SEE HISTORY COME ALIVE BEFORE YOUR EYES. INTRODUCING NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC HISTORY ORDER NOW!
PLAN YOUR NEXT GREAT GETAWAY! View our best-in-class travel guide today! NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC TRAVEL VIEW NOW

http://news.nationalgeographic.com/2016/09/saving-animals-gaza-strip-khan-younis-zoo/

Animals Rescued From the 'World's Worst Zoo'

An animal-welfare organization reflects on its nerve-wracking rescue—and what it might mean for troubled zoos around the world.

Four Paws International rescued this tiger, named Laziz, in southern Gaza on August 23.

PHOTOGRAPH BY IBRAHEEM ABU MUSTAFA, REUTERS

By **Richard Tenorio**

PUBLISHED SEPTEMBER 26, 2016

When a rescue team arrived to evacuate a closing zoo near the Gaza Strip city of Khan Younis in late August, just 15 animals remained.

They included Laziz, a nine-year-old Bengal tiger that is—according to Four Paws, the Vienna-based animal-welfare nonprofit that led the rescue—the last tiger in Gaza. There were also five monkeys, an emu, a pelican, two buzzards, two porcupines, two tortoises, and a doe. The doe had lost her fawn to wounds shortly before the rescuers arrived.

Opened in 2007 on three and a half acres of land next to an amusement park, the Khan Younis Zoo has been called "the world's worst zoo" by Four Paws and international media outlets. Hundreds of animals here starved to death during a seven-week war between Israel and Hamas in 2014. And last year, the surviving animals began sharing their cramped cages with the dead: Over 50 dead animals—including Laziz's mate—were taxidermied by the zoo staff. (See "Tiger's Death Raises Question: What Makes a Good Zoo?")

Abu Diab Oweida, the Palestinian businessman who owned the zoo, said that the mummifications were politically motivated—done "to prove to the whole world that even animals have been affected and [killed] by the Israeli occupation after the three [recent] wars in the Gaza Strip."

How It Happened

Four Paws and its director of emergency response, Amir Khalil, had sought for months to close the zoo and transfer the animals to sanctuaries. In late August, the ambitious rescue plan became reality.

"The idea to close [the zoo came in] April of last year," said Khalil, an Egyptian-born veterinarian who lives in Austria. "It was a concept last September. It was a plan this April. It was a mission in August."

Khalil needed to negotiate with four people: Oweida and three of his sons. In May they agreed on the concept of evacuating the zoo. (Also see "Animals Starving in Venezuela Zoos.")

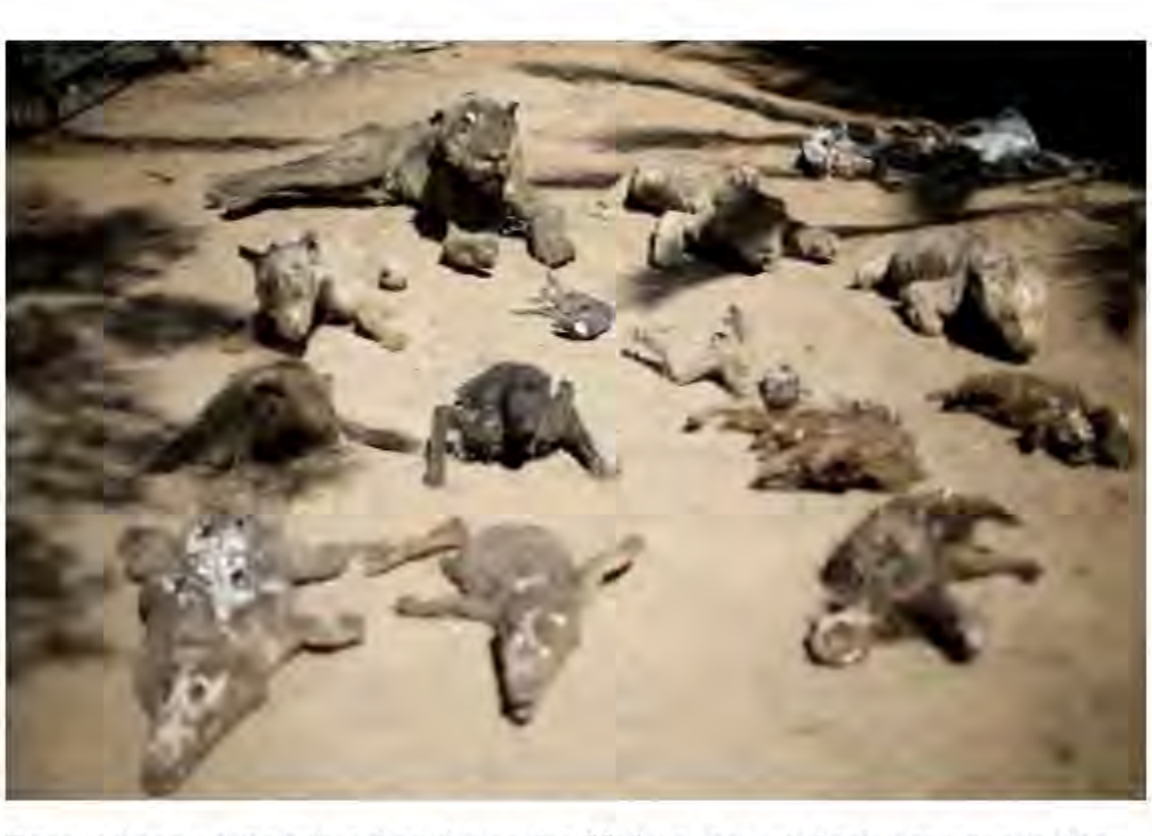
"The Israeli occupation of Gaza," says Oweida, "ended everything. They smashed and destroyed what [was] inside the Gaza Strip. So I decided to donate the animals to save what remained of [them], to live safely inside a nature reserve and in peace and security." (Read about the tunnels of Gaza in *National Geographic* magazine.)

The rescue itself was complicated, "a complex coordination between Israeli, Palestinian, and international officials," according to a spokesperson at the Israeli Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories, a branch of the Ministry of Defense that liaises with the Palestinian population in the Gaza Strip and West Bank, and with international organizations working in both territories.

"[The rescue] was not easy," Khalil said. "To be neutral is not easy. I think Four Paws was a form of mediator between three, four countries"—Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinian governments of Hamas and Fatah.

Khalil and Four Paws carried out the multiday rescue in the midst of a military conflict, crossing disputed borders as unseen Israel Defense Forces aircraft dropped bombs on the Gaza Strip in response to a rocket attack on Israel.

Khalil has worked to save animals from crisis situations before, including the 2011 Libyan uprising that toppled Muammar Qaddafi. But the Khan Younis mission, he says, was one of the toughest.



Decayed zoo animals that died during the 2014 war are on display at a zoo in Khan Younis on March 7.

PHOTOGRAPH BY IBRAHEEM ABU MUSTAFA, REUTERS

"In terms of the [mission], it went quite well," team member Ioana Dungler says. "In terms of time, it was quite exhausting. On a [difficulty] scale of 1 to 10, it was an 8."

Animal Rescue

The plans for the mission began to take shape in April 2015, when Khalil first visited Khan Younis and was horrified by the mummified animals.

He soon began negotiating with Oweida and three of his sons. First, Four Paws would pay for the animals' feeding. Next, it would cover all of the zoo's operational costs, including staff salaries. It also removed the cadavers from public view. The final condition was that Oweida agreed not to work with animals again upon closure of the zoo. (See "Opinion: Killing Healthy Zoo Animals Is Wrong—And the Public Agrees.")

Finally, in mid-August, Khalil led a 14-person team to the zoo. The team departed from the Erez border crossing in southwest Israel. Shortly before they crossed the border, a rocket from Gaza landed in the Israeli city of Sderot. Khalil said he could see smoke from the Erez border crossing. As the rescuers headed to the zoo, the Israel Defense Forces launched 50 airstrikes at Gaza. Nevertheless, Khalil said the team felt "safe and secure."

"Four Paws was checking what was going on from headquarters," he explained. "Locally, we were informed of anything happening. ... I was not worried about security, but about the mission." (Also see "Jerusalem Zoo Struggles to Remain Common Ground for Israelis, Palestinians.")

The team arrived at Khan Younis on August 22 to heartbreaking news: A baby deer, which had suffered during its few weeks of life, had died the day before.

Four Paws prepared the surviving animals for their journey to new homes. The group spent August 23 loading the animals into crates, placed on a truck.

The rescue became official when the team crossed back into Israel early on August 25. From there, team members escorted the animals to their new homes.

Where Things Stand

Four Paws has also transferred five Gaza lions and 15 other wild animals to sanctuaries. Now four active zoos remain in the Strip. Khalil says that Palestinian authorities are hoping to close them all.

Alan Knight, chief executive of the U.K.-based International Animal Rescue, says the Khan Younis mission was a milestone in animal rights.

"We are of course delighted that this terrible zoo has finally been closed and the surviving animals have been saved, thanks to Four Paws," Knight said. "The success of the rescue operation proves that ... extraordinary things can be achieved with passion and determination. Suffering animals should not be forgotten or overlooked, even in the midst of human conflicts or natural or man-made disasters.

"We must all continue to strive to drive up the welfare of animals in world zoos. And if they can't meet even the most basic standards, we must work toward getting them closed down."

Ahmad Safi, executive director of the Palestinian Animal League, also praised the rescue but tempered his words with concern about unresolved issues in Gaza.

"While we are delighted that the individual animals have now been moved to safety and can begin to enjoy life in a sanctuary environment," he says, "we are concerned that simply removing animals while failing to acknowledge and tackle the wider issues at play — such as wildlife trafficking and commercialization of wild animals in the Gaza Strip — means that these animals may be replaced and the good work done recently will simply be part of a vicious cycle which continues."

Vervet monkeys rest inside a cage on February 9, 2015.

PHOTOGRAPH BY SAID KHATIB, AFP, GETTY IMAGES

Khalil added that local authorities in Gaza have expressed interest in creating new legislation on wild animals. At the moment, "there is no legislation, no law"—a situation that results in "wild animals [being] smuggled and kept in poor cages."

"There are no current plans for assistance," he adds, though "we asked the authorities in Gaza to ... issue a regulation to keep wild animals in captivity [and] stop [animal] smuggling from Egypt."

A New Life for Rescued Animals

Of the Khan Younis survivors, Laziz had the longest journey to his new home—the Lionsrock Big Cat Sanctuary in South Africa, where he'll live on a hectare with grass, trees, and a bathing area. Lionsrock, run by Four Paws, is fenced in and patrolled regularly for poachers.

The buzzards may eventually be released into the wild. All of the other Khan Younis animals except the monkeys—four vervets and a macaque, which are bound for the Israeli Primate Sanctuary Foundation—went to the New Hope Centre sanctuary in Jordan. They'll eventually move to Al Ma'wa for Nature and Wildlife, a Jordanian sanctuary run by Four Paws and the Princess Alia Foundation.

But the animals' problems may not be over.

"Our experience rescuing and rehabilitating wild animals that have spent years in captivity—often in appalling and traumatic conditions—has taught us that this can lead to a wide range of physical and psychological problems," Knight says. "Some animals have suffered lengthy periods of starvation and need treatment for malnutrition and dehydration. Others, like the tiger in Gaza, have been fed an entirely unsuitable diet"—Laziz was fed chicken, which Dungler says tigers should not eat—"that, coupled with constant confinement and an inability to exercise, leads to obesity and the many diseases associated with that.

"On a positive note," he adds, "we have also learned that with expert treatment and care, in time even the most damaged animals can be rehabilitated and given a second chance in life. Some, but not all, can even be returned to the wild."

What's Next for Zoo Survivors

The two Palestinian governments, Hamas and Fatah, have recently approached Four Paws about creating a sanctuary in Gaza. But "how far it is from reality," says Khalil, "I don't know."

There are currently just 12 veterinarians in the Gaza Strip, with four set to retire soon. (Five veterinarians assisted Four Paws during the rescue, with Khalil and his team providing on-hand training.)

Khalil says he's worried about the remaining Gaza zoos—and about other zoos in conflict zones that require immediate attention. Some of these, he says, can be found in Yemen, Syria, Libya, Sudan, and Venezuela. But that's a very partial list. "There are," he says, "hundreds of such zoos worldwide."

Time will tell if Four Paws' inspiring work can be replicated at some of them.

Sign up for more inspiring photos, stories, and special offers from National Geographic:

Email: Sign up

Comment on This Story

8 Gorgeous National Parks You've Never Heard Of 1 / 10

Gates of the Arctic National Park, Alaska Gates of the Arctic is one of several national parks in remote, roadless areas of Alaska. This northernmost national park in the U.S. is visited by only a few thousand people a year, making for great wildlife viewing.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALASKA STOCK IMAGES, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SUBSCRIBE NOW

You Might Also Like

In Search of the World's Megafishes

Zeb Hogan is in hot pursuit of the world's largest freshwater fish.

EXPLORER MOMENTS

Rare Wildlife Portraits From Photographers Who Click...

Photographers Uri Golman and Helle Olsen travel the world to capture images of endangered species and threatened habitats.

Global Warming Is Real—But 13 Degrees? Not So Fast

Scientists are dismissing a new study suggesting Earth could already be doomed to warming of as much as 13 degrees Fahrenheit.

Comment on This Story

0 comments

Sign in 23 people listening

Share Post comment as...

Newest | Oldest | Top Comments

IMAGINE A NEW WAY TO TRAVEL THE WORLD
NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC JOURNEYS G Adventures Learn More

Copyright © 1996-2015 National Geographic Society.
Copyright © 2015-2016 National Geographic Partners, LLC.
All rights reserved

Learn about our nonprofit work at NationalGeographic.org