Baton Rouge Zoo
Special Inspection
August 11, 2016

An inspection team consisting of Hayes Caldwell, Executive Director, Caldwell Zoo and Dr. William M. Bryant, Senior Veterinarian, Sedgwick County Zoo inspected the Baton Rouge Zoo on August 11, 2016. The team was assigned by the Association of Zoos & Aquariums at the request of Phil Frost, Director, to conduct this special inspection. The purpose of this inspection was to review a number of recent animal deaths and one animal escape at the Zoo and determine if there were any contributing factors or patterns to these incidents. The team spoke with Phil Frost, Dr. Gordon Pirie, Consulting Veterinarian, Sam Winslow, Assistant Director, Lee Schoen, Curator of Birds, Holly Taylor, Vet Tech, as well as other staff members.

Malayan Tiger

A young Malayan tiger died acutely April 13, 2016 with no previous signs of illness prior to the event. Video surveillance cameras corroborate the reports given. The necropsy reports produced by Louisiana State University School of Veterinary Medicine verify the cause of death was a gastric torsion. There had been no changes in the normal feeding routine or exercise. The death was sudden so there was no opportunity for corrective action to take place.

Two Adult Giraffe

Two adult giraffe died at the zoo within twenty four hours beginning on March 18. The first giraffe was a twenty four year old female that had been treated for several years for a chronic arthritic condition. Zoo staff had been increasing quality of life care as the condition progressed. On the 18th the giraffe was down and after careful consideration, the decision was made to humanely euthanize her. During this event and a fast approaching thunderstorm a second thirty year old female giraffe had to be temporarily housed with the male giraffe with whom she had been housed with before. Unfortunately, during these events the animals became agitated and the female was knocked to the ground by the male where she expired. The necropsy and histology report generated by L.S.U. showed that the thirty year old female suffered severe trauma to the musculature of the back and developed a degree of pulmonary hemorrhage. Shock was a contributing factor in this death. Under the circumstances the staff responded professionally and there was no break in protocol.

During the inspection of the forty year old facility, the team noted the chain link mesh between the stalls was somewhat bent at the bottom and the mesh over the air vents was showing its
age. One louver was also missing from the return air vent. The team also suggested that the zoo consider the installation of a secondary barn door for additional options for access and egress.

Lemur Escape

Records were reviewed in the case of two lemurs that escaped their enclosure on June 13 when a fairly new keeper forgot to lock an access door. Once the lemurs were seen outside their enclosure the animal escape code was called and the response by staff was swift and correct. One animal was netted and the other was tranquilized and returned to their quarters. The keeper was counseled and took the action seriously.

Guenons

On the morning of July 13, 2016, keepers found that three spot nosed guenons had been attacked by dogs. While the dogs did not enter the enclosure, the monkeys apparently reached out slapping at the dogs. Two of the primates were dead and the third was so severely injured that the decision was made to humanely euthanize the animal. Security camera records in the area reveal two small dogs in zoo at approximately 2:00 a.m. Records revealed that the contracted security service guard apparently had not made rounds during her shift. This was the first incidence of dogs entering the zoo since 2010 when dogs entered the zoo and killed 17 flamingos. That event occurred when a park department mowing crew left a service gate open when they left the zoo. That gate has been kept locked and outside service providers now must call the zoo to access that gate.

The zoo property comprises 147 fenced acres within a 660 acre city park. The zoo’s entrance is located just outside the perimeter fence separated by a bayou. Visitors walk across a bridge to enter the zoo. There is also a train ride that begins at the entrance and enters and exits the zoo grounds at two locations. Typically, animals would need to cross the entrance bridge or train trestle to gain access to the zoo during the day. When the zoo is closed each location has gates that are closed and locked to secure the perimeter fence. Staff did a perimeter fence check and found one spot where the ground had sunk providing a 6” gap for possible entry. Staff perimeter fence checks have been increased from quarterly to monthly and traps have been placed in areas around the perimeter. Stepped up stray dog patrols are occurring in the adjacent park.

The inspection team was not able to tour the entire 2.6 mile perimeter fence due to weather but did suggest continued upkeep of the fence line to keep dead fall off the top of the fence and keep both sides of the fence cleared of heavy brush to allow for easier inspection. The team also noted a couple of potential spots at the front gate where a determined animal might dig under the decorative entry fencing. While there is no realistic measure to completely
eliminate the possibility of dogs entering the zoo, the team feels that the zoo has done its due diligence in eliminating all but the most improbable or determined ways a dog would enter.

**Conclusion**

The incidents of the last several months appear to be a string of unfortunate events that have no common thread. There did not appear to be a culture of laxity in the events that led to the lemurs escape or giraffe deaths as response to these events was swift and appropriate. The tiger death was an unpreventable event due to the deep chested animal being predisposed to torsion. The mitigation of the dog entrance into the zoo in both events seems appropriate in this difficult environment. The team also reviewed the additional necropsy reports from the previous eighteen months and did not find any evidence that negligence or staff error may have contributed to the deaths.

The staff of the Baton Rouge Zoo lead by Phil Frost is a very dedicated, hardworking group. There is a good mix of long term employees with a great deal of good experience and young, highly motivated employees eager to learn. Together they are focused on the best of care for the collection.

The inspection team was very impressed with the veterinary program at the zoo. Dr. Pirie has been associated with the zoo for over forty years and is highly regarded in the American Association of Zoo Veterinarians. While maintaining his private practice, Dr. Pirie schedules regular visits to the zoo five days a week at least 1-2 hours in duration. He also is available for emergencies as they arise. He has a unique association with the L.S.U. School of Veterinary Medicine providing vet students learning opportunities at the zoo in the care of exotic species. In turn, L.S.U. does all the necropsies for the zoo as well as give the zoo access to excellent facilities, equipment, and specialists at the university on an ongoing basis.

The zoo also has a full time veterinary technician with several years of experience who communicates regularly when Dr. Pirie is not on grounds. She keeps the hospital, which would rival facilities at larger zoos, well organized and in good working order. The hospital is complete with a surgical suite and ample treatment and pharmacy spaces. The facility is well equipped with radiology, ultrasound, and a Class 5 safe along with other amenities necessary to perform a multitude of procedures to care for the collection.

Although not a focus of this inspection, the team had the opportunity to hear about and read the study regarding rebuilding the zoo at the present location or move and rebuild at another location. While recent capital projects at the zoo such as Realm of the Tiger and the Otter Pond are well done and reflect modern zoological practices, the zoo maintains a number of original exhibits and buildings that are showing their age. The inspectors recommend a continuation of these discussions to finalize a course of action to replace the aging facilities.
Phil,
Out of my concern regarding the media and social media attacks on the quality of care at the Baton Rouge Zoo, I would like to voice my professional opinions. Regarding the number of animal deaths this year and considering the advanced age of many of the animals, the short normal lifespans of others, and the numbers of animals in the collection, the numbers of deaths this year do not in any way seem out of the expected range.

The Louisiana Animal Disease Diagnostic Laboratory (LADDL) does necropsies on all the animals, except primates, which die at the Zoo. As a Veterinary Pathologist and the Director of LADDL, I can confidently say that I have never seen any indication, in the necropsies I or my colleagues have done for the Zoo, that the animals were receiving anything other than quality care, both from the veterinary and zookeeper staff aspects. I speak for a time frame spanning 27 years. For example, the 2 giraffes that recently died, both were of advanced age (commendable) and neither had any detectable parasites. The latter is absolutely remarkable; parasitism in giraffes plagues all the large and famous animal exhibits, yet those in the Baton Rouge Zoo were parasite-free! The body condition of nearly all animals (except those dying from protracted illnesses) is appropriate, not too thin or too fat, again, indicating quality care. The very fact that all deaths receive necropsies indicates a commendable desire on the part of the zoo staff to monitor the quality and effectiveness of care and the health risks for the other animals in the exhibit.

Additionally, those who are pointing fingers have not witnessed, as I have, the devastation the staff feels when they lose one of their animals that have been on exhibit long-term. The staff really cares. Therefore, as a Veterinarian and Veterinary Pathologist, it is my professional opinion that there is no scientific evidence of any wrongdoing or negligence on the part of the veterinarians and zookeepers at the Baton Rouge Zoo. On the contrary, this is a quality staff and deserves our full support and confidence.

Daniel B. Paulsen, DVM, PhD
Director and Professor
Louisiana Animal Disease Diagnostic Laboratory
Louisiana State University
Louisiana State University, River Road, Rm 1043, Baton Rouge, LA 70803
office 225-578-2978 | mobile 225-330-9657 | fax 225-578-9784
dpauls1@lsu.edu | lsu.edu | laddl.org
STATUS UPDATE

• In response to a recent string of animal deaths at the Zoo, the Baton Rouge Zoo requested an independent audit from the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA)
• Purpose of inspection was for an independent third-party to determine if there were any contributing factors or patterns to recent incidents
• This was also to supplement an audit by AZA and an inspection by USDA into giraffe deaths . . . both of which were at the request of the Baton Rouge Zoo
OUR AFFILIATION

AZA represents the top 10% of zoos in the U.S.

Only 231 member institutions

First zoo accredited in Louisiana, 19th in U.S.

Baton Rouge Zoo licensed since 1970

USDA licenses 2,800 animal exhibitors
AUDIT PROCESS

• AZA sent an audit team onsite to inspect premises and operational protocols, including animal and veterinary care practices
• Reviewed necropsies of animal deaths dating back to January 2015
• Interviewed numerous staff members, including consulting veterinarian, veterinary tech, curators, and other staff
FINDINGS OVERVIEW

• AZA audit team could not find a single case where any of these animal deaths were in any way related to neglect, poor animal care, or poor veterinary care

• The same team complimented the Baton Rouge Zoo staff as a diverse team of employees focused on the best care for the Zoo’s collection

• Findings noted strong veterinary program with experienced staff and beneficial working relationships with LSU School of Veterinary Medicine
MALAYAN TIGER

• Young Malayan tiger died April 13, 2016 with no previous signs of illness

• Video surveillance corroborated reports of incident, and LSU School of Veterinary Medicine’s necropsy verified the cause of death as a gastric torsion

• No changes in normal feeding routine or exercise noted

• AZA found death to be sudden and unpreventable, with no way to predict or take any corrective action once the animal became distressed
TWO ADULT GIRAFFE

• Two adult giraffe died within 24 hours beginning on March 18
• AZA team found Baton Rouge Zoo staff responded professionally to circumstances surrounding their deaths
  • 24-year-old giraffe humanely euthanized due to chronic arthritic conditions
  • 30-year-old giraffe agitated and knocked to the ground during a storm event when housed with a male giraffe with whom she had been housed before
TWO ADULT GIRAFFE

- USDA also conducted a separate audit – at the request of the Baton Rouge Zoo – into the giraffe deaths
- They found no non-compliant items during its inspection, meaning they could find nothing wrong with how the Zoo staff handled this unique situation and determined the Zoo staff had no fault in this matter.
LEMUR ESCAPE

• Records reviewed in the case of two lemurs that escaped their enclosure on June 13, 2016 when a fairly new keeper forgot to lock an access door
• Once the lemurs were seen outside their enclosure, the animal escape code was called and the response by staff “was swift and correct”
• One animal netted and the other tranquilized before being returned to their quarters
• “The keeper was counseled and took the action seriously”
Guenons

- Three spot-nosed guenons attacked by dogs the morning of July 13, 2016
- First incident of dogs entering the Zoo since 2010 when a park mowing crew left a gate open
- Staff perimeter fence check showed one spot where the ground had sunk, providing a 6” gap for possible entry
- Audit team found train gate mitigation of this dog likely entrance into the zoo seems appropriate in this difficult terrain and environment
GUENONS

• Audit team suggested continued upkeep of fence line and front gate area to allow for easier inspection
• Staff perimeter fence checks have increased from quarterly to monthly and traps have been placed in areas around perimeter
• “While there is no realistic measure to completely eliminate the possibility of dogs entering the zoo, the team feels that the zoo has done its due diligence in eliminating all but the most improbable or determined ways a dog would enter.”
• “The incidents of the last several months appear to be a string of unfortunate events that have no common thread.”
• “Together they (the Baton Rouge Zoo staff) are focused on the best of care for the collection.”
• “The inspection team was very impressed with the veterinary program at the zoo.”
• “The Zoo Hospital is well equipped with radiology, ultrasound, and a Class 5 safe along with other amenities necessary to perform a multitude of procedures to care for the collection.”
THE REALITIES OF OUR ZOO

• Like all zoos, we have a mix of young and old animals at the Baton Rouge Zoo – which means we will always have animal births and deaths

• Some tragic incidents happen as a result of circumstances impossible to avoid or ones that are out of our control, such as predators that live near the Zoo
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OUR LIVING COLLECTION

• Currently 650 animals in our Zoo collection
• More than 14% of our 143 mammals considered geriatric – in other words, animals have received such excellent care that they have lived a long and healthy life
• However, these also include animals we anticipate dying in the next 12 months due to age or others due to serious health conditions, such as cancer
• Why not just get younger animals?
• Our professional ethics code mean we are committed to the welfare of each animal at our Zoo for its entire life
• We are bound to the decisions that are based on what is best for the survival of species, not what is desired for our Zoo
OUR OPERATIONAL OVERSIGHT

• Annual surprise inspections from the USDA, looking at welfare of zoo animals and how we care for our animals daily
• Every five years, we undergo a year-long accreditation process through AZA, which only the top 10% of zoos and aquariums in the country achieve
• These licenses and accreditations verify we follow processes such as:
  • Hiring animal care staff with appropriate animal experience
  • Providing annual continuing education to animal care staff
  • Conducting regular emergency drills
  • Following protocol as to the housing of certain species
  • Implementing regular inspections of barrier fencing
OUR ACCREDITATION

• AZA Accreditations Commission has granted a one-year extension on our accreditation due to the recent flooding events
  • Demonstrates AZA’s confidence in the current operation and management practices at the Zoo.
  • It also shows a compassion on areas like Baton Rouge and how we as both a community and a Zoo are working to recover in the wake of such a devastating flood
  • This extension would not have been put in place if AZA was not confident in the quality of our operations at the Baton Rouge Zoo
ZOO FACILITIES

• While recent projects like the Realm of the Tiger and the Otter Pond reflect modern zoological practices and exhibit design, the Zoo maintains a number of original exhibits and buildings that are showing their age.

• Although not the focus of this inspection, the team is aware of the study and discussion currently being done regarding rebuilding a new zoo . . . .

• “The inspectors recommend a continuation of these discussions to finalize a course of action to replace the aging facilities.”
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WE LOVE OUR ANIMALS

• When animals at our Zoo die, we are just as upset as everyone else – our keepers form bonds that are just as strong as ones people have with their pets, even more so sometimes

• We take our responsibility as caretakers of all our animals very seriously

• Our top priority has and will continue to be making sure our animals are provided with the best possible care