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Health and Welfare Report: Fallow deer at Clissold Park, London N4 2EY

30th August 2010

1] Introduction & background

Clissold Park is an urban amenity park managed by Hackney Council. The park contains a small collection of exhibition animals including fallow deer, aviary birds, rabbits and goats, all housed in separate enclosures and houses. Despite the presence of a typical Regency house, dating to the late eighteenth century, it appears that the landscaping surrounding the mansion did not include a deer park. In fact, the original deer were red deer [*Cervus elaphus*], kept as an experiment after a gift of six red deer from Highbury Park to London County Council by Mr Robson in 1890, a year after the Clissold Place property was acquired by the Council and opened as a public space in 1889. Red deer from Clissold were later sent to four other London parks [Maryon, Victoria, Golders Hill and Battersea] as the Clissold herd grew. Red deer were still present when Whitehead wrote his account of English Deer Parks in 1950. He reported one stag and four hinds in an enclosure of just over one acre¹. By 1988 Hingston reports that the red deer had been replaced by fallow, as there were then twelve fallow deer within an enclosure of three acres²

In recent times the herd has consisted of some eight to ten fallow deer [*Dama dama*]. Breeding has been limited by the presence of a vasectomised buck, provided by John Fletcher MRCVS.

In 2010 an extensive redevelopment of the park and facilities has been undertaken, funded in part by the heritage Lottery Fund and in part by Hackney Council. This has included complete re-fencing of the deer enclosure, reconstruction of the aviary and small animal houses and dredging and restoration of the new canal, a remnant of the canal that brought fresh water from Hertfordshire into London.

2] The visit on 27th August 2010

The deer enclosure at Clissold Park was visited on the morning of Friday 27th August 2010 at the request of Eleanor Johnson and Michael Dixon. After a brief discussion of the management and very recent history of the deer, the enclosure and the animals were inspected and photographed. Ms Johnson and Mr Dixon provided answers to my questions about the deer and escorted me to the deer enclosure. The animals were observed for some time as building work proceeded around them. They were photographed. The temporary boundary fence was inspected and the design of the proposed new fence was discussed after considering architects plans.

3] The deer

At the time of the visit there were nine fallow deer in the enclosure, three bucks and six does. All the deer were good bodily condition. The oldest of the three bucks had very recently sustained a laceration to the lower lip, which was haemorrhagic and

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swollen; I was informed that this was the result of a dog attack earlier in the day. This buck was carefully observed: he was seen to eat normally when food was provided by the deer keeper. There were no signs of other injuries and there was no evidence of lameness. Although I was equipped with a dart gun and full veterinary field equipment I considered that the stress and risks of darting and anaesthetic would compromise his welfare more than leaving the wound to heal by second intention and I therefore decided not to interfere.

Although the deer were in good physical condition they were very disturbed and stressed by the high level of building, construction and groundwork going on around them. They did not settle at all during the time I was observing them and constantly moved from one area to another, huddling in a tight group from time to time. Their respiratory rate was elevated and one younger buck showed signs typical of unacceptable stress including panting and prolapse of the tongue from the side of the mouth.

4] The present enclosure and habitat

On August 27th 2010 the deer enclosure was bounded by temporary Harris-type weldmesh panels supported by proprietary perforated blocks. The enclosure was considerably less than one acre in size. On all sides there was evidence of construction and groundwork in progress, including extensive digging out and reinforcing embankment of the canal, construction of a new aviary, tunnel and rabbit house, clearance of a large fallen horse chestnut tree and other site work. In effect the deer were confined within an open pen inside a busy urban construction site.

There was no cover or shelter for the deer other than an open sided shed, which provided no screening. It was impossible for the deer to find an area where they could not see and hear construction and building work at close quarters. The ground had a patchy cover of grass, with a close sward, but there was no scrub or natural vegetation to provide any refuge for the deer.

The boundary fence was suitable for a building site but not for a deer enclosure. The weldmesh panels were elevated from the ground on the support blocks, so that at all points on the perimeter there was space for a reasonably sized dog to pass beneath the fence, and indeed, at some places for a fallow doe to creep out.

In summary, the enclosure and habitat was grossly unsuitable for the deer.

5] The current health and welfare of the deer

Deer kept in deer parks or zoological collections are never comparable with domesticated livestock such as sheep, goats or cattle. They are timid and easily stressed. It is essential that they have a refuge of some form into which they can retreat to escape the attention of the public. Many small collections and several urban parks successfully keep a handful of deer in a limited space and in most cases these animals can be habituated to the presence of people, dogs, pushchairs, bicycles and other potentially frightening stimuli outside the fence, but for the sake of their welfare

they must have an area or areas where they can feel secure from such stimulation. It goes without saying that the boundary of any deer enclosure in a public park should be completely dog proof, as the presence of a dog within the enclosure will cause severe panic and very few dogs can resist the temptation to chase running deer.

Under the terms of both the Protection of Animals Act 1911 and the recent Animal Welfare Act 2006, these fallow deer are protected animals, since they are confined to a small area, under the control of humans and dependent upon human management for their survival. They are not "living in a wild state"³. It is clear that the deer have suffered recently from excessive disturbance and from dog worrying. Their needs under Section 9.2 of the 2006 Act have not been met. The welfare of the deer has not been safeguarded during the current building and reconstruction programme and at the time of my visit on August 27th it was my opinion that they were suffering unnecessarily. Before any building or groundwork was started and before the existing boundary fence was removed the welfare of the deer should have been considered and measures put in place to ensure that they were protected from excessive disturbance, provided with a refuge area and securely fenced to prevent intrusion by people and dogs. The advice of professional people, experienced in deer welfare and management should have been sought as part of the planning process for the redevelopment work. This might have resulted in the temporary removal of the deer to a place of safety whilst the work was undertaken.

At the meeting on August 27th it was clear to me that although there had been a failure to anticipate the problems that the redevelopment work would cause the deer, both Ms Johnson and Mr Dixon had recognised the difficulties that the deer were in and were anxious to remedy the situation. I was told that the work in the area of the deer would be completed by Christmas 2010.

6] Recommendations

6.1. Immediate measures

During my visit I made several recommendations and indicated that they should be implemented as a matter of emergency. These were

- Provide screening for the deer by attaching opaque sheeting to the Harris fencing. Mr Dixon showed me a sample of green polypropylene loose woven mesh, which I agreed would be appropriate. This screen should extend around as much of the enclosure as possible.
- Fit gravel boarding beneath the Harris fencing to make certain that no further intrusion by dogs can occur.
- Limit the noise and machinery work immediately adjacent to the deer enclosure
- The removal of the two young fertile bucks before the rut begins at the end of September

6.2. Future measures and the design of the new enclosure

I understand that the proposed new enclosure will be some 6,500m² in size, which is small compared with most deer park paddocks and will mean that the deer will be confined to a very limited area. If the park management team decides to persevere with the deer at Clissold Park [see 7. below], it will be essential to provide facilities and husbandry that safeguards their welfare. These must include:

- Appropriate perimeter fencing that prevents intrusion by people and by dogs. The proposed design shown to me by Mr Dixon incorporated a series of horizontal rails, mimicking classical Regency parkland designs. This style of fencing is not suitable for a contemporary urban deer park, since it is far too easy to scale. Horizontal rails will be used as ladder rungs by vandals and by those determined to gain access to the enclosure. It is essential that the fence is climb-proof.
- An area of refuge for the deer, preferably provided by natural screening. Appropriate plantings [willow, alder, sallow, etc] would be aesthetically most acceptable, but would need to be deer guarded to a height of 2 metres. Alternatively, split chestnut pailings, woven willow screens or hardwood palisades can be incorporated into the enclosure or the perimeter fence to provide an area into which the deer can retreat for security. A building will not be suitable as park deer rarely take refuge beneath a ceiling.
- The constant provision of an appropriate diet, including both forage and concentrate feeds. There will be insufficient grass to sustain a group of eight or ten fallow deer within the proposed enclosure. Regular feeding in the open will provide a spectacle for the public and will help to habituate the deer to public attention.
- The replacement of older animals as they become senile and the introduction of new deer of varying ages from time to time.
- Regular veterinary monitoring to safeguard the welfare of the deer, to assess build-up of parasites and to provide prophylactic and therapeutic veterinary services to the deer as necessary.

7] Conclusions

The deer at Clissold Park have recently suffered unreasonably because insufficient provision had been made to safeguard their welfare during the reconstruction and re-development of the park.

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The park management are now aware of these difficulties and have given me an undertaking that all necessary steps will be taken to reduce to a minimum the stress to the deer during the remainder of the building and groundwork.

The design of the new deer enclosure should incorporate a refuge area for the deer.

Future deer management needs to be of the highest possible standard.

The presence of a small deer enclosure with a very limited group of deer in a busy urban park is not ideal, in terms of animal welfare, and is not an easy facility to manage. It is however, quite possible to maintain such an exhibition and it is successfully achieved in one or two London parks. Others are not so successful. The increasing concern of the public for animal welfare means that small public deer parks and deer pens are likely to come under much greater scrutiny and that standards of animal care must be exemplary. The deer must be under the care of a veterinary surgeon. Every effort must be made to allow the animals to behave normally and to be free of stress, distress, disease and injury. They must be fed an appropriate diet and provided with an appropriate habitat. The enclosure at Clissold Park and the staff are capable of providing all these elements of good husbandry and there is no doubt that, as Hingston said of Clissold in 1988, the deer could be "a refreshing sight in the heart of London"². But if in the future the deer are neglected, overcrowded, excessively disturbed, worried by dogs or otherwise caused to suffer, there is no doubt that there would be complaints and investigations that would be impossible to refute.

8] References

- 1 Whitehead GK [1950] Deer and their management. Country Life Publishers, London.
- 2 Hingston F [1988] Deer Parks and Deer of Great Britain. Sporting and Leisure Press, Buckingham.
- 3 Animal Welfare Act [2006] Section 2.c. HMSO