

Asahiyama Zoo in Asahikawa City

---A Zoo Vibrating with Life---



Asahiyama Zoo in Asahikawa City is the northernmost zoo in Japan. Although Asahikawa may be the second largest city in Hokkaido, with a population of 310,000 people, it is located quite a distance from Tokyo and other large cities and has heavy snowfall in winter.

Nevertheless, in the summer of 2004 the monthly number of visitors to Asahiyama Zoo topped the number for Ueno Zoo in Tokyo to become the highest in Japan. The secret behind this popularity lies in Asahiyama Zoo's display method, called "behavioral display," which takes advantage of the characteristic behavior and abilities of the animals. I had been thinking about this zoo for some time, and recently I had the opportunity to experience its attractions. Let me share them with you!

Behavioral Display

Originally there was no method or expression called "behavioral display" in either Japanese (*kodo tenji*) or English. The zookeepers at Asahiyama Zoo wanted to show the natural behavior characteristics and abilities of the animals to visitors, and at some time along the way the facilities and display method that they crafted came to be known as "behavioral display." In this way, Asahiyama Zoo hopes visitors will feel nature as much as possible by seeing the animals living in environments in which they can display their abilities.

A typical example of this "behavioral display" is the Polar Bear House, where visitors can experience the dynamism of the largest bears in the world up close. One of the highlights here is a massive pool



where, like at an indoor aquarium, visitors can watch polar bears swimming. At feeding time (“Mogumogu Time”), a daily event, cheers can be heard from the full house of visitors as the polar bears, with their huge bodies, dive dynamically into the water and swiftly change direction as they swim around in search of the fish feed. At the same time, a zookeeper provides running commentary. Apparently the polar bear’s large body, small ears, and short tail are countermeasures against the cold. Its streamlined body, with a small head and long neck, is ideal for swimming. The skin of a polar bear is actually black to absorb the sun’s rays; its body hair, which appears white, is transparent with a hollow core to retain heat. And so on. In addition, I heard that due to environmental destruction, including global warming caused by humankind, the polar bear, with its powerful and beautiful body, is an endangered species.

Video of polar bear swimming nimbly: <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/fvxWcf4dtiM>

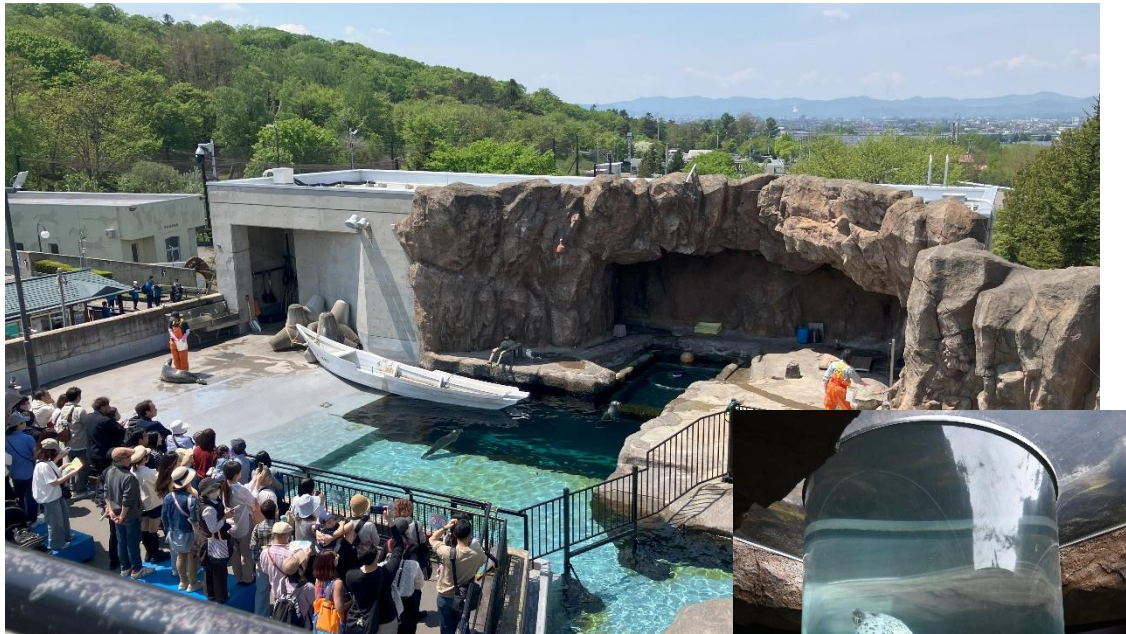


Another highlight is a capsule-shaped observation window with a diameter of about one meter, set up so that it seems to be floating right in the middle of another enclosure. After observing the polar bears swimming in the massive pool on the first basement floor, on the way up to the first floor I came to a place decorated so that you feel just like you are in the ocean. From the capsule positioned up some stairs, I could see a huge polar bear. In what is known as the Seal’s Eye, here you can experience the perspective of a seal sticking its head through a hole in the ice and seeing a polar bear. The polar bear’s favorite food is seal, so it comes up close, thinking that the human being poking their head through the capsule might be a tasty seal.

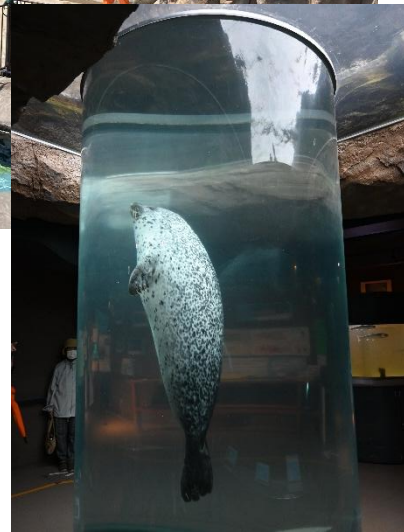


Video of polar bear from a seal’s perspective: <https://youtu.be/ek3WsTNrsGA>





A second typical example of the “behavioral display” is the Seal House, where spotted seals are raised and displayed. In the outdoor part a small wooden fishing boat and tetrapod remind one of a fishing port in Hokkaido. On entering the enclosure, you see the famous Marine Way, a cylindrical tank striking an imposing presence. According to the zoo staff member in charge of public relations, they built this cylindrical tank in consideration of the fact that seals have a habit of swimming vertically so as to breathe above water. Their plan was (excuse the pun!) spot-on, and now visitors can view the seals swimming vertically.



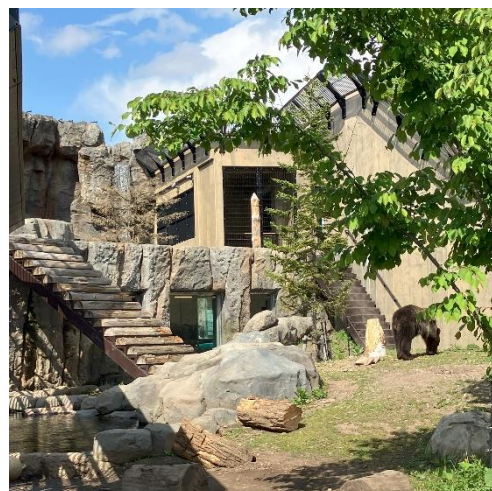
Video of a seal rising vertically in the cylindrical tank “Marine Way”:



<https://www.youtube.com/shorts/LEKn1XuEo0M>

Ezo Brown Bear and Ezo Deer

Opened in 2022, the Ezo Brown Bear House is a magnificent facility befitting the Ezo brown bear. The outdoor enclosure, which has a wonderful waterfall and stream, is just the right spaciousness for the large Ezo brown bear. In the indoor enclosure, which is separated from the observation corridor by a



single layer of glass, visitors can get as close as a few dozen centimeters from the bears.

Video of a brown bear in the outdoor enclosure:

https://www.youtube.com/shorts/zgnHUp53_uA



The explanatory board relating to the brown bear, compiled with the cooperation of the Shiretoko Nature Foundation, is well worth reading. I had thought that the brown bear was carnivorous, so the content was really eye-opening for me. According to the information on the board, brown bears are omnivorous but

mainly lead a vegetarian lifestyle, eating sprouted grass and acorns that fell in the previous year in spring, mushrooms and insects in summer, and fruits and nuts in the fall in preparation for winter hibernation. They do also eat dead or weakened deer, but they don't actively go hunting for meat like the wolf. When people visited Hokkaido before, a common souvenir that they bought was a wood-sculpted bear with a salmon. Apparently, though, apart from the bears in Shiretoko, they don't have much opportunity to eat salmon. The exhibits include a comparison of the skulls of a brown bear and wolf. Compared with the wolf's large canine teeth, the brown bear's canines are on the small side relative to its huge body. But the brown bear's molars have developed like those of a human being in order to mash acorns, grass, and so forth.

Video of close encounter with a brown bear (indoor enclosure):

<https://www.youtube.com/shorts/W3WC7QveRG0>



Following Hokkaido's decision in the 1990s to implement a protective policy, the number of brown bears has increased from about 5,000 in the past to around 12,000 today. At the same time, however, the forests where brown bears used to live have declined, and their wandering into urban areas, and consequent physical damage to people and to agricultural crops, has been taken up in the news, with the resulting dilemma that nowadays brown bears are also being treated as vermin.

Among the animals of Hokkaido, the number of Ezo deer increased exponentially after Ezo



wolves were destroyed by human beings, and now more than 10,000 of them are being culled as vermin every year. Asahiyama Zoo is experimenting with the provision of cooking that makes effective use of the meat of culled Ezo deer. Driven by the lofty maxim of “gratitude in consuming life,” I ordered an Ezo deer frankfurter, which I ate with thanks. Perhaps this also is a way of sensing life.



A Rather Bold Display



The cute lesser panda is popular whatever zoo you go to. At Asahiyama Zoo’s Lesser Panda House there is a 3.5-meter-high suspension bridge stretching from the main facility, which houses the lesser pandas’ sleeping places, to the tree on the opposite side and crossing the path for visitors. This layout, I was told, is designed to bring out the natural abilities of the lesser pandas, which in the wild live on the top of trees, and to show their lively behavior. Be that as it may, if they jumped down 3.5 meters, they would be free,

wouldn’t they? When I asked if they could escape, the zoo staff member replied, “They realize that it would be dangerous to jump from such a height!”

Another interesting aspect at the Lesser Panda House is a display of that day’s feces. Because the lesser panda has a carnivorous body but is actually herbivorous, its digestive ability is weak. In other words, what goes in at one end comes out almost unchanged at the other. When I lifted the lid of the clearly handmade display case



to take a photo, a girl from a local junior high school apparently on a school trip cried out, “Look, poop!” When some boys came over to join her, there was a real hubbub.

After that incident, the image of poop followed me for the rest of the day.

Video of suspension bridge 3.5 m above ground: <https://youtu.be/9pv6XK1JioI>



The first thing that surprised me at the Orangutan House, where Borneo orangutans live, was the size of the tower soaring 17 meters above ground. According to the zoo

staff member, there were questions about whether it was dangerous, but they went ahead with this display precisely because orangutans live atop even higher trees in the wild and rarely come down to the ground.



Luckily, on the day of my visit, I was able to see an orangutan robustly crossing a kind of ladder connecting the indoor facility and the top of the tower. I then suddenly glanced down at the board below me, which warned, “**⬆Mind your head.** Beware of falling poop and pee.” We must not forget that people who try to see natural environments in this way certainly face some risks as well.



The white-handed gibbon display also takes place in a facility with a high tower. In the wild gibbons jump from branch to branch at a speed, it is said, of 60 kph. If they put on such a show, it must be quite spectacular. But today they were just sitting up high eating vegetables. I would love to see them jumping around, I



thought hopefully. According to the zoo staff member, apes are clever, so the zookeepers make sure that they are never bored, for example by deliberately hiding their food by the window. A gibbon found the basket of vegetables hidden by the window and continued to munch away. Below, a muntjac kept repeatedly looking up at



the gibbon. On a signboard it was written, “Although they share the same habitat, the gibbons are up in the trees and the muntjacs on the ground. They eat different things as well, so they do not fight.” But wait a second, the muntjac is eating some cabbage that the gibbon dropped. I may be imagining things, but it looks as though the gibbon noticed the muntjac waiting and is sometimes deliberately dropping food. If that is the case, then apes really are clever, aren’t they?

Video of the relationship between the white-handed gibbon and the muntjac:

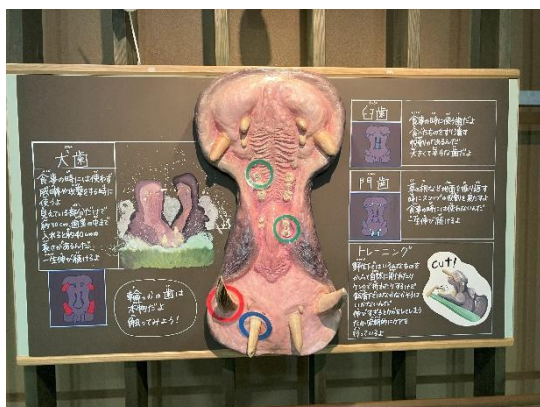
https://www.youtube.com/shorts/1y2gxKR_Rx0



Communicating Life

The philosophy of Asahiyama Zoo is “Communicating life.” By various means the zoo attempts to ask us what life is. One of these means is the handwritten signboards to which the zookeepers pay particular attention. To be honest, while this article introduces my personal impressions about what I saw, most of the information comes from the handwritten signboards set up in every facility. Especially striking among these unique handwritten signboards is the cluster of 3-D signboards in the underground passage connecting the Hippo House and the Giraffe House.

The Hippo House consists of outdoor and indoor enclosures. In particular, visitors can observe at close hand the imposing figures of hippos nimbly walking and swimming in a three-meter-deep pool in the underground part of the indoor enclosure. I will leave you to view the imposing figure of a hippo on the video and here take up a couple of facts taken from 3-D signboards.



The first concerns the hippo’s teeth, and the second explains the structure of its face. Regarding its teeth, the hippo only uses its canines to threaten and attack other animals; it does not use them when eating. It uses its incisors to dig up grass and so on from the ground and its molars to mash the food before swallowing it.

As for the hippo’s face, the signboard explains clearly that its ears, eyes, and nose are positioned in a flat, straight line at the top of its head so that it can display all the functions of hearing, seeing, and smelling just by poking its head a little out of the water.

Video of a hippopotamus moving nimbly through the water:

<https://www.youtube.com/shorts/2KHxCbIWgig>





In the Giraffe House, you can observe the tall giraffes closely from the same height as their heads, look up at their legs from the underground part of the Hippo House, and watch the giraffes standing among the trees through the outer fence. The body patterns of the giraffes differ from animal to animal and do not change in their lifetime. When males fight, they engage in an act called necking, in other words, swinging their necks at each other.

As a giraffe grows, its face becomes rugged. This is said to be effective in necking.

When I took a close-up photo of Genki, a male giraffe at Asahiyama Zoo, I could see that his face was indeed a little rough.

The pictures on the signboard at the Giraffe House are skillful and very easy to understand too. But still, when I read the signboard about the guinea fowl, which reside together with the giraffes, I loosened up nicely. (In other words, I laughed.)



Project to Repay Borneo's Kindness

Both the Borneo orangutan and the Borneo elephant are designated as endangered species. The rain forest of Borneo is disappearing due to felling for timber and the expansion of palm-oil plantations for the production of palm oil, as a result of which the elephants and orangutans are losing their habitat. Asahiyama Zoo has launched a project and, together with cooperating companies, is continuing to provide support for the protection of elephants and orangutans. One of the initiatives involves the setting up of vending machines in several places around the zoo, including near the Orangutan



House. I heard that 25% of the proceeds from these vending machines is used for the project to repay Borneo's kindness. On the bus going back to my hotel, I looked out of the window and saw similar vending machines in the city as well. I remember feeling very impressed upon realizing that the project had become a city-wide endeavor.

The joy of sharing space with animals and the sensation of life through observing the lifestyles of animals are, undoubtedly, important themes of this zoo. At the same time, though, in various ways it also raises issues concerning, for example, the symbiosis of animals and human beings and problem awareness relating to environmental destruction caused by the irresponsible actions of human beings. In all the commentaries that I saw, the zoo exhaustively poses questions to visitors, such as when the zookeepers raise problems at the feeding time for polar bears, an endangered species. That is proof, I thought, of a clear line existing between Asahiyama Zoo and other zoos and aquariums that seek to attract visitors with rare animals and showy displays.

Puzzle Solved!

I spent a day and a half going around Asahiyama Zoo, which is rather hilly for a zoo. Worn out at the end, I went into a toilet cubicle and nearly nodded off. But then, on the toilet wall, I noticed yet another message and came to my senses. The message read, "Why does the feces of giraffes and deer consist of oval-shaped balls?" Oh no, poop again! And in the toilet! At that moment, I could hardly hold back my laughter. On the bus going back, despite my tiredness after so much walking, I was thinking how much I would like to see the animals that sleep in the daytime in the Nighttime Zoo, which is held in the summer, and the Penguin Walk in the winter. A child tells their mother, "It's great here!" A young girl with sparkling eyes smiles at her boyfriend and says, "This is interesting!" A junior high school student shouts, "Yikes! Poop!?" I felt that I had solved the puzzle of how Asahiyama Zoo makes visitors want to come again and again. Returning to my hotel in the late afternoon of the first day, I told a young staff member at the reception that I had been to the zoo, to which she replied proudly, "I have an annual pass!"

Asahiya Zoo is loved by the citizens of Asahikawa City and by sightseers from throughout Japan and indeed around the world. If you haven't been there yet, why not go and see for yourself?

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