

The zoo that has to close

Lord Zuckerman

London Zoo is the only major national zoo run without the benefit of substantial support from public funds. No wonder it is having to close.

THE impending closure of the Regent's Park Zoo is immensely saddening, but comes as little surprise to those who have followed its fortunes over the past few years. The present council of the Zoological Society of London (ZSL) is an educational charity, which until 1964 was entirely supported by gate-money, by fellows' and members' subscriptions, and by the occasional benefaction. The bulk of all its resources up to 1932 went to the upkeep of the London Zoo, and after that date to Whipsnade Park as well. What was left covered the normal operations of a scientific society — meetings, library and publications.

When I became the society's honorary secretary in 1955, attendances fluctuated around the 2 million mark, with gate-money sufficient to cover the menageries' running costs. What reserves had accumulated during the Second World War and first postwar years were used to build an animal hospital, to establish an assured pension fund and to cover the costs of a supplies and workshop building. Funds were provided by the Nuffield, Wellcome, Ford and Wolfson foundations for the building of research laboratories, and for modernizing the library and meeting room. A few wealthy individuals donated the money to build new animal houses, shortfalls being covered by bank loans.

The first government money the society ever received was a grant in 1964 of £250,000 plus a matching long-term loan. When a further loan of £375,000 was arranged five years later, the government appointed professional consultants to see if the society could improve its financial management. Their conclusion was that the only way to complete the zoo's rebuilding programme would be for the government to help. Repayment of the 1964 loan was then waived, a grant of £650,000 provided to repay other short-term debts and one of £700,000 to help the society over the period 1970–76.

By the early 1980s, it was obvious that the society could no longer continue to run a major public amenity. In the 1950s, salaries and wages accounted for less than half the society's total expenditure. By 1980, the proportion had risen to two-thirds, exclusive of contributions to the pension fund. Gate charges were being raised to keep pace with increasing staff costs, and staff were being laid off.

Fortunately the society's research staff were supported mainly by the research councils on the basis of merit.

The financial position deteriorated acutely between 1980 and 1983, my final years as an officer of the society. But my message to the council and Whitehall remained the same — the society was the custodian of the only national zoo unsupported by public funds. If the London Zoo were not to close, the government would have to keep it open.

As negotiations continued, help was provided on an annual basis with new government-appointed management consultants recommending that an 'operational plan' should be prepared to show how the society could become solvent, but with the London Zoo still under its wing. The upshot was that by the time I retired from the presidency, the government had committed itself to providing the society with up to £2 million a year for the two years to March 1986.

Without any other money in sight, a management committee was formed and set about the promotion of the zoo's image by improving its public amenities. Little improvement in attendances resulted, and in 1988, in response to pressure from Lord Peyton, then the society's treasurer, and, on the recommendation of another firm of management consultants, the government provided a 'once-for-all' grant of £10 million for the zoo on the condition that a subsidiary company, Zoo Operations Ltd, should be set up to manage the menageries. Commercial and advertising executives were recruited to succeed where the council had presumably failed. Considerable publicity followed, but little else. No new animal houses were built. The company spent money freely, and business partners were vainly sought for the task of running the zoo as a commercial venture.

Little more than a year ago, Sir Barry Cross, the society's secretary, issued a statement saying that over the past eight years the society had had little success in raising money from private sources, and that only £4.5 million remained of the government's final £10-million grant. Operating costs were running at £6.3 million — well above what could be afforded. Were the zoo to close, the society also faced a dilapidations bill of £13 million.

Later that year, several members of the council, including the treasurer, res-

igned *en bloc* — without publicizing the reason. With attendances continuing to fall well below the million mark, and with no money in sight to cover its labour-intensive operations, the new council had no option but closure.

As landlord, the Crown Commissioners can now take over without compensation several listed and famous zoo buildings. It is conceivable that some may continue to house a few animals — it is sad to think of Lubetkin's famous pool without penguins. The bulk of the society's live collection will be kept at Whipsnade, little further from the centre of London than the zoo was when it started in 1826. The ZSL's main building, library, meeting rooms and laboratories will continue where they are.

Without the incubus of the zoo, the society is financially viable when its accounts are viewed in a way appropriate to a scientific institution, and not, as now, as though it were a commercial undertaking. For example, in the 1990–91 report, the library is shown as running at a deficit — which is ridiculous. When I enquired, I was told that the deficit represented the library's share of the society's overall shortfall of £4.6 million. On the other hand, no part of the deficit is shown as attributable to the finance department. What the accountants of Zoo Operations Ltd clearly do not realize is that if the ZSL were not a charitable scientific body that publishes and possesses a library, it would never have been allowed 30 acres of public park rent-free. What rent a commercial menagerie would have to pay, I cannot bear to think. The menagerie element of the society also benefits from the fact that, as a charitable scientific institution the society pays less than half the local taxes that the local council would otherwise demand.

Because of its charitable status, the society has for four years indirectly helped to finance the menageries. Having to close the Regent's Park Zoo is highly regrettable, but Field Marshal Sir John Chapple, the new president, and his council are nonetheless to be congratulated on having had the courage to show that not Zoo Operations Ltd but the council remains master of a world-renowned scientific institution.

Lord Zuckerman is emeritus professor at the University of East Anglia, Norwich NE4 7TJ, UK.