

For immediate release

11 Pasir Ris Farmway 2
Singapore 519326
Tel : +65 6518 2488
Fax: +65 6581 6318
www.acres.org.sg
info@acres.org.sg

PRESS RELEASE

6 September 2006



UNDERCOVER INVESTIGATION AT SINGAPORE ZOO REVEALS SERIOUS WELFARE CONCERNS

SINGAPORE 6 September – A four month undercover investigation by the Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (Acres) into the welfare of the polar bears (*Ursus maritimus*) at the Singapore Zoo revealed serious concerns.

Two polar bears are housed at the Singapore Zoo (Sheba, a female and Inuka, her male offspring) in an open-air enclosure that provides only approximately 0.000005% of a polar bear's natural home range.

Since 2004, Acres has been in discussions with the Singapore Zoo and has called for the zoo to improve the living conditions so that the bears can, at the very least, express some of their natural behaviours.

From September until December 2005, Acres placed undercover researchers at the Singapore Zoo to conduct a detailed scientific behavioural study into the welfare of the polar bears. Key findings of the four month scientific study (based on 3,150 minutes of data) were:

Both bears exhibited signs of severe heat stress. The bears were both seen to be panting for long periods of time (Inuka: 36.0% of the time; Sheba: 38.7% of the time), indicating that they are far too hot. The bears were also seen to be exhibiting other behaviours indicating heat stress.

Both bears engaged in high levels of abnormal stereotypic behaviour (Inuka: 64.5% of the active periods; Sheba: 56.8% of the active periods). The bears were at times observed to be constantly pacing or swimming stereotypically. Stereotypic behaviour is widely recognised as a clear indication of an abnormal animal-environment interaction and a sign of psychological disorder in animals.

Both polar bears displayed high levels of inactivity (Inuka: 42.5% of the time; Sheba: 64.6% of the time). This is recognised as a clear indication of an abnormal animal-environment interaction, almost certainly caused by a sub-optimal environment that does not satisfy the natural, species-specific behavioural needs of the bears.

There is no doubt that polar bears are poor candidates for captivity. They are extremely wide-ranging, highly intelligent, cold weather carnivores, so they are extremely problematic to house in captivity.

The bears also cannot simply 'adapt' to life in hot climates; wherever they are in captivity they will still possess all the physiological adaptations to life in the Arctic. Even if they lose some fur and blubber, they will always have black skin that absorbs heat. Whilst an indoor air-conditioned area is provided for the polar bears at Singapore Zoo, this area is reported to be extremely small and not big enough for the bears to rest comfortably. Therefore, although the bears can choose to enter the air-conditioned area during the day, this means being cramped in a small, uncomfortable area.

A 2003 report by Oxford University researchers concluded that polar bears are one of the species most affected by captivity. The bears are prone to problems that include poor health and repetitive stereotypic behaviours. These problems were suggested to stem from constraints imposed on the natural behaviour of animals with wide-ranging lifestyles in the wild. The report revealed that naturally wide-ranging species show the most evidence of stress and/or psychological dysfunction in captivity.

Acres presented the results of the scientific study to the Singapore Zoo in June 2006 and are pleased that the Singapore Zoo has responded positively and agreed to:

- Eventually relocate Inuka, the male polar bear, to a more suitable facility in a more appropriate climate.
- Not import any Arctic animals in the future.

Rob Laidlaw, a Chartered Biologist and Director of ZooCheck Canada said “I am very pleased to hear that the Singapore Zoo has finally recognised that the keeping of polar bears in tropical situations is problematic. It is difficult to think of a worse candidate for life in captivity in a hot climate. I hope other zoos around the world learn from this example”.

“The tropical Southeast Asian climate is no place for Arctic polar bears and the World Society for the Protection of Animal (WSPA) congratulates the Singapore Zoo for making this progressive step in phasing out the keeping of polar bears” said Dr. Roy Jones, who has a PhD in Applied Ethology/Animal Welfare and is the Wildlife Project Officer for WSPA Asia.

Acres will be presenting the results of the investigation at the Southeast Asian Zoo Association conference in Vietnam next week and will continue to monitor the welfare of the polar bears to ensure that improvements are made to their living conditions.

Contact:

Louis Ng (Executive Director)

Email: louis@acres.org.sg

Office: +65 6581 2488 Handphone: +65 9796 8592

- ends -

Notes

- Video footage of the polar bears displaying abnormal stereotypic behaviours and photos of the polar bears are available on request.
- Acres is a local animal welfare charity aimed at fostering respect and compassion for all animals. Our approach to raising animal welfare issues is to focus on education and back up our advocacy with scientific clarity accrued through research. Using our findings, we will inform the public and work towards synergistic partnerships with the authorities and related parties to improve animal welfare.
- This campaign is conducted in collaboration with WSPA who is recognised by the United Nations and works to raise the standards of animal welfare throughout the world.