

Zoos juggle animal health and visitor satisfaction

Visitors pay steeply for admission to Japan's zoos. But the constant exposure is hard on the animals, say zoologists.

Asahi Shimbun

OSAKA—Zoos these days are finding it hard to choose between the need to protect animals from stress and the need to keep visitors happy and coming back.

For Japan's zoos, a new style of environment has been created that allows animals to live in natural surroundings similar to their natural habitats, landscaped with trees and rocks.

But it is precisely this environment that visitors are complaining about: they can't see the animals because the hillocks and trees provide excellent camouflage.

Although admissions are an important source of income for zoos, zoologists say exposing the animals to people around the clock causes the animals tremendous stress. The ecological style of display tries to solve that problem, and zoos around the world are re-designing themselves to make life

easier on the inmates.

The Tennoji Zoo in Osaka opened its redesigned rhinoceros ground in October.

But visitors are complaining they cannot see rhinoceroses because they are always hiding behind rocks.

The enclosure—whose 2,600 square meters is three times larger than the previous space—is edged with artificially sculpted rocks towering 1 to 5 meters. It provides a sandy ground planted with greenery to simulate the rhinos' original habitat, the African savanna.

The old paddock had a low concrete fence and handrails that exposed the rhinos to constant view.

Since moving into their new area, the rhinoceroses spend most of their time behind the fake rocks. Their favorite spot is about 20 meters away from where visitors stand.

On a recent day, a 33-year-old homemaker visiting the zoo from Higashi-Osaka said she was disap-

pointed, adding zoo keepers should post a sign explaining why visitors are being deprived of a good view of the popular animals.

Another zoo visitor, a 24-year-old company employee from Osaka, said she had waited half an hour to see if the rhinoceroses might come out into view.

After receiving complaints, zoo keepers tried to lure the animals out with food. It proved to be ineffective.

The Ueno Zoo in Tokyo spent 5 billion yen opening a jungle-like enclosure for gorillas and tigers in 1996, complete with grass, trees, rocks and ponds. But like at the Tennoji Zoo, visitors complain of not being able to see the tigers because they hide behind the trees. Complaints continued to flood the office for weeks after the opening.

The zookeepers admit the area may be disappointing for some visitors, but they intend to keep the area as it is, hoping people will learn more about the animals' natural living environments.

Yokohama spent 47 billion yen on part of its unique 53-hectare zoo opening next spring.

The zoo will not only have natural environments but also house the nation's first full-scale breeding center. Aimed at preserving endangered species, the zoo will breed rare animals such as the tapir and the kagu in environments close to their natural habitat.

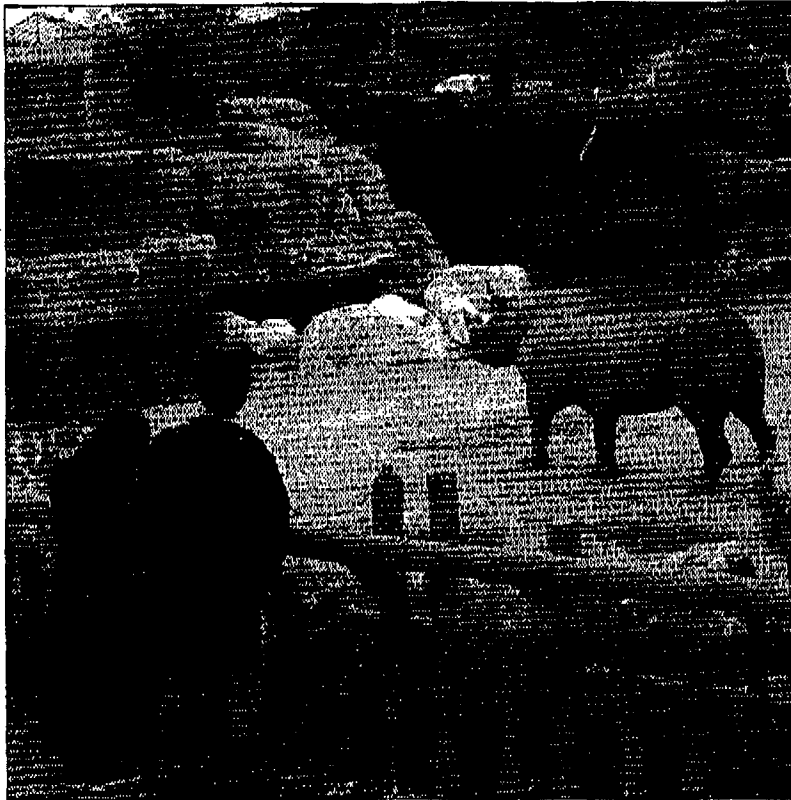
The Yokohama zookeepers originally intended to keep the breeding grounds closed from public view to ensure the animals complete privacy.

But senior city officials insisted local citizens would want to see the rare species. The zoo then decided to open the grounds to the public several times a year, since the project used much taxpayer money.

In Kobe, the Oji Zoo has developed a donut-shaped environmental area covered in glass to house its lions and tigers. Starting early in 2000, visitors will be able to watch from the central area—the donut's "hole"—as the animals roam the circular enclosure.

The animals may think they are hiding behind rocks, but visitors will be able to spy them from behind.

Zookeepers are confident the unusual area will satisfy visitors while alleviating stress on the animals, too.



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Visitors watch a rhinoceros at the Tennoji Zoo in Osaka. Most days, the shy animals hide behind the fake rocks in the enclosure.