

**Sent:** Friday, June 02, 2006 10:03 AM  
**Subject:** letter to the editor

Editor of the Vancouver Sun.

Dear Sir/Madam

Please accept the following submission as a response to the article by Nicholas Read regarding Hazina the Hippo: (sorry for the verbosity, but there is a lot to address)

Letters to the Editor:

Editor of the Sun,

As the veterinarian who oversees the medical care of the animals at the Greater Vancouver Zoo, I feel it is necessary to respond to the comments made in the article of Wednesday, May 31<sup>st</sup> by Nicholas Read regarding the charges laid by the BCSPCA against that facility.

As someone whose entire working and private life revolves around the care and well-being of animals, I can sympathize with the concerns in the minds of the public raised by these charges. However, it is extremely important that these allegations be more fully explored and not taken on their reported face value. There are a significant number of inaccuracies and inflammatory half-truths listed.

1. In Mr. Read's article, I was dismissed as 'unavailable for comment.' This is true, technically. However, I think it is important to know that Mr. Read phoned my office at around 4 PM on Tuesday. At that time, like most of us, I was at work and consequently, was not watching the carefully staged, televised press-conference, and thus was unaware of any of the charges. More specifically, I was in the middle of performing an orthopedic surgery on a dog's knee when Mr. Read phoned. He was told I would speak to him after the surgery or the following morning, when I would not be jeopardizing my patient, but, apparently, this was unacceptable to Mr. Read. My question was then, and remains, why would anyone who professes to love and care for animals, as Mr. Read does, demand I drop what I was doing and put at risk the health of a patient just so he could get a quick quote for a story? And why would he reject the opportunity to obtain first-hand information? Seems a bit hypocritical.

2. The so-called 'windowless' facility Hazina was reportedly housed in actually has a row of windows along the north wall. All of the television shots of Hazina were taken through those windows. Now that the weather has warmed up, the south-facing door is open as well.

3. Hazina is in a 'pool so shallow that she couldn't float.' Actually, she can float. She spends a great portion of each day floating in the pool. Yes, the pool could be bigger now that she is getting larger, but at the present time the pool is fully adequate for her health and well-being. Somewhere between now and six months from now it certainly will become inadequate. Fortunately, by that time, and well before she begins to suffer from this inadequacy, she will be in her new facility.

4. Ms. Moriarty, general manager of cruelty investigations, reportedly stated Hazina is in a 'small pool inside a wooden shed.' Actually, it is a heated, concrete building. Which, if Ms. Moriarty had ever taken the time to actually visit the facility about which she comments regularly, she would have known. Concrete, although solid and unappealing to look at, is, for good or ill, the best material in which to house most exotic animals. It is the only surface that can be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected, and that can stand up to the wear and tear large animals can inflict on a building. The reason why all zoos, not just the Vancouver Zoo, have concrete buildings is because the animals are safer and healthier in them. It is not for their aesthetic appeal.

5. Again, from secondhand information, Ms. Moriarty states that 'her (Hazina's) only form of stimulation were a rubber tire and a ball.' Actually, Hazina has a superbly dedicated caretaker that interacts with her every day. This caretaker is not in the pen with her twenty four hours a day, because Hazina does like to sleep. Hazina did have company when arrangements were made acquire her. When Hazina was acquired, Harvey was the other hippo on site. Unfortunately, Harvey died, which left Hazina by herself. At the same time Ms. Moriarty laments the fact that Hazina is alone. When the zoo then states they are planning to obtain a companion for her to rectify this concern, then she complains long and loud about bringing in another hippo. Either they want her to have another hippo or they don't. They can't demand the zoo acquire a hippo for companionship and then do everything in their power to prevent that from happening. I have difficulty following their logic on this point.

6. The next complaint listed is that 'they (the zoo) have only just started opening the door for her (to see sunlight).' Yes, that is true. However, the reason is that we just came through a winter. Winter weather is cold and wet. Now that winter is over, the ambient temperature is high enough for it to be safe to allow her access to the outside. If the doors had been open earlier, she very well could have become chilled and contracted pneumonia. This is why she was not allowed access to the outside. This isn't rocket science.

7. The hippo was forced to stand on concrete. Actually, from the time Hazina was at the zoo, the floors had rubber horse mats on the floors.

8. 'The zoo should not have acquired Hazina unless they had adequate facilities.' I would agree wholeheartedly with this statement. However, the building she is currently in fits that requirement. But there is a difference between optimum, adequate and inadequate. We all

agree she does not have an optimum facility. No question about that. That is why the zoo has constructed the new hippo facility. This new facility will approach that goal. On that same point, I have never seen a situation where horses, or cattle, or dogs or cats are required by the SPCA to be housed in 'optimum facilities', only adequate ones. And some are much more adequate than others. There is no question in my mind that the current facility is certainly adequate for a young, growing hippo. If it was not adequate, there would be signs of distress, illness or injury. In my bi-weekly assessment of Hazina, I have never seen her show any signs of illness or injury.

However, on one occasion, and one occasion only, she did show signs of distress, serious distress. This occurred during the Christmas holidays this past year, when the SPCA on the spur of the moment, and without consulting me, demanded that the zoo immediately construct a new pool for her. The zoo was only given a couple of weeks to have the new pool ready and was threatened with having Hazina seized if they didn't comply. I was unaware of this edict and when I came in to examine Hazina on my next visit was confronted with a severely depressed animal. She hid in the pool and refused to eat or interact with anyone. I told the zoo to stop construction, contacted the SPCA and expressed my very serious concerns about the cruelty they, the SPCA, were inflicting on the hippo by this ridiculous and arbitrary order. To their credit, common sense prevailed and they reversed the order. But, other than that one time, I have never seen Hazina in distress.

9. 'SPCA was alerted to the problem by the Vancouver Humane Society.' I would suggest that the usually sane and appropriate approach to concerns about animal welfare taken by the SPCA was derailed by the need to be 'seen to be doing something.' The 'Vancouver Humane Society' and other more rabid animal rights groups have never accepted that exotic animals, or in some cases any animals, should be kept in captivity. The SPCA, I believe, has been bullied into this action by these more extreme groups, who often severely criticize the perceived inadequacy and inaction of the BCSPCA.

The statements released emphasize the 'appearance' of problems and condemn the aesthetics of the facility, but never once identify a specific example of cruelty with respect to Hazina. I am not a hippo expert. Never claimed to be. And, I doubt if one exists. But I do have twenty five years of veterinary experience with a wide range of domestic and wild animals. I have degrees in wildlife management and in agriculture. I have been asked by the BCSPCA to examine and report on cases of animal abuse as recently as this past month. So even the SPCA must feel I have some credibility in the field of animal welfare.

However, if they truly believe my credibility is insufficient then employ or ask another qualified veterinarian to assess the condition of Hazina. The SPCA has several vets on staff. It begs the question, why they were not involved in this assessment and prosecution? Furthermore, why has the SPCA not been able to get any other qualified veterinarian to support their claims? These criminal charges for animal cruelty are very, very serious. I would hope that those making them would have some credible and verifiable expertise.

If there truly was a concern about Hazina why would those at the SPCA not contact me with their concerns? They implied they have tried to work with the zoo and me. This is not true. I have documented attempts to try obtain their cooperation. In conversations with Ms. Driver, she said she possessed information outlining what was required to satisfy the needs of hippos in captivity. Unfortunately, even though I repeatedly asked for this information, I was never contacted by the SPCA nor was I ever provided with any such information. Surely, if the SPCA was in possession of such information, and if they truly had the best interests of Hazina at heart, they would have provided this information to either me or the zoo.

As an aside, on Wednesday afternoon, I had a T.V. camera-person wanting to interview me regarding this issue. While she was waiting and in the space of one hour, among the cases that came into my clinic I had a dog that had a twelve inch long, two inch deep, laceration across the top of his neck. It had festered for two days before he the owners brought him in. I had a cat that was ill for a week and a half, and I had a dog that had been in a fight a day and a half ago. Each of these cases would constitute more pain and suffering than Hazina has experienced in her entire life. Do I report the owners for cruelty? Is that the most appropriate course of action to take? No. We, as veterinarians see these situations every day of our working lives. We deal with the problem and educate the owners. If we do our job, the situations are resolved and, more importantly, are never repeated. I humbly submit that the SPCA would have been well advised to follow a similar course of action.

The current owner of the zoo has, within his means, steadily and significantly improved the zoo. Many of the oft-repeated problems of the zoo occurred long before he was ever involved with the zoo. It is both misleading and unfair, and quite frankly, tiresome, to see him tarred with this same brush over and over again. That is very lazy and sloppy journalism.

Certainly, improvements can always be made. It is a never ending process. This applies to all walks of life. But surely working with the zoo would have accomplished so very much more for all concerned, in particular, those of us who love zoos and for the animals who live at the zoo, than this expensive, wasteful, vexatious and, in my opinion, malicious exercise. Surely, the crown has no shortage of real criminals to prosecute!

Sincerely,

Dr. Bruce Burton.