

"Vegetarian Lions and a Smoking Chimpanzee"

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Mozambique, a country of great beauty in Southern Africa, has a long history of armed , struggle. The war for independence from Portugal ended in 1975, but was followed by a cruel civil war which finally terminated in 1992 with the signing of a peace agreement between the government Frelimo and the rebel Renamo forces.

By then most of the country-side had been devastated and more than a million landmines remained buried all over the country. Maputo, the capital of Mozambique, was mostly spared from the fighting, providing refuge for a large number of people from the countryside. During those years the city, built at the beginning of the 20th century in a Portuguese style, had not been maintained. Beautiful residential and government buildings reflecting the architectural traditions of the 30s and 40s were gradually decaying.

The Zoological Gardens of Maputo, located in the outskirts of the city, had been conceived in this same style. An open area was reserved for the keeping of groups of antelopes and many other animals like giraffes, rhinos, lions together with a large selection of reptiles, birds and other mammals could be admired in their enclosures. The animal housing facilities were surrounded by large and beautiful tropical trees such as Jacarandas and Flamboyants just to name a few. Prior to independence, a large number of Portuguese left Mozambique and the Zoological Gardens succumbed to neglect and decay. Around 90% of the animals were wiped out by hunger, illness or theft.

During the 80s the supply of food all over Mozambique became a big problem and basic commodities were rationed. In the country-side most domestic animals were slaughtered and consumed or escaped into the bush, turning wild. Wildlife in the parks and management areas were also shot or killed by landmines.

Maputo Zoo also felt the effects of the war. The rations for the animals were minimal and, if fed at all, they often did not receive adequate amounts. The story goes, that the five lions in the zoo survived on a diet consisting mainly of cabbage, turning them into possibly the only vegetarian lions in the world.

I remember visiting the Zoo when I had just started with my contract as a lecturer at the Veterinary Faculty at the Eduardo Mondlane University in 1993, shortly after the ending of the civil war. During my first visit it was sad to see the decay of the buildings and the conditions of the animals. The lions at the sight of a visitor licked their lips. The association 'Friends of the Maputo Zoo' had been brought into being and this small group of motivated people tried to save the Maputo Zoo and improve its deplorable conditions. An 'animal adoption' program was started, enabling individuals and companies to sponsor the rehabilitation of the facilities and assuring the adequate feeding of the animals. Better times started for the "survivors" such as the chimpanzee "Joao", who likes to smoke cigarettes, dance and exhibit his genitals to the visitors. Also the big hippopotamus "Abre

boca" (open your mouth), showing his impressive teeth in expectation of some food, and the long nailed bear, who is so old that no one is willing to risk anaesthetizing him to cut his 15cm long nails, have survived the dark periods of Mozambican history. The time had come to improve the conditions and avoid incidents such as the escape of adult crocodiles from their simple enclosures into the inhabited neighborhoods of the zoo and causing mass panic.

Since I had worked as a veterinarian in Blijdorp Zoo (Rotterdam) in the Netherlands almost 10 years ago, I had kept up my special interest in Zoos. Therefore, twice a year, I gave my lecture to the veterinary students in the Maputo Zoo. We noted that although several improvements had been made, there were still no signs providing information on the species exhibited. Two Mozambican students, Ilidio Hele and Josue Rosas, volunteered to make an inventory of the animals in the zoo and gathered information on each of the species. Blijdorp Zoo was approached and they were enthusiastic about cooperating on the design and production of the signs for the Maputo Zoo.

By coincidence, one of the Mozambican students came to the Netherlands for a three months course at the Veterinary Faculty in Utrecht. During this course two other participants, the Dutch students Gjalt van Hes and Ben Hesseling, teamed up with Ilidio Hele to look for appropriate illustrations and to design the signs for the animals at the Maputo Zoo.

Several discussions were held with Chris Peters, Chief Zoo educator at Blijdorp Zoo. What material would be best to withstand fluctuations in temperature? What colors would remain bright after exposure to extreme sunlight and heavy rain? What would be the best way to mount the signs and withstand any form of vandalism? What size and type of letters should be used? These were only a few of the questions put forward. Clearly under different conditions, different kinds of materials have to be used. The discussions were extremely fruitful, resulting in a product adapting the vast educational experience of Blijdorp to completely different conditions prevailing in a tropical country. A Foundation initiated by Prof. Van Knapen kindly sponsored the manufacturing of the signs and in October of 1999 the signs were handed over to the "Friends of Maputo Zoo". Although, many improvements still have to be made, the zoo can accomplish its important educational role by providing information on the different, mainly African species, of animals that most African children have never had the opportunity to see before.

