

CHINA

Zoo boss who loves his creature comforts

Innovative director gains widespread public support after putting wildlife conservation first

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A zoo in Nanjing, Jiangsu province, that struggled to stay afloat during the COVID-19-induced lockdown last year has made a remarkable revival.

The man behind the U-turn is Shen Zhijun, 50, an animal welfare advocate and horticulturalist. In 2008, he became the youngest director in the history of Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo, which was established in the 1920s.

In August, Shen took to the internet to publicize his decadelong reforms — a series of campaigns that transformed the 65-hectare wildlife park located in hilly forests to Nanjing's north, from a traditional zoo to one which prizes wildlife conservation.

Over 13 years, Shen has transformed the park's landscape and abolished animal shows, which are the financial lifeblood of many zoos.

In his speech, "A Zoo's Pursuit", Shen talked about some of the humane and successful changes introduced at his zoo.

They include a bathing pool and giant shower for elephants, a leafy playground in the orangutan valley, a jungle environment for cassowaries — an endangered, fierce bird from northeastern Australia — to roam about and mate, and a secluded resting place for animals about to give birth.

"That (having a rest) was a basic animal right," he said at the online event hosted by Yixi.tv.

During his speech, Shen's team used 3D-printing technology to repair a monkey's tooth and restore a red-crowned crane's broken beak. "This helps improve their quality of life and bolsters their confidence when they are among other animals," Shen said.

His 30-minute presentation, which propelled him to overnight stardom on the internet last summer, included quirky diversions about animal facts.

He recounted how zoo staff members studied the breeding habits of cassowaries using oval-shaped sensors after the exotic birds began to lay eggs for the first time in a decade. He also told of how zoo staff mem-



Shen Zhijun watches an orangutan at Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo in Jiangsu province. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

"A modern zoo needs to educate the public more about the relationship between wildlife and their habitats and understand the importance of the environment for both human and wildlife survival. It should let people have respect for life and nature and encourage a sustainable way of life."

Shen Zhijun, director of Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo in Jiangsu province



bers went to painstaking lengths to send an abandoned baby chimpanzee back to her troop.

Money matters

However, as Shen started to wind up his speech he abruptly changed topic and called attention to the zoo's falling revenue. The park usually generates 80 percent of its

income from ticket sales, however, visitor numbers had plummeted due to restrictions implemented last year to control the COVID-19 outbreak.

"Some people say there will be a 'retaliatory' surge in number of visitors to zoos after the novel coronavirus subsides, but I have not been retaliated against yet," he said. "The

future survival of the zoo makes me worried."

His honest assessment of the zoo's situation quickly resonated with netizens. The talk received more than 1.1 million views in the five days after it was released online.

Riding the wave of public interest, the zoo rolled out a program for netizens to "adopt" animals for a period

of time. For example, 20 netizens can collectively adopt a leopard for a year, with each paying 100 yuan (\$15.30), twice the price of an admission ticket. In return, the donors receive regular video updates about the animals they sponsor and can visit the zoo to have an up-close experience with them.

Through the innovative fundrais-

ing measures the zoo has managed to turn around its finances after the epidemic subsided on the Chinese mainland.

New way ahead

The comfortable environment the animals live in is a far cry from that for 2,800 animals 13 years ago when Shen took charge of the zoo. A horticulturalist by training, he had no experience running such a facility, which involves dealing with not only the animals, but hundreds of animal caretakers and hundreds of thousands of visitors every year.

Shen said he spent his first year doing nothing but observing how the zoo operated. Every morning, he did routine patrols of the animal shelters and one thing soon became apparent; the animals seemed unhappy.

The wolves seemed the most distressed, with the animals confined to a 10-square-meter cage, "helpless and hopeless", Shen said in the viral talk. In 2009, he began making changes starting with the wolf shelter and later expanded to zones housing tropical birds, lemurs and koalas.

Zoo authorities have also stepped up efforts on conservation education. They have put up posters and signs to educate the public on dwindling natural habitats and endangered species.

"We want to explain to our visitors why they are endangered. Is it because of climate change, or industrialization or shrinking habitats?" Shen recently said.

He has attributed the success of his speech to the fact it has helped the public learn what the "true mission" of a zoo should be. Traditional zoos have existed for many years to entertain visitors through animal performance and other means.

"A modern zoo needs to educate the public more about the relationship between wildlife and their habitats and understand the importance of the environment for both human and wildlife survival. It should let people have respect for life and nature and encourage a sustainable way of life," he said.

"Finally, a zoo should inspire empathy in people and help translate those feelings into actions."

Inspectors ensure rails don't fail in Kaili, Guizhou

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At the end of the day, people who are generally inactive would be pleased if the number on their step counters in their smartphones reached more than 10,000, which is equivalent to having walked 6 kilometers.

For Zhou Jie's, when his step counter reaches that figure, it means that he is nearing the halfway point of his daily work as a railroad inspector, a job which requires him to walk around 15 km along the railway line every day.

"I do not care about the number, because the real test is to find a defect in a few millimeters every day among a dozen km of railway tracks. An accident could happen if a little defect is undiscovered," Zhou said.

The 31-year-old is part of the 10-man inspection team that patrols the railway that runs alongside the mountains in Kaili, a city in Guizhou province. Their job is to make sure the trains can safely pass through their section.

The inspectors describe themselves as "railway doctors" whose work is just as vital as doctors in hospitals, because both types are, in their own way, responsible for saving lives.

Team members, who are age 30 on average, are always divided into two groups during the inspections. One group of three carries walkie-talkies to warn about approaching trains, while the rest scan the steel rail with flaw-detecting instruments, which use ultrasound to check for internal cracks.

Zhou is a member of the latter group. "To be more specific, we are more like gynecologists, but we hope to find nothing inside while checking," Zhou said.

Every morning, a shuttle bus



Zhou Jie checks a section of the Shanghai-Kunming High-speed Railway in Kaili, Guizhou province. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

takes them to their worksite — a section of the Shanghai-Kunming High-speed Railway, which runs between Huangsi and Longli county in Kaili.

After arrival, seven members of the team start conducting their routine checks, leaving the tracks when trains arrive and returning after departures. They get on and off the tracks more than 60 times a day.

"If we discover any cracks, we inform the staff at the Kaili train station, and they send people to fix it," Zhou said.

"That sounds easy, but after identifying a spot on the rails with potential damage, it demands highly concentrated attention to measure and check the flaw as well as significant stamina because we need to walk more than eight hours carrying the tool, which weighs 50 kilograms."

Meanwhile, members of the walk-

ie-talkie group split up. One positions himself 1 km in front of the inspection team, and another 1 km behind. When they see approaching trains, they immediately inform the station and their other teammate who walks with the inspectors.

"We are important to the safety of passing trains, and the other group is important to our safety. And thanks to them, we have never experienced a frightening situation like the ones we have seen in Hollywood movies," Zhou said.

Further, the detectors have kept travelers from experiencing danger over the past few years.

"Since I became the member of this proud team in 2013, we have achieved the 'four zeros' — zero missed defects, zero miscalculations, zero violations of regulations and zero accidents — every year, and whenever I think about this, I am happy that I am here," Zhou said.

Zhou is a native of Chengde, Hebei province. After graduating from a college in Shijiazhuang, the province's capital, he got a job offer from the China Railway Chengdu Group.

The corporation, based in Chengdu, capital of Sichuan province, manages many railways sections in Southwest China, and it assigned Zhou to work at its Kaili section.

To ensure trains would operate safely during the past two Spring Festival holidays, Zhou decided to stay in Kaili instead of going back to Chengde and visiting his parents.

Last year, Zhou and his teammates inspected more than 2,500 km of lines and detected more than 100 potential dangers.

China has 18 railway group corps operating 54 railway sections, and there are inspectors working at every section.

Those inspectors in yellow vests understand that they cannot make mistakes, as doing so could be catastrophic.

"No matter what you do, you need faith to keep going. And my belief is to accomplish the 'four zeros' every day to ensure the safety of all lives on the passing trains," Zhou said.

How firefighters keep Potala Palace safe

LHASA — For hundreds of years, it had been customary for Tibetan Buddhists to worship in the Potala Palace with butter lamps in their hands.

But for firefighter Champa Chopel, even the smallest flame can be catastrophic for the palace, known as a "pearl on the roof of the world".

Born in Lhasa, capital of the Tibet autonomous region, Champa Chopel grew up at the foot of the Potala Palace and is now the chief of the fire station that protects the structure.

Firefighters patrol the palace for more than 10 hours a day, with each walking more than 25,000

steps on average. The palace buildings stand as high as 115 meters. Inside the buildings, there are narrow passages and steep stairways, and footprints left by the firefighters cover almost every corner of the palace.

"After the palace closes in the afternoon, we start our patrols with the palace management staff. Every place must be covered to leave no potential danger unattended," Champa Chopel said.

The Potala Palace was built by the Tibetan King Songtsen Gampo (617-650) in the seventh century and expanded in the 17th century. The palace was included on the UNESCO World Heritage

List in 1994 and is one of the most popular tourist attractions in Tibet. It holds a collection of valuable scriptures, historical documents and precious relics, including statues, paintings and frescoes.

However, the mainly wood-and-stone buildings and the cultural relics contained inside are fragile. Throughout its history, the Potala Palace has suffered several fires, with the last occurring in June 1984 due to an electrical fault. The day after the fire, a firefighting team was established to protect the palace.

Thanks to the efforts of the firefighters no fire has broken out since.

In recent years, the fire department has taken a range of measures to better ensure safety, including the introduction of a system to detect short circuits and thermal heat-detection technology.

Champa Chopel said in the past firefighters at the palace mainly relied on water and soil. Now, water, powder and fire extinguishers are at the ready to offer the maximum protection for cultural relics.

Considering the unique structure of the palace and its elevation, firefighters have fire hoses in place that can decrease response times by at least five minutes.

As advised by the fire department, thousands of butter lamps in the main buildings of the Potala Palace were moved to a special room near the ground several years ago.

Having served in the team for about 10 years, Champa Chopel said the layout of the palace has long been imprinted on his mind, and he knows the location of every room, passage and piece of equipment.

He said he is so familiar with his work surroundings that guarding the palace is like guarding his own home. "Protecting it has become second nature," he said.



From top: Firefighters of the fire station that protects the Potala Palace in Lhasa, Tibet autonomous region, assemble in front of the site before starting a patrol on March 4. Firefighters take a physical fitness tests at the station. PHOTOS BY SUN RUIBO / XINHUA

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