If in keeping with the norms of zoological gardens the world over only a pair of an exotic species is required for exhibition purposes, the Dehiwela Zoo, near Colombo. has gone far above the norm in its leopard population. It has several leopard stars on exhibit, and the set is also teeming with “extras”. The zoo here has 4 leopards in all, nearly all of them cuddlesome cubs-lovely spotted delights. Sadly, for visitors, not all of them could be on exhibition at any one time, although many are seen. For, the zoo has its space problems too, with such an explosion in its spotted feline population. The increase in the Dehiwela Zoo’s leopard population is something that has been building up over the past four to five years. As the Zoo’s Director, Mr. Bradley Fernando explains, the fact that leopards, unlike elephants, breed freely in

captivity, has contributed largely to the situation. It is also the result of Sri Lanka's strict Customs regulations and surveillance on the smuggling out of animals, their skins or other parts. The smuggling of leopard skins has now been curbed to large degree. Few leopards are now being taken out of the country, even legally; Western European zoos having an abundance of their own cats don't need any from these parts, while in Eastern Europe, though most zoos could do with a couple of our leopards, exchange control laws make such acquisitions virtually impossible. Thus, despite the leopard being included in Annex A of the Convention on Endangered Species, Sri Lanka, is believed to have a fairly healthy leopard population with satisfactory breeding habits.

Concerned members of the Sri Lankan public have naturally had their claws out in criticism of what they call unfair confinement of big cats in tiny spaces. But defending the practice, Zoo authorities put forward the argument that leopards, being loners by nature, have their own favourite haunts even in the wilds and rarely stray except for hunting purposes. And having need for no more hunting, the animals. they say, are quite happy to receive their meals on a platter everyday. "The only thing they miss as against their wild state is exercise", they say. However, whatever Zoo authorities the world over say in defence of this practice, it is not entirely correct to say that those who are against it are interpreting it in a purely anthropomorphic sense. With 48 more leopards than they actually need, the Zoo is naturally faced with a huge problem, especially in a financial sense. Apart form taking up valuable space, the cats guzzle Rs. 60,000/-worth of theRs. 150,000 food bill every month-(including 50 percent of the meat bill), which works out to something like five lakhs a year. However, struggling as they are with the problem of space, there isn't much the Zoo can do at present where providing them with more spacious surroundings is concerned. As it is. theirs is a huge responsibility. Each time a poacher is apprehended, his live booty is invariable handed over to the zoo. In some cases poachers may have got away with mother and the abandoned cubs are at the mercy of the zoo.

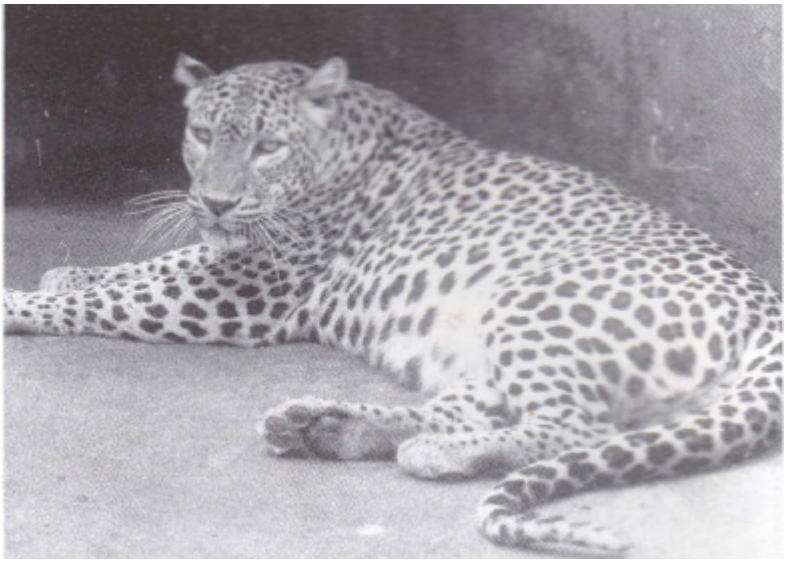
There have also been cases where leopards which have been pushed out of their wet zone habitat have been taken under the motherly wing of the zoo. Thus, it is often that the zoo is called upon to play mama and provide foster homes to dozens of victims of circumstance.

The idea of giving over leopards to private homes has been thought of but then again, unless it is a tourist hotel or animal lovers whose credentials have been established, there is the danger of the animals being ill-treated or eventually being

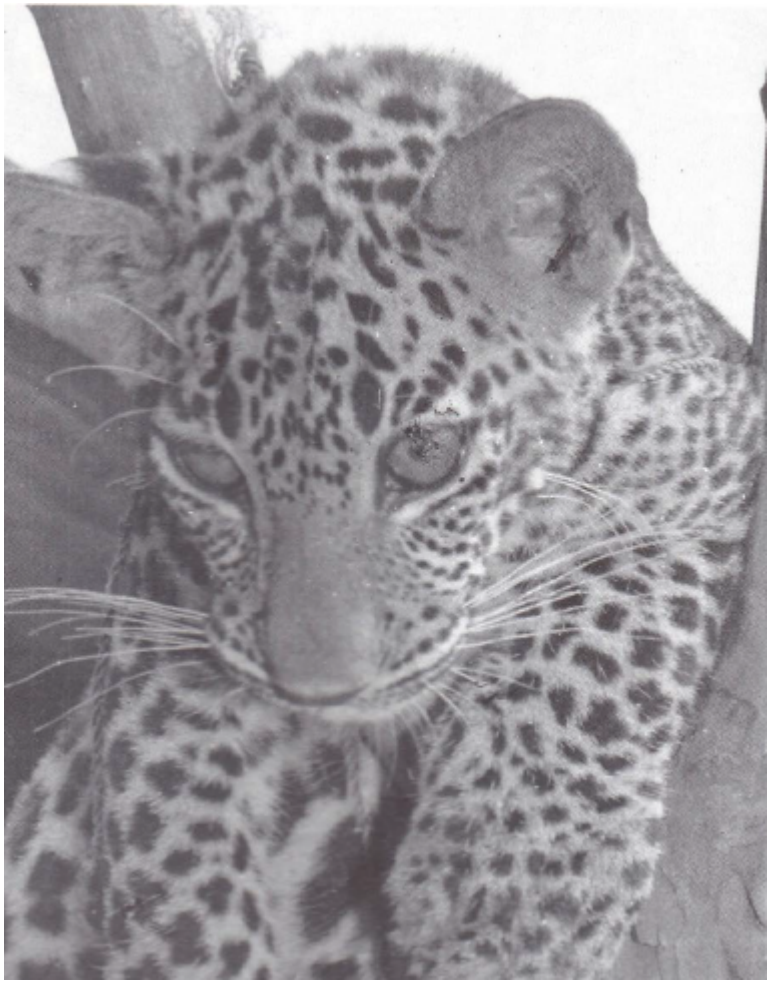
killed for their hide. The concept of a leopard park, an orphanage of sorts modelled on Sri Lanka’s well known elephant orphanage at Pinnawela, has appealed to many people concerned for the well being of the zoo leopards but again several obstacles stand against the success of such a venture.

For instance, the leopard, unlike the elephant, being a loner by nature, does not enjoy living in groups. On the contrary, a male leopard wouldn’t tolerate another male for miles within its territory. In these circumstances, the only answer, it seems, is releasing the animals into the wilds. It isn’t a new idea to zoological authorities and we’ve heard of similar stories where big cats have been released into the wilds after years of living among human beings. Or does it happen only in the make-believe world of celluloid where anything is possible? Maybe not. Yet, one may encounter more than a handful of problems in such a situation. Having lived in captivity and having lost their fear of humans, will the animals turn man-eaters when they find human beings easy prey? It has happened in North India. Or, accustomed to being waited upon hand and foot all their lives, will they be able to fend for themselves at all? And being quite tame, will they stray into villages and be shot by mistake or fall easy victim to unscrupulous poachers? These are the questions to which answers have to be worked out. Until such time as these animals can be gifted to foreign zoos where hopefully they’ll find better homes, or all obstacles to a leopard park project can be worked out, or else they can be released into the wilds with confidence that they will adapt, 48 beautiful leopards must remain in the Dehiwela Zoo kept away from the other species in this large and well landscaped sanctuary, of sorts.

While they are there it is a delight to see them play, in the open pens, where the authorities have tried their best to make conditions as easy for them as possible. If your luck ran out in that photo safari at Yala, or you prefer to fool the folks back home, then the Dehiwela Zoo is the place to get all your pictures of spotted delight. (Courtesy – ‘The Sunday Times’, Colombo)



She is the mother of many. and has promise of gifting the Dehiwela Zoo with more cubs very soon.
Photo: S. Chitrapala



Getting his view from the top. Photo: Kapila Jayanett1



This spotted cub is in no friendly mood.