

A squalid mess: The Tennoji Zoo

By Eric Johnston
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In less enlightened times, zoos were merely menageries of exotic animals gathered from every part of the globe, stuffed in small, barren cages and placed on public display. From the Victorian era until the last 30 years or so, little consideration was given to the natural habitat of the animals or how their mental or physical well-being might be affected.

It has since been recognized that confining animals to concrete and steel cages is to condemn them to a slow death. As the science of zoology has advanced, zoo keepers everywhere have attempted to renovate zoos in order to create a more hospitable environment.

So for those familiar with the San Diego, St. Louis, Washington, D.C. or London zoos, a trip to Tennoji is quite a shock. Opened in 1915, the zoo was quite modern for its time. Today, it's a squalid, antiquated mess — a throwback to an era when zoos, freak shows and traveling circuses were the main forms of mass entertainment.

The Tennoji Zoo lies in a part of Osaka many would just as soon forget. No towering skyscrapers, wide boulevards or glittering international business centers here. Tennoji is *shitamachi*, a working-class neighborhood that is on the one hand nostalgic and not without a certain charm, but also filled with vagrants, yakuza, and Edo Period brothels.

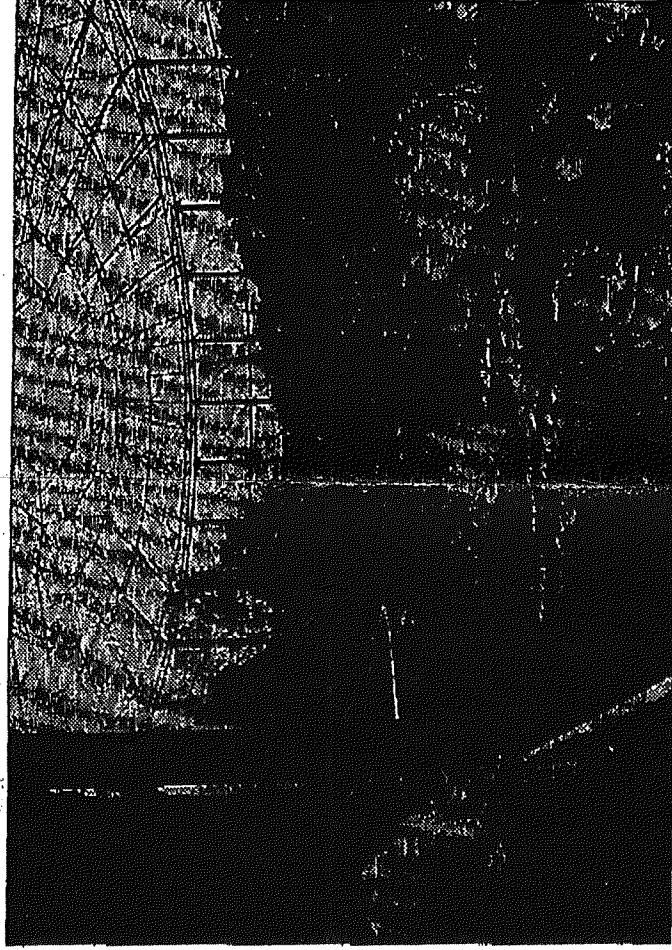
Things are changing, at least cosmetically. In order to eradicate the myriad of social problems, tremendous renovation of the area has been undertaken, and Osaka has spent millions of dollars tearing down old buildings to create a very modern park setting. But the Tennoji Zoo has benefited little from these changes to date.

The first and most obvious problem is the polluted environment. During the summertime, a sticky pall of automobile smog from nearby highways, which run literally right above the zoo, descends on the area, stinging the eyes and making it hazardous for both humans and animals to breathe.

The second problem is its small size. Approximately 2 million people a year visit the some 22,000 animals at the zoo. On one rainy Sunday afternoon, herds of families, children and couples gather and push each other along the narrow pathways that snake past the various cages, creating a situation not unlike a train station at rush hour.

The birds appear to have it best. Off to one side, several dozen species live in a man-made forest. Perched high in the treetops, they, at least, can remove themselves from the mayhem below.

But the larger animals, including giraffes, elephants and hippopotamuses, are not so lucky, as



The aviary offers a high degree of sanctuary but...

they are incarcerated in concrete cages. The former two have small grazing areas, while the latter cool off in a pool not much bigger than the family bathtub. All this is disturbing, but what was truly reprehensible were the hordes of people sticking their faces and fingers in the cages and teasing the ani-

mals. Many were feeding them everything from Pecky Sticks to ice cream to popcorn, sticking their hands in the cages to pet them and, in two cases, actually blowing cigarette smoke in the face of the monkeys.

The worst example of zoo authorities' ignorance and insensitivity is the deafening. Big Brother-like public address system. Every 15 to 20 seconds, a woman's voice comes on at ear-splitting volume to make some mundane announcement. The speakers are set up throughout the zoo complex. During the course of the afternoon, I noticed many children and several adults putting their hands to their ears to muffle the dangerously high volume.

What do the experts think of the Tennoji Zoo? In May of last year, Ann Mary McGivern, a British zoologist, conducted a survey of conditions at the Tennoji Zoo. Her report detailed the wretched conditions under which the animals live and identified major health problems with certain species.