

Zoos of South America

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The zoos of South America, few and far between, are usually located only in a nation's capitol. The dimensions of their collections and the quality of their enclosures and care vary dramatically. Very few compare favorably with their counterparts in the United States.

As with most institutions, funding, or the lack of it, determines the kind of collections maintained and the availability of personnel to care for them—a result of a particular society's understanding of the role a zoo plays within it. Generally, most South American zoological collections are limited to native species, since the acquisition of exotic animals from far off locales create an insufferable financial burden. An occasional elephant or giraffe may be on hand, but they are the rare exception. The all too frequent government restrictions on expenditure of hard earned foreign exchange solely for necessities limits imports to national priority items, in which animals for exhibition are not included.

While U.S. zoological institutions concern themselves with a conservation ethic manifested via captive breeding programs, our southern neighbors have virtually ignored such a concept. Most collections sport but a single specimen of any given species, and where there is an abundance of individuals of a species, no effort is made to provide a proper breeding environment.

During my visits to South America, I have had the opportunity to visit zoos in Caracas, Venezuela; Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Buenos Aires, Argentina; Santa Cruz and La Paz, Bolivia; and Lima, Peru. With the exception of the zoos in Bolivia, all had fairly large grounds, with the Lima Zoo covering the greatest expanse by far. The zoo in Rio de Janeiro featured the oldest enclosures, many of which were empty, yet one very large macaw flight held over twenty hyacinth macaws and a number of blue and gold and greenwing macaws.

The zoo in Buenos Aires maintains quite a diversified collection including

marine mammals, green sea turtles, jaguars, wolves and many other native mammals. The bird collection was the most varied of any of the zoos visited, with a number of psittacines and softbills, and a free flying resident flock of native Quaker parakeets on the grounds. The grounds were given over here and there to carnival-type attractions in an attempt to increase revenues in support of the zoo's activities.

The Lima Zoo is the national zoo of Peru, occupying a very large tract of land on the outskirts of the city. Within the grounds is an ancient archaeological site, featuring thick mud walls of a civilization lost in the sands of time and unknown even to the Incas. The zoo has a budding bird collection including toucans, macaws, conures and a smattering of waterfowl afloat on a very nice lake. A number of the birds arrived as a result of confiscations from bird dealers.

Only in Lima can you see all the camelids native to South America. Llamas, alpacas, guanacos, and vicuñas roam about in spacious pens. The director of the zoo, Sr. Felipe Benavides, is one of Peru's leading conservationists and head of the Peruvian branch of the World Wildlife Fund. He was a prime mover in establishing the Andean condor sanctuary at Paracas and was instrumental in closing the bird trade in the Amazon.

Caracas, Venezuela has two zoos, and a number of private collections, though I only visited one of each. Parque Caricuao is a privately operated zoo open to the public, modest in size but impressive in scope. A very large group of scarlet ibis nest in the park and wade about in its ponds and streams, yet may come and go as they please. Other interesting animals not seen elsewhere include sun bitterns, toucans, flamingos, several species of tapirs, and capybaras, the world's largest rodent (about the size of a dog). The director of the park, Dr. Pedro Trebao, has been very active in Fudena, the Venezuelan arm of the World Wildlife Fund.

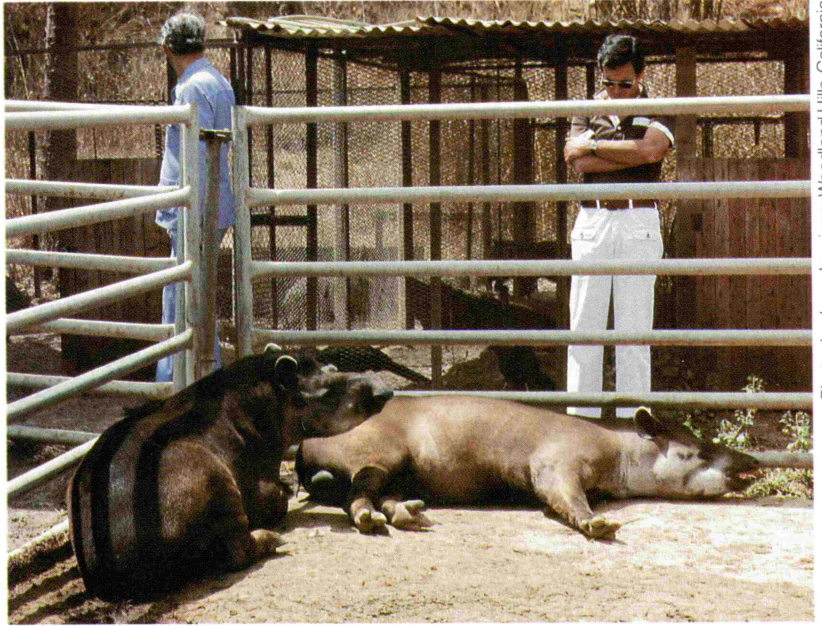
Bolivian zoos literally span the spectrum from the very worst imaginable to

one of the very best South America has to offer. The small, delightful zoo in Santa Cruz, Bolivia has the most interesting bird collection of the zoos visited. Nearly all the species of macaws, including red fronted and caninde, were on display. Numerous species of Amazons and conures were exhibited along with an interesting array of birds of prey, including the rare harpy eagle, softbills, gamebirds and waterfowl. Most of the region's geese and the coscoroba swan were happily swimming on the park's pond, while curassows, screamers and storks were in spacious pens nearby. A nicely planted walk-through aviary held a variety of doves, finches, and softbills. The unique mammal on exhibit (seen in no other zoo) was a pair of spiny anteaters. Equally noteworthy was the immaculate condition in which the Santa Cruz Zoo was maintained.

The zoo in La Paz, Bolivia's capitol, is as far away from Santa Cruz in condition as it is in elevation—over 12,000 feet. The conditions were so outrageously poor, the use of the term "zoo" does a disservice to the concept. "Unattractive nuisance" is a far better term. The collection was limited to a few jaguars, a few primates and a handful of birds, including several macaws, which appeared to be on the verge of death. Worse, the park(?) is located on a steeply sloping hillside, through which flows several open sewers. If that weren't enough, local visitors would step off to the side of the footpath to urinate, rather than seek out a restroom. The stench was overpowering. Cages were littered with stale food and feces. Fences were in disrepair and weeds were abundant.

It is amazing to see the variation in quality from one zoo to the next and it is obvious how much difference a little concern on the part of the caretakers makes. All of the zoos in South America are plagued with poor funding, yet they can be pleasant. Parque Caricuao and Santa Cruz are evidence that a quality environment can be provided on a shoestring budget. ●

*Tapir enclosure at
Parque Caricuao,
Caracas, Venezuela.*



Photos by Jerry Jennings, Woodland Hills, California



Large mammal exhibits at Lima Zoo in Peru.

*Macaws
in the La Paz Zoo
in La Paz, Bolivia.*



*The scarlet ibis present a beautiful sight at
Parque Caricuao in Caracas, Venezuela.*

*Waterfowl in the
Santa Cruz Zoo in Bolivia.*

