The ‘New’ Colombo Zoo

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The restful precincts of the Colombo Zoo

Be it families with infants and toddlers in tow or the wizened elderly, they all saunter through the gates of the Colombo Zoo. A steady stream of heads and shuffling feet frequent the maze of paths that traverse the expanse of 23 acres during all hours of the day. For generations, the zoo

has been offering visitors a generous peek into a diverse and exuberant animal kingdom. With many rare and exotic species within its confines, today it has taken new strides to enhance the experience for both visitors and its treasured inhabitants.

Words Prasadini Nanayakkara Photographs Indika De Silva

Entering the premises of the National Zoological Gardens in Colombo is to be engulfed in the shade of lush canopies, landscaped lawns and patches of garden while the charismatic occupants emerge within their enclosures. One of the first sights is the shy zebras at close range, and beyond are up to 350 species to be discovered that translate to an excess of 3500 animals in numbers. Amongst these are as many as 100 species of mammals that populate the vast acreage with marsupials, primates, cats, hoofed mammals, bears and marine mammals.

The immense diversity that can be witnessed here took place as a gradual ascension that began in the 1900s with John Hagenbeck who was engaged in animal circuses. He purchased five acres of land to hold animals as he began a trade exporting them to Europe. This collection centre became an attraction amongst the residents and it was in 1936 that the government took over the area, establishing it as a zoological garden. Today under the purview of Basil Rajapaksa, Minister of Economic Development, the Zoological Garden begins a new phase of development with facilities and infrastructure for both visitors and animals being revamped and refurbished.

Today there are rare and endangered species, some endemic while others were acquired through exchange programmes; for instance, the much treasured pair of African Black Rhinocerous brought down from Japan in 2007 as zoo bred animals. With just 3000 rhinos in the wild and 200 in captivity they are deemed animals of high value. At the Colombo Zoo, the male and female pair occupy an enclosure that is currently under an expansion programme to provide ample space that would enable breeding. At present a walkway bridge runs over the enclosure so that visitors may enjoy a closer look at the pair, and dents have been created to safely isolate the rhino for inspection or treatment whenever necessary. The rhino enclosure can also be further expanded as they share territories with the adjacent African Greater Kudu. And the scientifically devised mixed species enclosures such as this, is another means of expansion along with natural barriers in place for the animals to roam more freely. At the outer extreme of the rhino enclosure a museum and displays will further enhance the viewing and learning experience for visitors.

Similarly a free living area for the elephants and upgraded cages for animals are some of the welfare measures taken for the wellbeing of the animals.

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Visitors too can benefit from the many upgrades that are underway. Paths have been refurbished with access to the differently-abled designed wherever possible. Eco friendly sanitary facilities have been built with modern technology while in addition, comforts such as baby rooms for mothers with infants and sanitary facilities for those with disabilities have also been incorporated. The newly refurbished spacious restaurant is ideal to host birthday parties where guests from the animal kingdom may also make special appearances on request.

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One of the most recent and significant additions to the Zoo is the Animal Nursery and Veterinary Laboratory. This three storey state-of-the-art building is one of a kind not only in the country but in the region as well. Opened just this year, it would allow veterinary surgeons to perform a series of intricate tasks for the well-being of the animals. It affords the desired conditions to care for young animals of different species in a natural environment enabled by adequate technology. Neonatal mammals room, mammalian food preparation and keeper’s room, baby carnivore room, baby ostrich rearing room, baby herbivore mammals room, baby primates, ICU and incubation room, aviation food preparation room and hatchling rearing room all occupy the ground floor. Here, the level of hygiene and security has been conscientiously maintained with biosecurity measures for the protection of the wee ones that would occupy this floor.

Outside each room is a panel to control temperature and humidity within and cameras installed allow the cubs or hatchlings to be observed on CCTV display panels outside each room without intrusion. The individual rooms have been designed with specific species and functions in mind. For instance, the timber floors have been used for the baby carnivore rooms so that the cubs may find good footing. Each of the baby rooms has an open air area with natural settings and ventilation so that they may be gradually introduced to the natural environment. These external and internal compartments in turn afford the requirements for

various development stages of the animal. These rooms including the ICU allow not only zoo bred fragile cubs but also those orphaned in the wild to find refuge here till they are capable of thriving on their own. As a result, everything from species specific milk powder, to medicines are made available at the Animal Nursery.

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The floors above accommodate the CCTV control room for close observation, a one of a kind forensic lab, a drug store, auditorium and veterinary surgeon’s offices. The sophisticated forensic laboratory conducts species identifications on samples that arrive at the Zoo to provide expert evidence when needed.

With many aspects of the Colombo Zoo thus enhanced for the welfare and wellbeing of animals, visitors and even zoo keepers, a day out at the Zoo may well offer an appreciable dose of recreation, education and experience in the animal kingdom.

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