

## **Tiger, tiger ... gently into the night**

It was just after 1pm last Saturday when Paul Whitehorn unlocked the heavy security doors of the tiger compound at Melbourne Zoo and crouched at the enclosure to examine the form in the far corner.

Frank, the old Sumatran tiger, lay on his side in the shade. He fixed Whitehorn with a gaze and, though his eyes blinked, his huge head remained on the ground and his long striped body did not move.

"Hey, Frankie ... hey buddy," Whitehorn called softly. Frank normally would jump up and roar, or at least pace the caged yard behind the public display.

But the tiger was not well and Whitehorn suspected it was more than the usual problem with the arthritis in his hips. Two days earlier, for the first time ever, he hadn't wanted to move into the public viewing area. Vets had increased the anti-inflammatory drugs hidden in his meat, but today he just wasn't interested in anything.

In the morning, as he had dragged himself to where he now lay, Frank had urinated involuntarily along the way. It was a sure - a final - sign. Tigers like nothing more than to mark their territory with urine.

"Hey Frankie ... come on," Whitehorn urged. The tiger, now more than 19-and-a-half years old, looked back, but did not move. In the wild, male tigers live to about 12 years, in captivity to between 15 and 17. Time had taken its toll on the tiger whose life had begun at Germany's Frankfurt Zoo and who was only 15 months old when he arrived in Melbourne.

Kate Bodley, the zoo's on-duty vet, approached and stood by Whitehorn, silently studying the tiger. Frank may have suffered a major organ failure, possibly his kidneys, and given his age and the quality of life considerations, there really wasn't much choice.

A whispered conversation between Bodley and Whitehorn sealed the decision.

Euthanasia, so controversial in humans, is carried out routinely at the zoo for both health and management reasons. In an odd twist of derivative language, it is carried out as humanely as possible.

Outside the tiger's enclosure, a hot day has attracted a big crowd. The zoo car park is filled by mid-morning. As well as the families, almost 3000 young scouts have fanned out across the zoo. Children with hats and ice creams and mothers with bags and not enough eyes or hands struggled to keep their flocks and themselves together.

For the staff, life at the zoo revolves around animal births, deaths and sex. Staff who are too sentimental to handle the brutal realities of these events do not last. Relations with animals must be professional. In the case of euthanasia, a zoo manual instructs that while such decisions were not lightly made, they were "not made easier by individuals who bring emotional sentiments into play". This need for objectivity, even when unstated, is recognised by staff. Paul Whitehorn, who is the keeper in charge of carnivores and hoofed mammals, was acutely aware of his responsibilities with the forthcoming "procedure". He would have to assist the vets, inform senior zoo officials and then explain the decision as best he could to at least two dozen staff.

And yet, he would later say that losing Frank was like losing a member of his family. They went back and they did have a relationship. The tiger was one of the zoo's most popular and well-known exhibits well before Whitehorn started working there 10 years ago. Frank's well-being was one of his main duties.

"We've been through a bit together," Whitehorn mused. There was that incident five years ago when the gate between them accidentally was left unlatched and Frank had pushed against it. Both realised at the same time that it was open.

Whitehorn, whose physical presence, height and round eyes are undeniably tigerish, repeats the story with so much animation it's clear he relishes recounting it and has done so often. They had looked up at one another in surprise. Frank almost had it over him! He got to the gate a whisker before Frank, slamming it shut.

Of course, Frank later had grown jealous of the relationship between Poetry, a placid female Sumatran tiger, and himself. The way Poetry had smooched up to him! But after she died 18 months ago, Frank had calmed down,

perhaps his testosterone drying up with age, and occasionally even allowed Whitehorn to scratch him through the bars.

As well, Whitehorn had nursed Frank and Poetry's twin cubs and not long ago brought Frank's grandson down from the Dubbo zoo.

In Frank's yard, outside his night den, were the logs he scratched, and the secret places where he discovered meat hidden by the keepers and where he tracked foreign scents. But though his huge yellow eyes were wide open, Frank could no longer see or feel anything. A dart, fired 10 minutes earlier by Kate Bodley, has put him into a deep sleep from which he won't awake. The only sign of life was the gentle rise and fall of his abdomen with each sedated breath.

Few words were spoken as two vets, a nurse and Whitehorn fussed over Frank. Bodley, her brown hair cut short and her features sharp, moved efficiently and clinically, clipping a heart monitor to Frank's limp tongue and then feeling around his abdomen for lumps.

Another vet, Andrea Reiss, kneeling alongside, struggled, due to Frank's low blood pressure, to find a vein in his hind thigh before inserting a catheter in his front left leg. Several syringes of dark blood were drawn for analysis. The nurse kept an eye on his body temperature with a thermometer in his backside. A keeper, rifle in hand, stood back, watching for any sign of stirring. No one spoke.

Whitehorn, situated behind Frank, helped hold the tiger's hind leg for Andrea Reiss and then assisted with the catheter. Throughout, his right hand gently stroked Frank's shoulder or pushed back an ear. He gently slid a folded blanket under the old tiger's head.

Tests immediately suggested renal failure, problems with cardiovascular function and possibly a liver tumor. At 2.45pm, Bodley inserted a large syringe in the catheter and Whitehorn, still patting the tiger, looked away.

The news spread quickly. As Paul Whitehorn, red-eyed but controlled, emerged from the compound staff expressed their sorrow. The zoo's public relations officer prepared a media release.

Only about 400 Sumatran tigers survive in the rainforests of Sumatra, an Indonesian island, and about 210 live in zoos around the world. Few live as long as Frank.

Another set of eyes may have been watching Frank's last moments on Saturday. Ramalon, a four-year-old tiger, was in the enclosure adjacent to Frank's. Ramalon is Frank's grandson and, according to Whitehorn, has his grandfather's looks and his grandmother's gentle temperament.

Frank and Poetry's era has passed and the search has begun for a mate for Ramalon. Meanwhile, Paul Whitehorn is getting to know the newcomer. "He's turned out to be a really nice tiger," he said. "He's already got us all wrapped around his little claws."

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## Melbourne zoos kill surplus animals

### INSIGHT

Melbourne's three zoos regularly kill animals that are surplus to their requirements, documents obtained by The Age show.

Animals culled for management reasons since 1992 include four lion cubs, a chimpanzee, meerkats and mandrills.

The documents, released under freedom of information laws, show animal euthanasia is used at Melbourne, Werribee and Healesville zoos for reasons other than health and old age. These include gender selection, stock surpluses and lack of space.

Some animals, such as one red kangaroo at Melbourne Zoo, were culled due to their aggressive behavior. "Keeper safety is at risk due to the increasing aggression displayed by this half-grown animal to anybody who enters the enclosure," says an application for euthanasia of the kangaroo.

Most deaths by euthanasia follow illness, injury by other animals or old age. But the most controversial killings are the so-called "management" euthanasias. In April 1992, three-day-old twin lion cubs were put down after their mother, Juliana, refused to feed them. A zoo spokesman said it was policy not to hand-raise lions because they coped better if they were cared for by their mothers. Hand-raised animals could not be reintroduced to the pride.

Six months later two male cubs, aged five weeks, were subject to "management-related euthanasia" after a decision not to introduce them to the pride. A spokeswoman said the decision was "essentially a mercy killing" because two older males probably would have killed the younger males. Attempts to place them at other zoos were unsuccessful.

In the same year three cape hunting dogs were culled, and in February 1993 Ernie, a chimpanzee, had the same fate.

Two years ago an application for the culling of a patagonian cavy relied on "management reasons. Too many males in group".

In 1996 the killing of two hybrid mandrills was approved because "the only available holding facilities for these animals are inadequate. They are too small and too isolated to be suitable for such a sociable animal to be housed".

In 1995 Melbourne Zoo found itself with 26 meerkats - nine more than the optimum group size. Three awaited shipment to New Zealand and approval was given to cull the remainder.

Male wallabies were killed for being "surplus to requirements" and a male eastern grey kangaroo was "excess to requirements".

At Healesville Sanctuary an eastern barred bandicoot was culled after failing to breed.

In 1996 an old female koala was found to be in fair condition after a clinical examination. "No immediate need for cull on health grounds. Euthanased on management request," the application form says.

Melbourne Zoo's curator of mammals, Mr Peter Stroud, told Insight that management culling was declining but contraceptives were fallible "and so are animal managers". Before animals were culled for other than health reasons, zoos tried to place them at other facilities and considered alternatives.

"In a paddock of antelope, if you end up with some surplus males and you just can not place them ... and you cannot put them in a bachelor group because they will kill each other, you don't have the space to locate them individually ... in that situation you would try to make the best of it and will probably shoot them and feed them to the lions and the tigers," he said.

Before animals are culled, the responsible curator must complete a form headed "application for approval to cull genetically surplus animals". The curator must provide the justification and details of what alternatives to euthanasia were considered. The application has to be approved by the zoo's director.

Healesville Sanctuary has a policy of killing male brush-tailed phascogales (small carnivorous marsupials) after their first breeding season so the limited space can be used for the young. In the wild, males usually die from parasites or infections after breeding but avoid these in captivity and survive for two to three years.

Healesville Sanctuary, where most rescued wildlife is taken, has a policy of putting down any animal that cannot be successfully released, except when the animal is endangered or can adapt to being in captivity. Pet or tame birds were euthanased if unclaimed for more than a week.

"We would all like to rehabilitate and successfully release every animal that comes in, but the reality is we cannot," the sanctuary's euthanasia policy says. "Euthanasia is an unfortunate but essential part of wildlife rehabilitation and we should support each other to counteract its depressive effects rather than question those having to make the difficult decisions."

The senior veterinarian at Healesville, Dr Rosemary Booth, said the public relations backlash associated with animal culling had led to greater emphasis on population control through sterilisation, contraception and keeping animals separated. But animals that were not genetically valuable and could not be placed elsewhere were put down. "It's a resource issue," she said. Mostly, the animals are killed with barbiturates, but at Werribee's Open Range Zoo, herded animals such as deer are shot. Some of the animals have been used to feed the zoo's bigger cats such as cheetahs.

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