

Animals behind bars 'not behind the times'

By Fiona Holland

BIG cats have always been a crowd-puller for zoos and in Hong Kong's concrete jungle the sleek jaguars of the Zoological and Botanical Gardens are no exception.

But the spotted parents and two rare black cubs have attracted attention of a different kind after the debate resurfaced over plans to replace their cage.

The row over costs has sparked questions about the future of the historic gardens.

Pacing their pen of 150 square metres, the jaguars are unaware of the battle brewing between animals rights groups, urban councillors and zoo authorities.

For once the animal welfareists have sided with bureaucracy, joining the urban council in opposing the planned new \$6.7 million enclosure.

Green groups say they still have the animals' best interests at heart — building a new cage would only perpetuate their incarcerated misery.

Cage size has often been the focus of criticism but the real issue is whether there are good reasons to keep undomesticated animals captive.

A lonely voice among what he calls the "anti-zoo lobby" is Dr Kenneth Searle, Honorary Zoological Curator to the urban council, which manages the Zoological and Botanical Gardens.

A doctor by profession and a zoologist in his spare time, Dr Searle, involved with the gardens since 1957, fervently believes in the ability of zoos to contribute to conservation.

While he agrees that "100 per cent ideal conditions" are impossible to recreate, animals don't go mad as a result of confinement.

Dr Searle said: "It's just not true. They would not lose their instinctive behaviour, by definition it is something innate. What they can lose is some learnt behaviour."

Lost habits learnt from their mothers means no captive-bred big cat has yet been returned to the wild — a fact which reflects the "lamentable ignorance" of the anti-zoo lobby, he said.

"It's absolute rubbish. They are several generations captive-bred. They would starve to death," he said.

But the zoo has been involved in returning rare species to the wild.



LONELY VOICE: Dr Kenneth Searle supports zoos.

"There is no doubt they (the Zoological and Botanical Gardens) are playing an important role through breeding endangered species. They have an exceedingly good captive breeding record for a number of mammals and bird species."

The endangered white-winged wood-duck, down to the last 200 pairs, has been reared at the gardens before being sent to Thailand for the first attempted release.

Dr Searle said the wood-duck, together with another rare bird, Rothschild's myna, and a tiny South American monkey, the golden lion tamarin, ranked as the most successful captive breeding programs carried out by the gardens.

At the 10th anniversary of the first reintroduction of the golden lion tamarin earlier this year, the wild population had increased 20 per cent.

World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) director David Melville said zoos could play a valuable conservation role both in terms of raising awareness and in captive breeding.

"There is no doubt they

(Zoological and Botanical Gardens) are playing an important role through breeding endangered species.

"They have an exceedingly good captive breeding record for a number of mammals and bird species."

Officially WWF does not take a stand on zoos but Mr Melville said: "The animals are breeding successfully in facilities provided which must speak for itself to some extent."

But the limited numbers of species that could be saved by zoos was "a drop in the ocean", he said.

EarthCare vice-president Dr John Wedderburn said: "The success rate of that kind of thing is very minimal. Zoos are latching on to this as justification for their existence.

"Very rarely do they actually achieve what they say they will."

Judy Mills, the Hong Kong representative of the WWF investigation wing, Traffic International, said captive breeding programs for big cats and some omnivores such as bears were still "pie in the sky", because no one knew if they could be rehabilitated on their return to the wild.

Zoos worldwide come in for harsh criticism in a report released earlier this month by two British-based animal conservation groups, the Born Free Foundation and the World Society for the Protection of Animals.

The Zoo Inquiry criticised zoos for using conservation to justify their continued existence and confining "as many as five million animals behind bars ... for little more than human entertainment".

The report said that in reality only 405 of 10,000 zoos worldwide had registered animals on an international species database, indicating that the majority had no intention of seriously participating in helping conserve rare species.

In those 405 zoos less than 10 per cent of space was devoted to threatened species while crowd-pulling African lions and brown bears which were not endangered continued to be bought and bred.

The report, based on research by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), revealed little more than 1 per cent of endangered species could be saved through the reintroduction of captive-bred animals.

Only 2 per cent of the 5,926 threatened species were registered with international zoo breeding programs and only 16 species had ever been successfully reintroduced.

The report also criticised the zoos' second line of defence — education — saying caged animals kept in conditions which bore no resemblance to the natural habitats would mislead visitors.

British-based animal psychologist Dr Roger Mugford described zoos as "animal bedlams" where lifelong confinement drove wild animals berserk to the brink of the unique mental state "zoochosis".

Symptoms of zoochosis involved compulsive, repeated behaviour which had no natural counterpart, reflecting the animals' stress level.

Dr Mugford said: "It's simply

HONG KONG STANDARD
2 5 JUL 1934

confinement and detention preventing animals doing what they normally do.

"Carnivores especially are often in collections where they put some tempting animal they want to eat next door. They can hear potential prey but (instead) they are given boring, uninteresting dead prey."

Zoo-opening hours disturbed natural patterns of sleep, rousing animals normally resting.

Dr Mugford said only a handful of zoos could boast good conservation records — including the celebrated author and zoologist Gerald Durrell's Jersey Wildlife Preservation Trust which was involved with in situ breeding program within the natural habitat.

Critics of captive breeding say it diverts attention from the greatest problem threatening animals — habitat destruction.

Mr Melville said: "It is easier to try and focus on captive breeding and rather ignore the habitat, which is not an answer."

Dr Searle believes neither offers a panacea for threatened species.

"Of course in situ conservation is important but in itself it is not working.

"The situation is becoming worse every year despite all that money that is being pumped into in situ conservation."

In situ programs for critically endangered species of rhinos, elephants and tigers were not enough, Dr Searle said.

In response to critics of captive breeding Dr Searle said: "Do they not realise extinction is for ever?"

"If it was not for captive

breeding there would be no more European bison, Przewalski's horse or Arabian oryx and probably there would be no more golden lion tamarin either."

Dr Searle admitted the seemingly insurmountable problems of unlearning captive-bred carnivores' caged habits to prevent them being a menace to humans on their return to the wild.

But the experience of seeing Caspian, Bali and Javan tigers becoming extinct had convinced him of the crucial importance of captive breeding.

"If it comes down to the bottom line would you rather have no tigers or would you rather have a good population of (captive) tigers against the day when it might be possible to put them back into the wild?"