

Greater Vancouver Zoo charged with animal cruelty

PHOTO: VANCOUVER SUN



She won hearts as the engaging star of a popular 2005 Telus Christmas advertising campaign, but, five months later, Hazina, the Greater Vancouver Zoo's baby hippopotamus, gained international attention for a much more serious reason. In May 2006, following an intensive BC SPCA investigation, Crown counsel laid formal charges of animal cruelty against Greater Vancouver Zoo officials for allegedly failing to provide proper care for the baby hippo at its Aldergrove site. It is the first time that a major Canadian zoo has been charged with animal cruelty.

"One of our main concerns was that Hazina was kept indoors in a temporary concrete pen for 21 months after she was acquired by the zoo in October 2004," says Marcie Moriarty, general manager of cruelty investigations for the BC SPCA. "Despite repeated promises by zoo officials that the construction of a proper indoor-outdoor hippo enclosure was imminent, she remained in what we consider to be substandard shelter for nearly two years."

Eileen Drever, the BC SPCA senior animal protection officer in charge of the investigation, says one

of the primary concerns with Hazina's holding pen was that her wading pool was only two feet (roughly half a metre) deep. "Because of their tremendous weight, hippopotamuses need the buoyancy of water in order to relieve the pressure on their joints. As Hazina grew, she was not able to float in the shallow pool and her time outside the pool was spent standing on concrete." Hazina's current weight is estimated to be more than 1,000 pounds (450 kilograms).

Drever adds that the BC SPCA was also concerned that Hazina had not been outdoors in 21 months, had not been able to graze for that period of time, and had been living in isolation, deprived of social interaction with her species. "We investigated options for removing Hazina from the zoo, but the veterinary experts we consulted agreed that transporting her would subject her to even more stress," said Drever.

Faced with increasing pressure from the BC SPCA and other animal welfare groups such as the Vancouver Humane Society, the zoo finally completed a new hippopotamus facility in June. "We're pleased that a proper facility was finally built, but that doesn't negate the responsibility the zoo had to provide proper shelter for Hazina during the first 21 months she was in their care," says Moriarty. She says the case highlights the fact that the Greater Vancouver Zoo and other facilities who exhibit animals for profit must be held accountable for the care of the animals they purchase.

This is not the first time that the Greater Vancouver Zoo has drawn well-publicized criticism from animal welfare groups for its care of hippos. In 1983, the zoo was at the centre of controversy after two hippos in its care fell through the ice and drowned after being given access to a frozen outdoor pond. Two other hippos, Gertrude and Harvey, have also died at the zoo since 2004. Both were in their 20s when they died, about half the life span of the average hippopotamus in captivity. In May 2004, the Greater Vancouver Zoo lost its accreditation from the Canadian Association of Zoos and Aquariums, due in part to the substandard facilities it provided for the hippopotamuses in its care. The outcome of the Hazina case is pending in the courts. ■