While at Slater Park Zoo, Fanny received frequent handouts of junk food from visitors. Now, in her comfortable home at Black Beauty Ranch, she can relish meals of fresh, abundant vegetables. Opposite: Already close friends, Fanny (right) and Conga socialize daily. Dous enclosure. Fanny and Conga enjoy the peace and freedom of their spacious enclosure. Fanny and Conga socialize daily.

June Slater Park Zoo—a five-acre menagerie in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, originally opened in 1937—permanently closed. The Pawtucket City Council had voted to close the zoo largely to save the city $330,000 a year, but the pressure that led this decision had come primarily from those concerned about the quality of housing and care provided to the zoo’s animals.

In 1990 local residents, animal rights/ protection groups, and environmental groups began complaining to the Pawtucket City Council of the zoo’s conditions—with little success. In April 1991 Save the Park, a local environmental group, contacted The HSUS for assistance. This request coincided with complaints to us from HSUS members and visitors to the zoo. In response, we wrote to the city council requesting that they investigate the situation and begin discussions with critics of the zoo to determine their concerns could best be addressed.

Over the next few weeks, HSUS New England Regional Director Arnold Baer, HSUS New England Regional Investigator Frank Ribaudo, and I visited the zoo several times. Although Slater Park Zoo had recently passed inspection by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), our visits confirmed the reports we had received from local residents. The exhibit areas were antagonized and in need of repair; they offered the animals no retreat from the public for privacy. There were few informative descriptions or signs; most of the animals were not even identified by species. Clearly the zoo had no established plan for education or conservation. In most zoo areas, visitors had easy access to the animals, who were getting frequent handouts of candy, popcorn, and other inappropriate food.

The condition of three Himalayan bears, one male and two females, attested to their being fed a steady stream of junk food by visitors. In addition to their zoo diet of dog food, whereas free-living Himalayan bears normally weigh 100-250 pounds, these bears were grossly overweight. Later each was found to weigh nearly 500 pounds. Also, the bears were kept in one barren cage on a cement slab, their small cement pond was often left dry. Perhaps most disturbing was the situation of the zoo’s star attraction, an Asian elephant named Fanny. As indicated by city records and files at Circus World Museum, Fanny had been captured in the wild in 1953; Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus had given her to Slater Park Zoo when she was five. For more than thirty-five years, she had lived at the zoo with only rare, brief periods of elephant companionship. She had spent much of that time chained inside a small building. Although her small outdoor area included a depression in the ground intended to serve as a pool, Mr. Ribaudo recalls: “In my dozens of visits to Slater Park Zoo over two and a half years, I never saw water in Fanny’s pool.” Elephants are highly sensitive, intelligent, and social individuals; Fanny surely suffered from her confinement and isolation.

In response to HSUS pressure, local political figures and media representatives toured the zoo with Mr. Ribaudo in May 1991 and asked zoo and city officials many pointed questions. This tour resulted in extensive press coverage of problems at the zoo and helped prioritize finding solutions.

The next month, The HSUS submitted a formal report to the Pawtucket Recreation Department describing the deficiencies we had found at Slater Park Zoo and suggesting several options for improvement available to the city. The first was to bring the zoo up to the standards that must be satisfied for accreditation by the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums (AAZPA). This would involve a major overhaul of the facilities and the hiring of professional curators. The second was to convert the zoo into a nature center or children’s zoo with no exotic animals. The final option, preferred by The HSUS, was to convert the zoo into a recreational facility involving no animals, such as a community center, historical site, or playground. In an independent evaluation conducted for the city, Dr. Donald Bruning, a curator at the New York Zoological Society, reached similar conclusions, as had Tony Vecchio, director of the Roger Williams Park Zoo in Providence, Rhode Island, when he conducted an evaluation in 1990. It was clear that the city lacked the financial resources to upgrade the zoo or hire the kind of professional staff recommended by The HSUS and other consultants. Any other option would require finding new homes for the zoo’s animals, including Fanny and the Himalayan bears.

While the political debate on the zoo’s fate continued within the city council and mayor’s office, conditions at the zoo worsened. In July 1991 a rhea (an ostrich-like bird) was gored to death by an aoudad (a wild sheep). Four days later, six fallow deer escaped from an exhibit in which newborn deer had previously died due to inadequate care.

That August Mr. Ribaudo expressed HSUS concerns and provided suggestions...
Black Beauty Ranch.

began her thirty-nine-hour journey to
of many flawless elephant transfers. Farrny

onto a forty-five-foot truck by Ed Novack,
an animal-transport expert with a history

Fest" with a parade and tributes to Fan­

The next day the zoo permanently

closed. In February the mayor for­

two veterinarians, the bears

for relocating the zoo’s animals.

In January 1993 we mailed our Rhode

members an Action Alert calling

for the sanitation. The difficulty

in helping the bears. The two female bears

the U.S. Fish and Wildlife

Service is the office assigned by the USFWS, the U.S. govern­

agency that oversees the protection of wildlife and

habitats. The USFWS investigates and prosecute­

cases of illegal activity, issues permits for

animal transfers, and enforces federal laws.

The process of closing Slater Park

and relocating its animals has been

arduous. "I have never before been

involved with an issue so

time-consuming, so intense, so drain­
ing, and so rewarding," Mr. Ribaudo com­
ments.

Today few cities are getting into the

zoo business," says Richard Farinato,

HSUS director of captive wildlife, "and

many of them will be looking to get

out— for the same reason that existed at

Slater Park. A zoo is a luxury item in the

budget." He points out, however, that

many “Slater Parks” remain. Of the 1,600

animal exhibitors licensed by the USDA,

only 160 are AAZPA-accredited zoos; of

the remaining 1,440 exhibitors, nearly 200

are municipally-owned zoos.

Ultimately, public zoos are the respon­
sibility of their respective communities,

which determine whether or not a zoo will

close and where any displaced animals

will go. Even so, the Slater Park Zoo expe­
rience shows that, working together, ani­
mal advocates can convince communities
to change, even halt, “business as usual” at

facilities that exhibit animals. Most of the

zoo’s animals have now been moved to fa­
cilities better-equipped to meet their physi­

cal and psychological needs. Funny and all

the other animals relocated from Slater

Park have the chance for a better life. We

hope that other municipal zoos will step to

reassess how they care for animals.

Randall Lockwood, Ph.D., HSUS vice pres­
sident, Educational Initiatives, formerly over­

saw the activities of all regional offices.

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