

A squalid mess: The Tennoji Zoo

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.

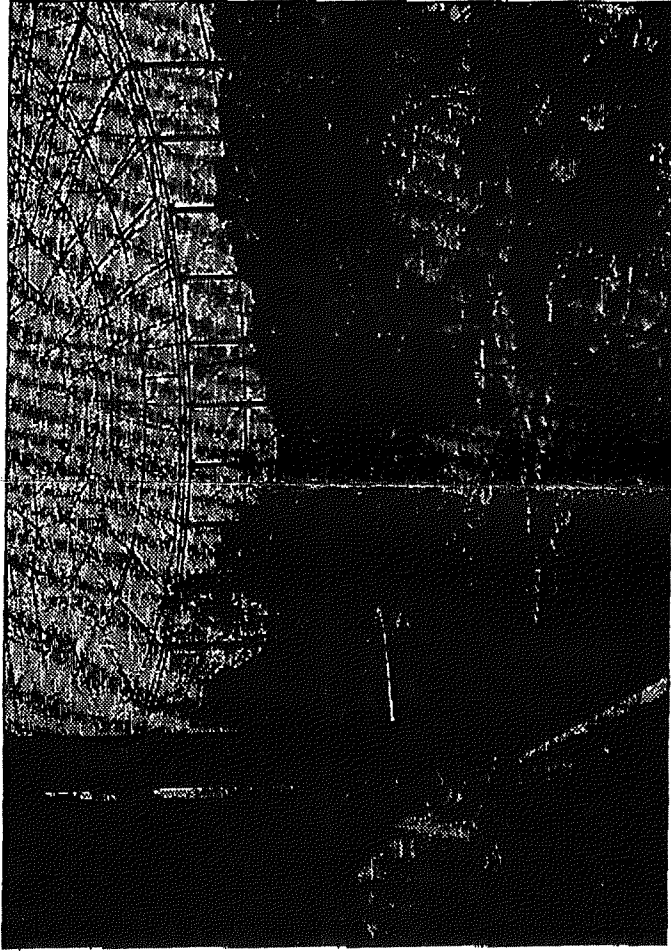
The second problem is its small size. Approximately 2 million people a year visit the some 22,000 animals at the zoo. On one sunny Sunday afternoon, hordes of families, children and couples gather and push each other along the narrow pathways that snake past the various cages, creating a situation not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

The birds appear to have it best. Off to one side, several dozen species from around the world 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-



mal. Many were feeding them everything from Pocky 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.

"A good number of the animals I saw were 'zoo-otic', which means they were pacing in their cages, biting the metal bars, and breathing heavily. One of the elephants had what appeared to be an open wound on its head, and the orangutan was not given any water," McGivern repeatedly tried to contact zoo officials to notify them of her findings, but without much success.

The condition of the enclosures was, in most cases, extremely bad, and the level of cleanliness and hygiene was poor. Particularly shocking to McGivern, though, was that the zoo keepers themselves were ignoring people's abuse of the animals, and some rules about animal treatment, norms in other countries, appeared nonexistent at Tennoji.

"One zoo keeper was actually smoking in front of the animals," she said incredulously.

Solving Tennoji's problems, though, will not be easy. For those who would simply scream "Close down the zoo!" McGivern's response is "And then what? What happens to the extra animals? You have no choice but to offer them to other, perhaps less respectable zoos or destroy them."

Furthermore, despite the horrors, McGivern was quick to point out that at least Tennoji is an officially registered zoo. "It's not like officials are totally unaware of the problems. Renovations are taking place, and Tennoji is actually viewed as one of the better zoos in Japan today."

One indication that zoo officials are trying to bring Tennoji Zoo into the 20th century is that newer facilities for the polar bears and lions are quite large, with ample room for the animals to move around.

"The problem has as much to do with public education about respect for nature and the environment as with proper facilities," she pointed out. "Once education improves, things will hopefully change." Based on the behavior of certain higher mammals at Tennoji, though, such change may still be a long way off.