

Tennoji Zoo plans to raise lowly status of reptiles



A Bit of Kansai

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Perhaps somebody ought to declare the 1990s as the Decade of the Reptile in Japan. Or at least in Kansai. The evidence is mounting that the creepy crawlies are slithering their way into a higher profile than ever before. Appropriately, 1989 was the Year of the Snake, launching the reptile years. But *that* was coincidental. Here are some meatier bits of trivia to sink your fangs into.

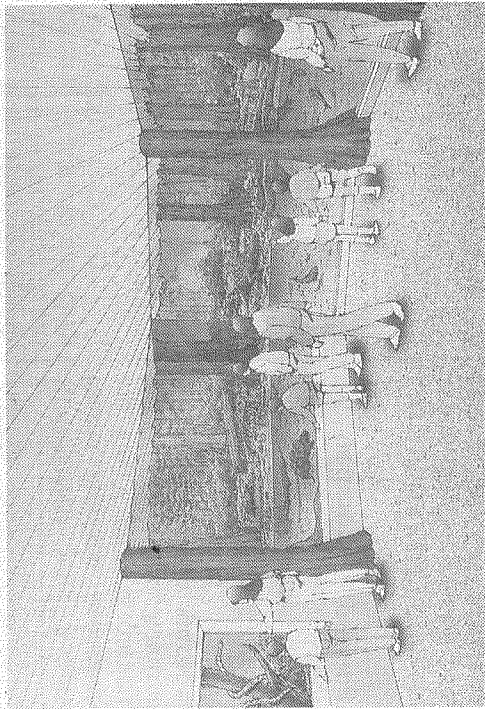
Last year, a zookeeper confirmed that snakes have become *haute couture* pets in the Japanese show biz world. And now another zoo official confides that pet lizards are all the rage — particularly with urban apartment dwellers. They apparently suit crowded city life to a T. A no-mess, no-smell, no-noise creature, the lizard slides by even the most emphatic pet bans.

Hot off the press, the latest news of our scaly friends is

Tennoji Zoo's plan to complete a state-of-the-art reptile house next year to commemorate the Osaka municipal facility's 80th anniversary.

Environmentally correct, the zoo will abandon the obsolete policy of plunking species in separate cells, stripped of their natural surroundings. Instead, the zoological park will reproduce the creatures' original habitats as closely as possible, offering a body of water segueing to marshy ground rich with plant life. Moreover, reptiles, birds and fish will cohabit as they do in the real world beyond the zoo gates.

To facilitate all this, planners are budgeting for a fog-producing apparatus to compensate for the lack of real rainfall indoors. Since temperature and water/humidity control are also crucial in reptile care, additional machines will be installed to cope with



PLANS FOR THE NEW reptile house at Osaka's Tennoji Zoo, partially illustrated above, will provide an environmentally correct habitat that will allow different reptile species and other creatures of the wild kingdom to coexist under one large roof. Its completion is scheduled for next year.

salt and fresh water needs.

The Tennoji Zoo will focus on two distinct geographical areas: the Japanese archipelago and America's swamplands in southeastern states like Mississippi, Louisiana, and Florida. To this end, the current, aging reptile house will be razed, and its 80 plus critters moved to the centrally located space, five times larger than its predecessor.

At present, the zoo exhibits

about 30 turtles, six alligators, five lizards and around 40 snakes.

In 1995 (possibly a tad earlier), visitors will see almost twice as many turtles and gators, 15 more snakes, and a huge assortment of lizards . . . plus heretofore unseen amphibians: frogs, newts, and salamanders.

Altogether, the new reptile house family (with its birds and fish) will jump to about

450, a hefty sum when you consider that there are now about 1,200 animals (comprising over 280 species) in the zoo.

The Osaka Municipal Tennoji Zoo, founded in 1915, is Japan's third oldest (following the Tokyo and Kyoto parks). For purists, its history actually traces to a menagerie appended to the Osaka Prefectural Museum in the 19th century.

During the war, animals designated as "fierce" were killed by military decree. Following World War II, the day after the zoo relaunched itself with the arrival of two Thai elephants, 100,000 citizens descended for a scent of the exotic.

Today, Tennoji Zoo admits about 2 million visitors annually. Fewer than half pay, since entrance is free to elementary students or younger, seniors 65 and older, and the disabled.

The zoo made a hit with its koalas about five years ago. Thanks to the orangutan and chimps' recent move to new quarters, freeing up space for the new bilevel reptile house, the zoo is preparing, once again, for a surge in visitors.