A BRIEF HISTORY OF JOHANNESBURG ZOO
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Researched by Mary Geddes, Display Artist: Education Dept. (1994 - with updates from time to time.)

Early in 1904, 200 acres of land was officially accepted by the Town Council of Johannesburg and signed over to the people of Johannesburg as a recreational venue in perpetuity. This land was offered by the firm of H. Eckstein & Co. and was to be called “The Hermann Eckstein Park” in memory of the founder of the firm. Nowadays, this 81 hectare area comprises Zoo Lake and the Johannesburg Zoo, divided by Jan Smuts Avenue.

Hermann Eckstein was involved in the development of the new mining town of Johannesburg. He had three million trees planted in an area which he christened Sachsenwald, now the suburb of Saxonwold. After his death in 1893 the land was subdivided. His partners offered part of the plantation to the Town Council. It was South Africa’s well-known Sir Percy Fitzpatrick, a partner in the firm, who suggested that it be named after Hermann Eckstein.

The nucleus of an animal collection was already kept on the grounds. It comprised:

- 1 male Lion
- 1 male Baboon
- 1 female Leopard
- 1 pair Indian apes (identified as Rhesus monkeys)
- 2 male Sable antelope
- 1 Golden eagle
- 1 Insimba cat (identified as a genet)
- 1 pair Porcupines
- 1 female Giraffe

The first “official” enclosure was built by the Town Council to house 2 young lions. Only the lions and leopard were in the public area at this stage. Development of the park proceeded immediately and continued unabated for some years. Bridges were built over water courses, paths laid out, ornamental trees and gardens planted and animal houses built to house the ever-growing animal collection. The infant zoo received many donations of wild animals, many of which were arranged by Sir Percy Fitzpatrick.

The Zoo fell under Superintendent of Parks, Mr A.H. Stirrat, who keenly encouraged children's playgrounds and open recreation areas in the then formal, “keep-off-the-grass” parks.

1910: A Bandstand was erected for the current popular live brass band music. The tramway from the town centre was extended to the zoo gates, resulting in an increase in visitors. Facilities for picnicking helped this park to become one of the most popular places to spend leisure time in, but public toilets were only built in 1916 and waterborne sewerage installed in 1935.

The development of Johannesburg Zoological Gardens followed closely the current European trends, largely due to the colonial population. This seems to have been the case with colonial zoos at that time, probably without exception.

1913 - 1915 A stone elephant and rhino house was erected. A few years later, a Hippo house and pool were added on alongside the Elephant House, but the elephants’ bathing pool was only constructed in 1937. The Elephant House was converted into an auditorium in the 1980s and remains a popular conference and function venue to this day, with its wooden block flooring still intact. Some of the old stone buildings constructed in the 1920s and 1930s are still in use today, though not as animal houses.

Also at this time, 1 Asian elephant and 1 Bactrian camel were purchased and trained for rides. Donkey and pony cart rides started in the late 1920s. These animal rides, including Llamas and a zebra, continued to be popular until the late 1960s, though the variety of animals used was reduced. One day in 1963/1964, an elephant with a cargo of children left its regular route and ran back to the Elephant House, refusing to return to its routine. This event marked the end of the elephant rides and only the donkey rides continued until the early 1990s. At this stage, one of the primary reasons for visiting the zoo was for children to enjoy the animal rides.

The principle of “cages without bars”, the use of vegetation and artificial rocks to give a natural look to the exhibits was
started just after the turn of the century. It took many years for the trend to become the norm in zoos worldwide, but Johannesburg Zoo started its own moated camp system as early as 1921 with the then lions' enclosure. This was stated to be the first open enclosure of its kind in South Africa, and the large camps to be the first in zoos in the southern hemisphere. (Daily Mail 2/2/1939).

Ironically, this first camp’s moat had to be filled in during 2001 because of drainage problems.

It was then the practice in South Africa to have separate facilities for “Europeans and non-Europeans”, and the new playground installed in 1929 was no exception.

By 1927, the blue-gum tree plantation had largely been cleared to extend the recreational area.

1936: A new hospital was built. The contrast between this original hospital and the current facility (built in the late 1960s and partially upgraded in the 1990s) was enormous - these buildings consisted simply of open-faced cages in rows facing north, whereas the current hospital has heated floors in the wards, a drive-through passageway, laboratory, surgery, X-ray room, examination room, and an entirely separate quarantine station, both served by a modern incinerator.

The first guide-book was published in 1936 and was very popular. A few published in the 1960s gave mostly very basic directional information, feeding times, “do’s & don’ts”, but most issues included photographs and information about the animals on display. Copies from the 1970s and 1980s could also be useful to scholars for biology projects.

For many years, plans for new animal houses were drawn up by the Town Engineers’ Department and not by zoo specialists. Perhaps for this reason, very few innovations were seen until private architects were involved in the designs. The 4 bear enclosures completed in 1939 and currently in use are a good example. Since medieval times, it was the practice to keep bears in pits and these enclosures, though beautifully executed in stone, remind many people of bear pits. The Zoo is currently raising funds to modify and extend this section into a more natural-looking environment.

For the first time in the zoo’s history, 1949 is cited as the first year that the Zoological collection was diminishing instead of growing, despite a number of private animal collections that were donated to the zoo. By 1950, the need for a “master plan” was recognised - to redesign the zoo over 10 to 15 years.

However, this was delayed until the 1960s by inadequate funds, when a study tour of zoos in England and Europe was undertaken by senior officials to study layout and administration. American consultants and architects were involved in the master plan. The major element was to be open, large enclosures with moats. A major redevelopment of most of the zoo, including the horticultural layout, took place in the 1960s and continued into the 1970s. (Labour shortages in the building trade slowed down the completion of this master plan from the mid-60s).

Public awareness was changing and visitors were “becoming sceptical with the old zoo. The staff Zoologist recommended reducing the number of species on display in favour of large, more natural displays of a more representative cross-section of each animal group. He also recommended establishing a “trademark” by which the zoo could be identified. These changes would enhance observational research and could include a museum of zoological specimens, made available to students of all kinds. The Zoologist gave lectures to many groups and talks on radio.

In November 1963, a start was made to replace white labourers with “Bantu animal Attendants”. Demotivation among keeper staff was a problem until some grading of posts took place in the early 1970s. The first attempt to “professionalise” keepers was to send selected staff on a part-time course of Wild Life Management from 1974. Nowadays, the minimum requirement is Matric, plus relevant experience. (Update required on this).

ATTENDANCE: Entrance to the zoo was free to all until July 1961, when people over 16 years old were charged. This made it possible to keep a more reliable record of visitors.

In 1939, The Star featured the Zoo as “the most popular resort on the Rand” 1959/60: It was noted that school groups were visiting in increasing numbers. 1968: It was noted that “competition from outside bodies” was causing a drop in the number of animal rides given. The World Zoo Conservation Strategy also observes this competition as a worldwide trend.
1982 - 1985: Under the Curator Mr. Willie Labuscha and Zoologist Roy Wilkinson, the Animal Adoption scheme, Nocturnal Tours and the fund-raising Polar Bear Trust (which became the Friends of Johannesburg Zoo Trust), were initiated, all of which are still thriving activities. These modern developments meet the need for people to be actively involved in their zoo in ways that their forebears never dreamed of. Tour guides, ferry drivers and educational Docents are all local people who volunteer their time and expertise to foster the zoo and its aims.

The Friends system has undergone many changes, hiccups and flat spots in its history. At the time of writing, it has come under the umbrella of the Zoo itself as Membership, instead of being run as an attachment. A full-time staff member manages Sponsorship, Animal Adoptions, and Membership.

THE RESTRUCTURING PROCESS: since the early 1990s, the need to add business management to the portfolio of zoos' existing foundation of recreation, conservation, education and research became pressing. Financial pressures pushed aside forever the days of the happy-go-lucky Curator who could potter around indulging his personal passion for wildlife. The enterprising Roy Wilkinson and then Dr. Pat Condy involved local businesses more and more and people became the most important ingredient in the recipe.

The most recent and important involvement was the sponsorship of a lion enclosure by AngloGold, to the cost of R7 million. No zoo lion anywhere in the world could wish for better. It is probably the first lion enclosure of its kind in the world, using islands and water moats to separate the groups, and with superb visitor viewing facilities. It was opened in late 2000.

The City Council of Johannesburg, under a new management more representative of the South African population, started weaning a number of utilities off the mother's milk of the municipality. Johannesburg Zoo was one of the units to be designated a Section 21 Company (not for profit) and was to receive a reducing subsidy over a period of years in order to make it as an independent utility. Thus the Council would free itself of a “burden” of about R26 million per year ...and good luck to the Zoo!

The Zoo being too big an issue to be left to sink or swim, everything was set in place to make the best of the development: Ms. Thembi Mogoai – a milestone first woman, and black as well, was appointed CEO. She would operate under a Board of Directors to ensure balanced management. With a business background, and a team of new professionals such as the municipal zoo had never seen before, the painful process of change began in September 2000.

For the first time, many staff had absolutely no connection with the animal world and both “sides” had to learn to accommodate the other aspects as well. Three General Managers were brought in to link the previously isolated aspects under only three key areas.

With its own website and extensive computer and internet usage by 2001, the Johannesburg Zoo had come a long way since the first computer arrived with Dr. Condy in 1991.

EDUCATION IN JOHANNESBURG ZOO

Education in Johannesburg Zoo was very informal and sporadic to the point of barely existing in the earlier years. Historical records indicate that a guide-lecturer programme was started in 1945 but there is no further information as to whether this programme was consistent. The education consisted of information in the zoo guide-books and very basic information displayed on boards in the zoo.

In the early eighties, education consisted of an “information officer” and keeper staff doing guided tours for those schools that requested it. The Information officer was appointed to handle any public information and education and animal name-boards. From this function grew the need to have pictorial displays and a combined artist /tour officer, than a second information officer, were appointed.

From 1990 the information staff adopted a stronger educational role and were officially called education staff and the education function developed both formal and informal programmes. These were presented by the Manager of education, two Educationists and the Display Artist.

Zoo School: The formal programme consists of curriculum-related topics and focuses on pre-primary, Primary and High school institutions and includes teacher training. The purpose of this, the first of its kind in the history of
Johannesburg Zoo, is to enhance the biological sciences with a cross-curricular approach. Since 1997 Zoo School has been presented in the Education Centre situated in the Zoo, (once a weekend restaurant and built in the zoo’s teen years. Schools pay a minimal entrance fee and Zoo School is free to ensure accessibility to all. Sessions consist of a slide presentation and interactive activity in the classroom and an activity sheet to be completed in the Zoo. Live animals and biofacts (museum specimens) are used in the classroom to illustrate certain concepts.

The Education Department maintains a collection of small contact animals such as rabbits, snakes, tortoises, terrapins, hedgehogs, birds and suricates to be used in close contact with children.

1998 - The most recent development in the formal education field is the “Zoo to You “ a van which travels to especially under-privileged schools, but also any other school that would like to book for this programme. “The Zoo to You” focuses on the new outcomes based education system adopted in South Africa and on environmental education and community involvement. Live contact animals and biofacts are always used and activity sheets are supplied to the schools to be used in their classrooms.

Informal education includes interactive and educational displays prepared by the display artist throughout the Zoo.

Holiday programmes take place 4 times a year during the government and private school holidays. These “edutainment” programmes always focus on environmental education where children of all ages can have fun while they learn and develop their skills.

Activities developed especially for children aged 3-6 years are included in the holiday programme, to give youngsters closer contact with animals and to create an appreciation for nature from an early age.

“Job shadowing” is arranged by the Education Branch and offers high school pupils the opportunity to see what zoo keeping is all about for a future career choice.

Special programmes during the year include World Environment week and Zoofari week. Zoofari is presented in conjunction with Zoo Keepers and other staff and visitors are treated to a special experience with baby animals up close, Behind the Scenes tours free of charge and feeding trails.

Tours: “Behind-the-scenes” tours, Nocturnal tours and Ferry tours are marketed to the public in general. The Education Dept. presents these tours but the demand is so great that they present similar tours during their holiday programmes. A new “Tea and Tour” has recently been introduced to cater to Senior Citizens. The ever-popular Farmyard Tours were held at the Zoo’s Rietvlei Farm for some years, but in 2002 have come back to the Zoo with the increased education staff complement.

The Biofacts Museum, in operation since 1988, hires out animal specimens for a fee to teachers and students for education purposes and for commercial use. It is unique in that few museums allow people to take out items in this way. By 2001, there were over 700 catalogued specimens available to the public by appointment. Biofacts are prepared by the display artist and other education staff and volunteers and are housed in the education museum.

Volunteers: As the staff complement of the Education branch was small, the need arose for volunteers to assist. A docent programme was developed by the Manager of Education to train adult volunteers to present formal and informal education. Some of these volunteers are also involved in the Biofacts Museum and assist with the tours.

In 2001/2, a part-time Bookings Officer and a new Educationist were appointed to allow the entire department to grow and to move into a redeveloped building in the Zoo, the old Restaurant built in 1913 as a tea Kiosk. To date, this development is still in progress. This revolutionary move will allow the Education Centre to become open to the public and to operate in a completely new way.

It has always been unfortunate that people are ignorant of the education that takes place in zoos. This new development will put it where it belongs – in the forefront of the Zoo’s combined public thrust.

The above represents some of the major activities of the Johannesburg Zoo’s Education Department. Throughout the year a great many other activities take place, often on an ad hoc basis or often as joint ventures with NGOs. The challenge is to educate and entertain the 10 million people residing within a 50 km radius of the Zoo where a great majority of these people are under privileged, poor and ignorant about the natural environment.
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Update: 29/04/2002