



Creating the Nation's first BioPark

National Zoological Park · Smithsonian Institution · Washington, D.C. 20008

Letter from the Desk of David Challinor
May 1, 1991

The urge to keep pets seems ubiquitous among humans, and it is a rare person who will admit to disliking animals. Those of us who have or have had pets know the care they require. I thought of this need to husband animals recently when viewing the magnificent paintings of the Dutch masters in the Maurits Huis Museum in the Hague.

On display at the museum were at least four or five sixteenth-century oil paintings depicting exotic birds and animals. One in particular, of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, contained extraordinarily accurate renderings of a toucan, two species of macaws, an ostrich, and a Greater Bird of Paradise. Considering that the new-world birds had only been known to Europeans for 30 or 40 years when these paintings were done, it seems remarkable that the artists had models to paint from so soon. It is true that they could have painted these birds from skins, but the accuracy of the birds' perching posture suggests that they used live birds as models.

If that was indeed the case, there must have been a thriving market in exotic birds and mammals. Normally the more lucrative the trade, the greater the effort to sustain it, and I can picture sixteenth-century adventurers in the Caribbean or the East Indies bargaining with the local inhabitants for parrots, toucans and small primates. Considering the appalling conditions these animals must have endured on the slow-sailing ships then used, it is a wonder that any survived the long ocean voyage. Obviously many did not.

What is still unknown are the details of how these birds and animals were maintained on board ship. Toucans normally eat fruit and berries. How and what were they fed without refrigeration? Whatever methods the successful animal traders developed, I am sure they kept the details secret to prevent competitors from gaining an advantage.

The necessity for secrecy in sixteenth-century commerce explains why no books were written on the shipboard-care of exotic pets. The same need for commercial secrecy was also probably responsible for the tantalizing but unrecorded history of fifteenth-century new-world whaling.



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There is considerable evidence that western Europeans fished the Grand Banks before Columbus arrived. Less certain is the theory that fifteenth-century European whalers might have extirpated the Atlantic population of the grey whale. Subfossil skeletal material from grey whales are found along the shores of the Chesapeake -- a large shallow estuary ideally suited to the breeding and calving of this species. There are a few oblique references in the seventeenth century to an uncommon whale in the western Atlantic. We can only speculate that this rare whale was the grey one, for the most recent subfossils of this species date back to the early 1700's. Extirpation by Indians was unlikely, so if any people were responsible for the loss, Europeans could easily have been the cause.

It is hard for us to realize how much global trade there was in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Narwhal tusks from the northwest Arctic Ocean and live gyrfalcons captured in Iceland and Greenland were successfully imported to the courts of Europe, and by tradition this species of hunting falcon was reserved for the exclusive use of Popes and Emperors of the Holy Roman Empire. Private menageries were relatively common and were a source of great status to the king or noble who maintained it, as the animals must have been extraordinarily expensive. Because wild birds and mammals were then so plentiful, there was little need for zoo breeding. Today, however, the situation is reversed. Importation of exotic stock is severely controlled, and the survival of gaudy exotic pets -- once kept only by kings and nobles -- is now of concern to us all. Places such as the National Zoo are in the forefront of maintaining successful breeding populations of rare animals and birds for future generations to enjoy; thus has twentieth-century democracy made kings of us all.