DEVELOPING A VISITOR ORIENTATION Fatality File



Zoo Visit Ends In Tragedy

NEW DELHI, Dec. 20, 2007 – – It was the end of his vacation, and all 50-year-old Jyoti Prakash Bezbarua wanted to do was to take a close-up picture of a tiger.

Bezbarua was visiting the Assam state zoo in Northeast India when he saw two royal Bengal tigers, some of the most endangered and beautiful creatures on the planet. Instead of staying behind the barricades, he slipped past them and, holding his cell phone camera in his left hand, reached about a foot inside their cage.

The female tiger, Dipya, who was eating nearby, bit his hand, and Gobardhana, a male tiger, quickly joined her. As the man's family screamed and onlookers rushed to help him, Bezbarua's hand was mangled by the giant cats. He would later bleed to death at a nearby hospital.

"He wanted to take a photograph, so he crossed the string of barriers. Our security guards who were there tried to convince him not to," the zoo warden, Narayan Mahanta, told ABC News. "There is no fault of the tiger, there is no fault of the barrier. … If somebody does this type of thing, that's his problem."

Bezbarua, a teacher at a nearby Junior Technical School, was with his wife and two children at the time. His family watched the whole incident unfold.

Mahanta is adamant that the fault lies with Bezbarua and that the zoo does all it can to prevent incidents like this. "I've worked here for five years. This has never happened before" he said, although in the last four decades, three people have tried to commit suicide by jumping into tiger cages.

According to Dito Joseph of the Wildlife Protection Society of India, the country's laws protect the tigers, not their victims. "He has committed a crime by approaching the tiger enclosure," Joseph told ABC News. "If the tiger attacks, that is not the fault of the tiger. That is negligence on the part of the visitor."

The tiger is a doomed species. In the last 100 years, as much as 95 percent of the world's tiger population have been killed, experts say. In India, where nearly eight of out every 10 tigers live, their population in 1900 was as high as 100,000. Today, the number is down to 1,500, according to a new census released last month by the government-run Wildlife Institute of India.

Mahanta, the zoo keeper, admitted that he was considering posting additional warnings to visitors, but he is hesitant. “We’re thinking about putting more signs in position. I don’t want to create panic though. … We need to develop the love and affection of the people toward the animals.”

The turnout at the zoo today, he added, was normal. And will anything change for the two tigers who killed a 50-year-old visitor in front of his family? “They’ve never created any problems. They’re a majestic animal. Unless you provoke them,” Mahanta said. “They do not do anything.”