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Save the cheetah

SALLY WALKER describes the efforts of people at Winston Wildlife Safari Park in Oregon, USA, who are involved in a struggling conservation project attempting to promote captive cheetah breeding and the rehabilitation of birds of prey

There was an article about Winston Wildlife Safari Park some time ago in an Indian magazine about African cheetahs. Winston is one of the captive breeding centres which has bred the most cheetahs in the world, some others being Whipsnade in the United Kingdom and the San Diego Wild Animal Park in California.

I had also heard about a very interesting young woman, Laurie Marker, who works there as Education and Public Relations Officer, in addition to being the stud bookkeeper for cheetahs in captivity the world over. Marker has also hand-reared cheetahs which were neglected by their mothers. She, in fact, had kept one

hunt had died of a kidney failure. Marker must have felt the loss deeply as Khyam had been her constant companion; she had taken Khyam with her to zoo conferences as well as to hundreds of schools, colleges and other public events where she lectured on conservation.

Marker had arranged for keepers to pick me up at her house and give me an inside tour of the park. Lunch and a long discussion was arranged with owner-manager Frank Hart and then we went home with another keeper to spend the night. The next day we left for Portland, Oregon, with a cheetah in our van.

Oregon is incredibly and naturally beautiful. The wildlife park is lush and green,

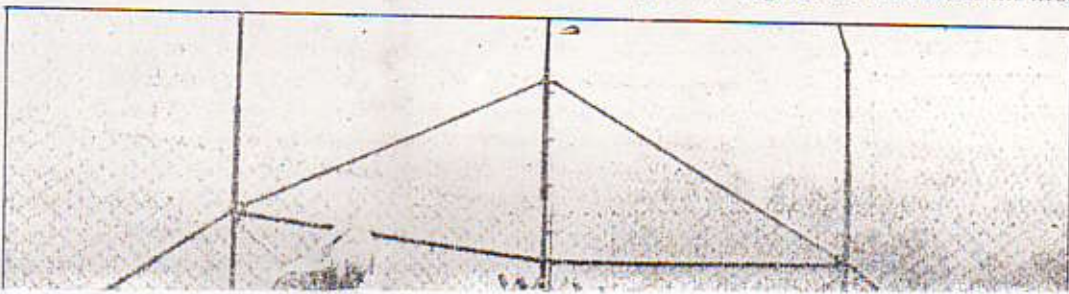
and visitors can watch and photograph them to their hearts' content. There are 68 species with a total of 500 animals, some in great, dramatic herds.

However, unlike the big fancy city zoos and parks I had recently visited, the Wildlife Safari showed signs of financial difficulties. The animals were not suffering, of course; they were all sleek and healthy. But the vehicles in which we went round the park were terribly old and shabby and, as I talked with the keepers, I learned that they were having a hard time making ends meet on their small salaries. They were not bitter about it; they loved the park and knew the owner was doing his best. But it was the first



Rhinoceroses at Winston Wildlife

it with financial assistance from a big company in 1972. Hart, of course, was more interested in conservation but the company wanted to see profits. When there weren't any, they wanted out. With great difficulty, Hart bought





Dedicated keepers and staff work to keep animals healthy in the cold climate of Oregon

female cheetah named Khyam in her home for over ten years. She had even taken Khyam with her to Africa and actually taught her to hunt wild prey as part of an experiment to see if captive cheetahs could be returned to the wild.

The beautiful cheetah she had reared and trained to

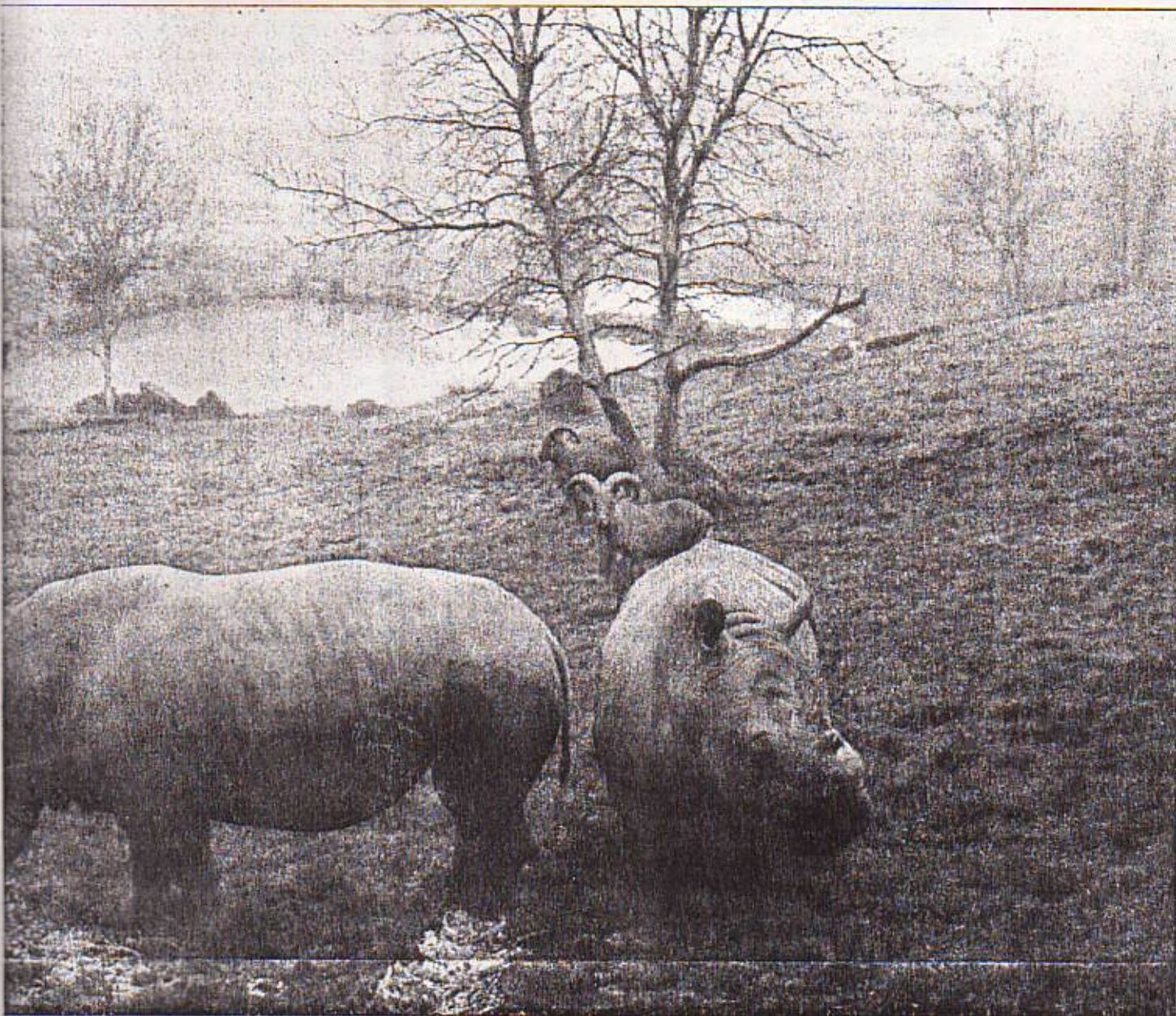
with rolling hills, oak and madrone trees, and misty, mystical mornings. So it was this morning—very beautiful and very cold. The park covers 600 acres and there are three miles of road which tourists can drive through leisurely. The animals, both Asian and African, roam free in separate

time that I had seen a struggling facility in America and it came as a great surprise to me that some Americans, too, are making great sacrifices for wildlife.

At lunch with Hart, I learned of the many problems he faced. The Wildlife Safari was his dream. He had started

Since that time, he has struggled to keep the park going. Oregon is not one of the great tourist centres of the US and, certainly, Winston is not a place people flock to. The weather also discourages year-round visits, a problem the southern hemisphere facilities do not face. Summer visitors do come in sufficient numbers to support the operation, but winters are lonely, long and hard.

Despite all that, Hart has done some excellent conservation work at the park through captive breeding. Cheetah breeding is perhaps the most dramatic and exciting, but there are other projects as well. Wildlife Safari is licensed by the US Federal Government as a wildlife rehabilitation centre, and is authorised to take in sick, injured or illegally held birds of prey. After recovery, the birds, if they are strong enough, are rehabilitated in the wild. In addition, educational training sessions involving these birds are held for the public to educate them on how birds of prey are use-



Safari Park

ful to human beings.

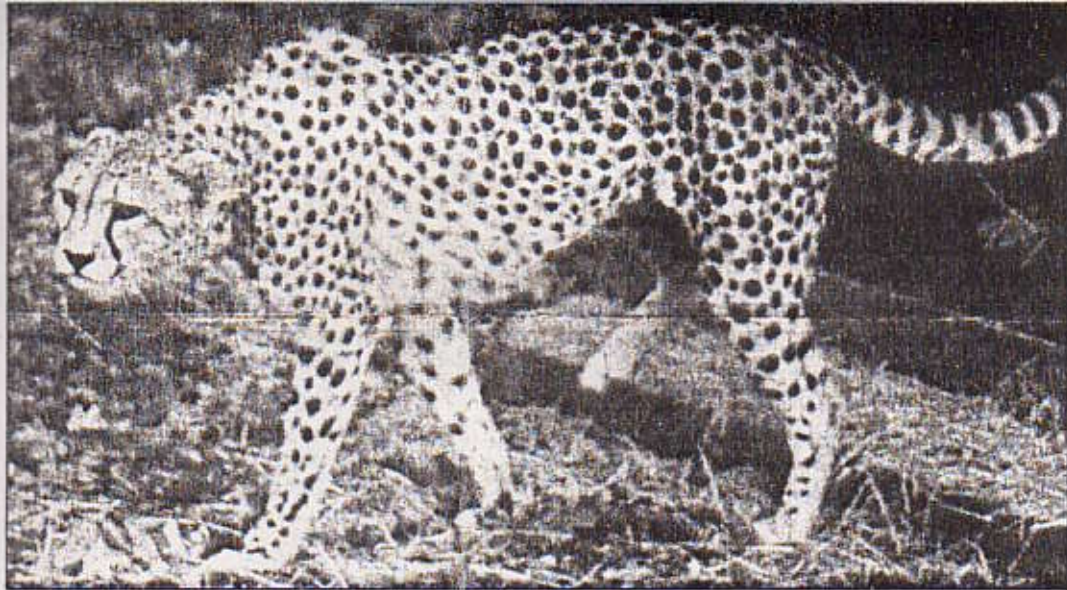
Hart told me of his struggles and then took me on a tour of the area around the offices, which consist of small and well-designed enclosures for animals which can't be released into the Safari. There is a petting zoo, an education

Tracy, it emerged, was taking the cheetah Damera to Portland to an exhibition. Not an animal exhibition, but just an exhibition, like we have in Mysore during Dassera. The cheetah was perfectly tame and sat quietly all day, allowing people to pat her and have

I got to know Tracy a bit during the night I spent with her and her children and during the ride down. She had a back problem and there was no one in Portland who could help her that day as it was a working day. I decided to help her.

be with her.

Then the visitors started coming. There was no teasing or 'bad behaviour' as such. But the questions. Such stupid questions. And sappy sentimental comments. It was really very tiresome. I started counting the hours until it was



over—it seemed a great ordeal.

Fortunately, Damera didn't seem to mind any of it. When it got too boring for her she simply went to sleep—and permitted herself to be photographed with her head in a lap. She didn't suffer. But we did.

It was very tedious work, but they made enough that weekend to keep the park going another two weeks. I left, full of admiration and respect for these people, both employees and volunteers, struggling to keep the Wildlife Safari open. I realized that they were making tremendous sacrifices, the like of which I had not dreamed would be necessary in the United States. There are so many talented people there who could be drawing huge salaries working for big concerns, but who were, instead, dedicating their lives to some struggling conservation project. Trying to save a piece of land or a few species of animals for posterity and to convince others to do so as well.

One of the hundred cheetahs bred at Winston Wildlife Safari Park

theatre and a gift shop as well.

In the evening, Tracy, the keeper with whom I was to ride to Portland, came to fetch me and we got into the park's van, which was, thankfully, in good condition. In the back of the van, in a very large cage, was a cheetah named Damera which we took along with us.

their photographs taken with her. This is one way the park raised sufficient funds to survive the long, visitorless winter months. And Tracy was giving up her weekend to take polaroid photographs of Damera and the people for five dollars per shot, all of which would go to the park.

At first, I thought it would be a lot of fun. Sitting with a beautiful cheetah and telling people about cheetahs and taking their photographs. And, of course, it was, at first. Damera was truly a sweet and patient animal who never gave anyone a moment of anxiety. It was interesting to