

BIRTH AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF THE B.C. WILDLIFE PARK

By John J. Moelaert (Founder)

Time fades many memories, but I remember the early days of the B.C. Wildlife Park as clearly as though it happened a few years ago instead of some forty. My home was like a halfway house for animals. All kinds arrived at my doorstep before they could be accommodated at the park. Some came by plane, some by truck and not a few were put on my porch in the middle of the night by anonymous donors....

The first one was Tramp the ocelot, a pet that had become too much of a nuisance for its owners; his nocturnal nature being part of the problem. He had the run of the house. I remember waking up one morning with him nibbling at one of my fingers. It was his way



of saying: it's time for breakfast. He stayed almost a year at my home. But most popular of all the animals was Demetrius, a young moose calf that was flown from the Revelstoke area to Kamloops on orders of then Highways Minister Phil Gaglardi. He stayed in our backyard and often cooled himself off by straddling a sprinkler. On a few occasions he entered the house to enjoy a cool bath, a photo of which became a very popular postcard. Every few hours I gave him a big bottle of warm milk.

Our home in the 400 block Nicola Street was across the lane from the Travelodge and many of the guests came to see Demetrius. In the meantime a two-acre enclosure complete with a pond was being built at the park just for him. After his transfer he was joined by a female moose. I made three or four trips a day from my home to the park with a case of milk that I warmed at the park before bottle-feeding

Demetrius and I at home the two of them. In three and a half months they went through some 1,600 liters of milk, all donated by Noca Dairies. By the time they were weaned November 30, 1966 Demetrius could drink a gallon nonstop!

On May 28, 1969, Demetrius and Gerda had a calf of their own, believed to be the first time a moose had been conceived and born in captivity. The calf weighed 30 pounds and was on its feet minutes after it was born to get its first taste of its mother's milk.

Until things were organized at the park, our home was like a hotel for transient animals each with its own personality. In terms of popularity Tiko--the blond gibbon--was second only to Demetrius. He even accompanied me as I drove around town to do various errands. He loved looking at the passing scenery. His manners left a few things to be desired though. For example, when I attempted to eat a banana he would take it from me with one of his long arms with the speed of lightning.



He even did some sampling at a wine and cheese party at the Canadian Inn. He clearly preferred the cheese over the wine.... Other animals that shared my home included ferrets, a skunk (de-scented!), coatimundis and all kinds of birds.

I have been keenly interested in animals since childhood and at one point I had 80 small animals.

Tiko working on his memoirs....

So when the opportunity came to become professionally involved with animals, I gratefully accepted the challenge.

It all started on St. Patrick's day in 1965 when about 40 people gathered in the basement of the old library building on Second Avenue and Seymour Street to discuss the feasibility and desirability of a zoo for Kamloops. Among those who attended were Ald. Albert McGowan of North Kamloops Town Council and Ald. Tony Andrew, Ald. Gene Cavazzi and Ald. Malcolm Grant of Kamloops City Council. Also present were Fred Nesbitt of the Chamber of Commerce, Len Smith, Head of the Kamloops branch of the Fish and Wildlife Department and Architect Bud Aubrey who subsequently donated his valuable services in providing drawings for the buildings and exhibits of the zoo.

The meeting was sponsored by the Kamloops Chamber of Commerce which felt that Kamloops was a one-night stop and needed more attractions so that visitors would stay longer and spend more. I suggested to the chamber on February 15, 1965 that a zoo would be an attraction for both residents and visitors alike and so the aforementioned public meeting was arranged to determine how much interest there was in the proposal.

I told the gathering that the best way to achieve such a goal would be to set up a nonprofit society, acquire a large property for spacious exhibits and develop it on a first-class basis.

Most of the people at the meeting were underwhelmed by my proposal. Not a few were clearly hostile to the idea. A newspaper report later described the event as "a stormy meeting, in which criticism and reservations greatly outweighed concrete suggestions." Opponents to the zoo argued what Kamloops needed was a public indoor swimming pool, better facilities for its senior citizens and so on --not a bunch of animals in cages. I made it clear that the well-being of animals was as important to me as it was to my critics and explained that a zoological park (The name wildlife park came into use later) could be a major recreational, educational and conservation project.

Opposition to my plan was strong and support for my proposal was at best lukewarm. Questions included: Where are you going to get 100 acres? Why not start small with just a few acres? And most important of all: How are you going to pay for it all?

I admitted I didn't have all the answers and reminded the audience that the purpose of the meeting was to form a society with the task to get this kind of information and then determine if the project was feasible. I asked for donations for the proposed society and received a \$10 bill from Ralph Thomas, General Manager of the Kamloops Pulp Mill, while Reg Waugh donated \$5. The meeting appointed a committee to pursue the matter. It comprised Andrew Berna, Mrs. S. Dow, Fred Nesbitt, Jim Watson and myself.

On April 6 the Greater Kamloops Zoological Society was officially formed after its constitution and bylaws had been prepared free of charge by lawyers Andrew Berna and Patrick Dohm. An executive was formed and a few weeks later the society was officially incorporated and registered under the BC Societies Act. A membership drive was started which quickly passed the 100-mark and included well-known people such as former Justice Minister Davie Fulton, Highways Minister Phil Gaglardi, Kamloops Mayor Peter Wing, Howard Paish, Executive Director of the BC Wildlife Federation and Dr. Murray Newman, Director of the Vancouver Public Aquarium. Membership was only two dollars a year and included four free visits to the park.

Several sites were suggested the best of which was an unused part of Molson's 1,000-acre hop farm about 10 miles east of what was then the boundary of Kamloops. Brewery officials showed interest in the park proposal, but insisted on several reports to prove its viability. Negotiations between Molson's (Western) Breweries' Public Relations Director, Alex Jupp and myself lasted almost a year. Molson's was mostly concerned that the project might become an eyesore for lack of funds which obviously would reflect poorly on the company. With never more than a few hundred dollars in the Society's bank account, convincing Molson's that we could carry out our development plans was a formidable task. Past experience had shown us that raising the required funds for the construction of buildings and exhibits would be impossible. Instead I managed to persuade architects, surveyors, engineers, contractors, carpenters, electricians, bricklayers, various suppliers and so on, to donate their services or building materials if the land were to be transferred to the Society which happened on February 11th, 1966. And so the children's zoo, complete with an office, animal care building, concession, and washrooms, was built. Similarly, a large parking area, several roads and the first enclosures for moose, deer and elk were constructed. Almost all of it with donated materials and volunteer labour! The acquisition and development of more than 100 acres for a wildlife park with an initial investment of only fifteen dollars had never happened before in Canada and has never happened since. To this day it remains the only publicly owned wildlife park on the Trans Canada Highway.

On June 1, 1966 I became the project's first manager and was succeeded as president of the Society by RCMP Staff Sgt. Gordon Simons. First item on the development agenda was to drill for water so that the park would have its own independent water supply. The very first drill hole found an abundant supply of excellent water. Development of the park could begin.

Soon BC Hydro crews brought in power, providing underground services to avoid unsightly overhead lines in the park, phone lines were installed and roads were built. I appealed to various companies to donate the necessary labour and materials. The response was very positive: one company would donate the use of a bulldozer, another a flat deck to transport it to the site, other companies donated concrete, building blocks, lumber, plumbing supplies, electrical supplies, water mains, toilet stalls, roofing materials, windows, doors, fencing materials and so on. Donations came primarily from Kamloops firms, but much was also donated by companies in the Vancouver area and from as far away as Peterborough, Ont. In recognition of the support the project received from various companies in the Lower Mainland the original name of The Kamloops Zoo was changed to the B.C. Wildlife Park on November 1, 1966. The society's name was changed to The Wildlife Park Society of BC. Once the City of Kamloops had extended its boundaries to

include the park the name was changed again, this time to The Kamloops Wildlife Park. At present the name once again is the B.C. Wildlife Park. The current name of the Society is the Kamloops Wildlife Park Society.

Many volunteers came out to the park to help as individuals. None were more dedicated than the park's women's auxiliary that was founded in January, 1967 under the name of the Zooettes. On August 16, 1966 the first large enclosure was opened to the public. The two-acre exhibit featured moose (Demetrius and his female companion, Gerda), whitetail deer, fallow deer and Canada Geese. It drew 7,000 people in 80 days before it was closed to the public for the winter. On June 8, 1967 the first animal was born at the park: a whitetail fawn.

Molson's announced it would provide 50 acres across the highway as a public park with a walkway under the highway and train track.. This proposal was later shelved when the wildlife park ran into financial difficulties, but could have become a reality if one or more of the three levels of government had provided more support.

The children's zoo was officially opened Saturday May 20, 1967 by Phil Gaglardi in the presence of North Kamloops Mayor Jack Chilton, Ald. Gene Cavazzi representing the City of Kamloops and Society President, Gordon Simons. About 500 people attended



the Queen Victoria Day event. A full-page advertisement in the Kamloops Sentinel thanked the several hundred contributors for their cooperation and generosity in making the public project a reality.

The park received wide media attention including reports in The Vancouver Sun and The Province and soon tour buses included the park in their itinerary. School buses brought students for free visits to the park, some coming from as far away as Victoria.

Businesses, service clubs and individuals sponsored various exhibits thus helping cover operating expenses. Federal Minister of Northern Affairs, Arthur Laing, gave tax exempt status to the park as well as three buffalo calves.

Official opening of children's zoo May 20, 1967. From left Park Founder John Moelaert, North Kamloops Mayor Jack Chilton, Phil Gaglardi, Kamloops Ald. Gene Cavazi, Society President Gordon Simons.

How does one develop and operate a quality wildlife park? To find out I visited zoological parks in Canada, the US and Mexico. In 1965 and 1969 I travelled to Europe at my own expense and visited zoos in Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Switzerland, Yugoslavia and Italy to acquire the knowledge needed to operate and develop the wildlife park in Kamloops.

The degree of cooperation I received from many zoo curators and directors was nothing short of astounding. The most valuable relationship I developed was with the San Diego Zoo which supplied animals, films and valuable advice. Its director, Dr. Charles Schroeder, pledged his support for the Kamloops project. Later San Diego Zoo designer Chuck Faust visited the site and designed an attractive layout for the children's zoo. He lauded the beauty, size and location of the site.

This view was shared by other zoo experts who visited the wildlife park, including Stanley Park zoo curator Alan Best, Calgary Zoo Director Bill McKay, Merv Larson, Director of the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum and Al Oeming, founder of the Alberta Game Farm just outside Edmonton.

I coined the park's slogan "Conservation through Education" and tried to practise what I preached by addressing students, service clubs and public meetings to generate interest in and support for the wildlife park. By 1968, the park's first full year of operation, total attendance had reached 48,000 of which about half were school and tour bus visitors. I also gave talks and slide presentations at the park during the summer. Educational benefits even included research by the federal Department of Agriculture's entomological lab west of the city. Research scientist P.R. Wilkinson later informed the Society that the lab's research at the park of "the engorged Rocky Mountain wood ticks on moose is almost certainly the only record from this animal in the world." The research station recognized the facilities provided by the park as an opportunity to provide information on tick infestations of other wildlife species. Requests for memberships came from as far as Quebec and the eastern and southwestern US. Correspondence arrived from as far away as Czechoslovakia and New Zealand.

Draftsman Dietch Aronowski became president of the Society on March 11, 1968 and was succeeded by lawyer Doug Jebson in that position on March 17, 1970. By 1969 the executive had grown to a total of 16 directors who free of charge shared their expertise and gave generously of their time. During those early years directors included: veterinarians Dr. Lorne Greenaway and Rex Mears, lawyers Andrew Berna, Doug Jebson,



John Kurta and Patrick Dohm, accountants Gordon Elliott and Bob Buxton, architect Trevor Owen, Sentinel editor George Smith, businessman Colin Day. Andrew Berna, a founder-director of the Society who had done a lot of legal work for the park free of charge was given a lifetime pass in 1968. Lifetime passes allow recipients and their family to visit the park free of charge. The board also decided that all children under 16 and accompanied by an adult should be admitted free of charge. In addition the park offered at least one day a year free admission to the general public. For the first two weeks in January, 1969 the adult admission charge of one dollar was reduced to 50 cents as yet another attempt

Kampurr plays peek-a-boo to bring people to the park.

In the meantime more than 100 animals were now living at the park, including Kampurr, the young cougar donated by the San Diego Zoo whose name was the result of a “name-the-cougar” contest in Kamloops. The cougar caused a bit of a stir when it escaped from its cage during a change of planes in Vancouver.

It showed its speed by doing a few sprints across the tarmac, but eventually it obediently came back to start the final leg of its long journey to Kamloops.

As the foregoing shows, during the park’s first three years great strides of progress were made, but then some serious financial challenges manifested themselves. It started in March, 1969 when the Government of BC decided to tax the park, despite legislation which provides for property tax exemptions in the case of nonprofit organizations operating projects of benefit to the public. The tax move came after the Society refused to accept a one-dollar offer by the Highways Department for 3.5 acres of parkland at the extreme eastern part of the property. The land was required to build an overpass to the Lafarge Cement plant. The Society insisted on market value and eventually it was compensated accordingly. When the Court of Revision sided with the Society, the BC Government appealed the decision to the Assessment Appeal Board which also ruled against the Crown. Even the provincial assessor William H. Webster said it was his opinion that the park should be exempt from taxation under Section 24(W) of the Land Assessment Act because it was a project operated for the benefit of the public by a nonprofit Society. Dietch Aronowski, president of the Society commented: “(First) the provincial government turned down our requests for a grant and now places the future of this important conservation project in jeopardy by trying to tax it which discourages further construction, since each addition or improvement would mean an increase in tax.”

In the meantime the Highways Department removed a one-by-three-foot directional sign to the park which the City of Kamloops had installed on its own property at Third Avenue and Columbia Street. City council strongly objected to this petty move by the Highways Department and the sign was returned to the City. By now it was clear the BC Government of the time was not on the side of the park.

The tax attempt was in sharp contrast with Ottawa’s ruling which had classified the park tax-exempt. Under the Ottawa ruling the society did not have to pay tax on its income while donations made to the park were ruled tax-deductible. I had mistakenly believed that once the land had been acquired and various quality exhibits had been built, the park’s continued existence would be assured. After all, the appeal and viability of the park had been proven. Surely, different levels of government would now support the project to assure its continuing development. The provincial government’s attempt to tax the park out of existence was the first wake-up call that the park’s continued existence (let alone its continuing progress) could not be taken for granted.

Then in 1970 the economy plummeted while the summer heat soared. This had a devastating dual effect on the park: both attendance and donations dropped sharply. The plunge in the park’s income created a deficit of about \$7000 and for the first time the board of directors and I were compelled to consider the real possibility of having to close the park. The board appealed to the city, the regional district and the provincial government for financial support. All three levels adopted a pass-the-buck stance, each one claiming to recognize the value of the park and supporting it in principle, but not wishing to put money into it on the grounds it was the responsibility of the other levels of government.

The board offered the Thompson-Nicola Regional District the park and all its assets in exchange for an annual grant that would assure the park's survival. The district responded by agreeing to hold a money referendum that would give the park \$15,000 a year for five years, less than 30 cents per taxpayer per year. On December 12, 1970, voters failed to give the referendum the required minimum 60 per cent approval, although all but two areas in the district gave it more than 50 per cent. While voters turned down \$15,000 for the park they did approve a \$39,000 expenditure for mosquito control....

Park supporters were stunned into disbelief. The defeat of the referendum could force the Society to dispose of all its assets, including all its animals and the return of the land to Molson's which had stipulated the land could only be used as a wildlife park. The possible loss of the wildlife park (which was larger than all other parks in the area combined) for the sake of \$15,000 a year seemed absurd. Today it is unbelievable that for the sake of a deficit of only \$7,000 which none of the three levels of government was willing to pay, the park which in land value alone now is worth millions of dollars, was almost lost and could have become yet another housing development or an industrial site.

In the meantime the City of Kamloops had pledged to give the park \$2,500 towards any deficit remaining at the end of 1970, but it reneged on its commitment and gave the park only \$100 in 1971. In desperation the directors took out a loan for which each had to assume personal liability to keep the park going for another year.

When the financial situation remained critical in 1971, a house-to-house canvass was conducted and a giant bingo was organized by local service clubs in support of the park, but the money raised was not enough to keep the park solvent.

After spending six and a half intensive years on the project I could not now preside over the funeral of the park and dispose of all the animals I had acquired and befriended. I was left with many memories. Not all animals had been acquired from other zoos. Many were abandoned and injured animals that were taken to the park where they were treated with loving care. Some I remember very clearly, like the squirrel I had cared for and then released in the park where it made its new home. It would run to me whenever I was in the neighborhood.

There were many animals that had been brought to the park in distress like the pelican found near Spences Bridge by fishermen. It would stretch its neck and gobble up whole fish until it was in good enough shape to be released again. I remember holding and walking with an injured beaver which also recuperated to the point it could be released to its native habitat.

A few winters we lost some of our animals due to severe cold, like January, 1969 when an arctic front made the mercury dip to 38 degrees below zero. All the buildings were insulated and were heated, but they were no match for extreme temperatures. That winter we lost eight animals, mostly birds. Park keepers worked till midnight getting the tropical animals out of their quarters into the oil-heated animal care building which saved most of them. The staff always cared deeply for the animals and often put in long hours looking after them. Different veterinarians at different times offered their services free of charge to examine and treat sick or injured animals. So many people had given so much of their time and often their money to make the park a success that the thought of losing it after all that was --to say the least-- distressing to all of us.

I resigned as the park's manager effective August 31, 1971. With great difficulty and personal sacrifice the board of directors headed by its president, Doug Jebson, kept the

park alive. Subsequent boards and employees continued their dedicated work and when Kamloops and surrounding areas amalgamated in 1972 (?), the park fell within the city's boundaries and responsibilities. The survival of the park was now assured.

I am confident that its value will continue to increase as a major recreational, educational and conservation project. Directors and staff can take pride in the park's success as a breeding facility for various species, some of which --like the burrowing owls-- are reintroduced to their native habitat to boost their dwindling numbers in nature.

The dedication of consecutive boards of directors of the society, the generosity of many Kamloops individuals and businesses and later more enlightened city councils saved the park for posterity. To all of them I express my sincere gratitude for their interest and support in making the B.C. Wildlife Park a reality.

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John Moelaert was born in Holland in 1930 and came to Canada in 1951. He studied philosophy at the University of Alberta and creative writing at the University of British Columbia. He started his writing career in 1958 as a feature writer and news analyst with The Columbian in New Westminster, then BC's oldest newspaper, but now no longer published. Since then his work has appeared in publications across Canada, in the US, Japan and Costa Rica. He has won several prizes for his short stories.

From 1961 until 1965 he worked as a senior reporter for the Kamloops Daily Sentinel. On March 17, 1965 he founded the Greater Kamloops Zoological Society (since renamed Kamloops Wildlife Park Society) and became its first president. After the society received 106 acres of land as a gift from Molson's Breweries just under a year later, he spearheaded the development of the site until August 31, 1971 when a lack of funds threatened to close the project.

His keen interest in animals remained, however. From 1971 till 1974 he was the editor-publisher of two national magazines: first The Canadian Conservationist and later Insight. Since then he has spent most of his time as a writer and public speaker on conservation and social justice. He is the founder of the Calgary branch of Amnesty International and the Kelowna branches of The Canadian Coalition for Nuclear Responsibility and Tools for Peace.

John has taught journalism at the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology in Calgary and communication courses at Camosun College, Fraser Valley College and Okanagan College. He has lectured at McGill University, UBC, Simon Fraser, the University of Victoria and the Lester B. Pearson College of the Pacific.

His lifelong interest in animals started when he went on his first fishing trip as a young boy. When he caught his first and only fish the sight of the metal hook through his catch's jaw horrified him. Even more traumatic was the scene at a slaughterhouse where pigs had their throats slashed.

"If you love animals you don't kill and eat them," John, a vegetarian himself, points out. "When people do not protect animals and their habitats, who will?"

His slogan “CONSERVATION THROUGH EDUCATION” was a key component in his development philosophy of the B.C. Wildlife Park hence the animal exhibits were kept as natural as possible.



John has two sons: Trevor and Lorne whose lives as youngsters were enriched by a wide variety of animals. He shares his retirement in Victoria with his feline friend Diego.

From left Lorne, Tiko and Trevor



Gerda the moose and her baby