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Press release

A look back into the past of Zoo Berlin

Exhibition in the antelope house presents history of Berlin Zoo in new light

Zoo Berlin has tackled a difficult task that was long overdue. Historian Dr Clemens Maier-Wolthausen was commissioned by the Supervisory Board of Zoologischer Garten Berlin AG to reappraise the eventful, almost 175-year history of Germany's oldest zoo. He was advised in this undertaking by an external advisory council. The outcome of this work is now on display in a free permanent exhibition in the zoo's antelope house.

Visitors are given clear and vivid insight into how Friedrich Wilhelm III's menagerie on Peacock Island developed into the zoo with the richest variety of species in the world and Berlin's most important recreational facility – thanks not least to vigorous civic engagement. The exhibition takes a cultural history and history of science perspective and does not fail to address the chapters in the history of the Zoo that give rise to critical reflection. "Human zoos" and compliance with Nazi ideology are just as much part of the Zoo Berlin's history as improvements in animal welfare and famous animal personalities.

"We are delighted to present the 172 years of Berlin Zoo's history in our antelope house. The most beautiful and the oldest, restored building of the original zoo is a worthy venue for this important exhibition," says Zoo and Tierpark Director Dr Andreas Knieriem. "We hope this permanent exhibition will encourage visitors to find out more about our history and that we can share our findings and our concerns with a wide group of visitors." The exhibition is spread over 130m² in the foyer of the Zoo's oldest preserved building." The painful chapter in which Berlin Zoo conformed to the Nazi regime is addressed right in the centre of the exhibition.

The history of zoos is generally presented as a row of anecdotes about "important men". "Books about zoos are frequently structured according to the eras of the directors – and until now, Zoo Berlin was no exception," explains exhibition curator Dr Clemens Maier-Wolthausen. He wanted to break with this convention here: "As Berlin Zoo is closely connected to the history of the city of Berlin we have taken this as the underlying theme of the exhibition."

A scientific advisory council comprising prominent researchers on the history of the 19th and 20th century and especially the history of Nazism and anti-Semitism was set up to ensure the independence of the exhibition content. The council continuously accompanied the exhibition concept development process. Research for the exhibition began more than one year ago and the exhibition costs were €120,000.

In awareness of its historical responsibility, Zoo Berlin is also financing a Fellowship Programme to promote scientific exchange between Israel and Germany. Berlin welcomed its first Fellow in October 2016. The programme is targeted not only at young scientists working on a doctoral thesis in veterinary medicine, biology, wild and zoo animal research and also at doctoral students in ethics and history. The programme enables PhD students from Israel to carry out a research stay in Berlin for three to twelve months. The next grant holder will arrive in Berlin in March 2017. The application procedure for further grants is underway. Zoo Berlin is in close contact with the Fellows, the Freie Universität Berlin and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.