

Animals in Transit: Archival Traces of Agency in the Deutsche Indien Expedition 1955-58

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Abstract

This paper examines the Deutsche Indien Expedition (1955–1958) as a case study of how animal mobility shaped the reconstruction of scientific collections and the formation of scientific networks in the postwar Federal Republic of Germany. In the aftermath of the Second World War, West German institutions sought to rebuild their depleted zoological and ethnographic collections and corresponding institutions like the Wuppertal Zoo. The expedition, which collected and transported living and preserved specimens from India to Germany, played a momentous role in this process. By tracing the trajectories of these animals, from capture and transport in postcolonial India to their arrival and exhibition in German museums and zoos, the paper argues that animals were not passive specimens but crucial participants in transnational networks of knowledge, diplomacy, and exchange. Their movements embodied both scientific ambition and political symbolism, linking the rebuilding of German science to emerging Indo-German diplomatic relations. Drawing on archival correspondence and field reports, the article situates these “specimens” within a broader history of animal agency and postcolonial scientific mobility, revealing how the logistics of care, transport, and display negotiated human–animal dependencies and shaped public understandings of science, nature, and global interconnection. In doing so, it highlights animals as historical and cultural agents whose trajectories illuminate the intertwined reconstruction of institutions, identities, and material knowledge in a world remade by war and decolonization.

Keywords: postcolonial science; animal agency; scientific expeditions; zoo histories; transnational networks

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The Deutsche Indien Expedition 1955-58 is the subject of the author’s ongoing doctoral project. This article uses selected archival materials from the more extensive expedition archive at the Leibniz-Institut zur Analyse des Biodiversitätswandels (Museum der Natur) Hamburg. The first report of this expedition, written by Reinmar Grimm, is available as a book (included in the references). While Reinmar Grimm’s report primarily documents the expedition’s activities, outcomes, and scientific contributions within a descriptive and institutional framework, the author’s study adopts a historiographical and analytical approach that interrogates the conditions under which such knowledge was produced. Rather than treating the expedition as a neutral site of data collection, it examines how authority, legitimacy, and scientific meaning were actively constructed through material practices, representational strategies, and transnational networks.

Introduction

In the years following the Second World War, the reconstruction of scientific institutions in the Federal Republic of Germany (henceforth West Germany) was met with political challenges and material scarcity. Museums, laboratories, zoological gardens, and other institutions alike had been destroyed and depleted of scientific collections and teaching materials. A diverse array of professionals set out from a defeated and partitioned country to reinsert themselves into global circuits of science, culture, and diplomacy. Simultaneously, the pre-war geopolitical landscape had drastically changed. Many former colonial territories were becoming postcolonial nation-states, and, as a result, access to animals, landscapes, and local expertise now depended on new forms of international diplomacy and exchanges. It was within this transformed world that the Deutsche Indien Expedition of 1955–1958 (German India Expedition) was conceived to replenish zoological, botanical, and ethnographic collections while trying to restate German scholarly credibility tarnished by association with the Nazi regime.

This article uses this expedition as a lens to explore how the movement of animals, as a part of other processes, fostered new forms of scientific relationships and diplomacy between West Germany and India, as well as the reconstruction of scientific authority and cultural identity in postwar West Germany. Rather than treating animals as passive objects of scientific extraction, the article argues that their movements constituted a central mechanism for rebuilding knowledge, authority, and diplomatic relations. Animals were not merely collected; they shifted through complex logistical, political, and institutional regimes that shaped how science was practiced, displayed, and understood in the postwar period. Their arrival in West Germany materialized transnational relationships, and their successful care and display demonstrated competence and awareness of reputational consequences.

Using archival sources such as newspaper reports and correspondence letters between expedition members and institutional leaders, this article aims to write an alternative “zoo-sensitive” (Bull & Holmberg, 2018, p. 8) history of the expedition, as well as the collections made by the Wuppertal Zoo through this expedition. The term “zoo-sensitive” could be used for texts that are attentive to “more than human sensibilities and sensations” in order to characterize the expanding body of work “that recognizes co-dependency between ‘human’ and ‘nonhuman.’” This narrative is also inspired by Maan Barua’s work that shows how elephants have been embedded in human networks of concern, commerce, and science between India and the UK (Barua, 2014). He poses a question about writing (postcolonial) histories “in a way that does not render inert the actions and agencies of non-human animals” (Evans & Adams, 2018, p. 631). Additionally, using the framework of actor-network theory (ANT), I situate the heterogeneous actors, like the institutions, exhibitions, humans, animals, technologies of transport, and documents, as interconnected in the same historical network. Even though my research is based on “human representative accounts” (Buller, 2015; Evans & Adams, 2018, p. 633), such as the expedition archives, I attempt to bring aspects of animal agency and their roles as historical and cultural actors to the foreground.

Sites of Projection: Scientific Ambition, Nationalism, and Wartime Propaganda

Modern European zoos emerged from the convergence of Enlightenment scientific ambitions and elite animal collecting traditions. While nobility had long maintained menageries as symbols of wealth and power, such as the Tower of London menagerie and Versailles under Louis XIV, zoological gardens represented a fundamental institutional shift. Acquiring and maintaining living animal specimens demanded substantial resources, making

collections powerful demonstrations of wealth and status. Rare animals signaled extensive commercial and diplomatic networks, with exotic species serving as prestigious diplomatic gifts that conveyed distinction beyond conventional offerings like hunted game (Wells, 2021, p. 604).

The 1794 opening of the Jardin des Plantes menagerie in Paris, founded by the revolutionary government as part of the Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle, transformed zoo development across Europe. Employing prominent zoologists like Cuvier, Lamarck, and Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, it established the model of using living specimens for scientific advancement. The Zoological Society of London followed in 1826, opening its Regent's Park gardens in 1828 with explicit zoological research objectives. This sparked a wave of zoo foundations across European cities like Dublin (1831), Bristol (1836), Amsterdam (1838), Antwerp (1843), Berlin (1844), and Frankfurt (1858), all claiming scientific purpose. Unlike aristocratic menageries serving individual prestige, modern zoos served national purposes, broadcasting imperial prowess through collection sizes and diversity while offering urban populations entertainment and education. Colonial networks enabled exotic animal procurement, though these networks were complex and transnational. Carl Hagenbeck's global animal trade dominance from the late nineteenth century, supplying institutions worldwide, demonstrated how geographical reach exceeded single imperial territories (Ito, 2011, p. 447). The convergence of scientific rhetoric, urban leisure culture, and imperial expansion created the institutional framework that defined modern zoos, even as they faced persistent criticism regarding expense, ethics, and their treatment of animals as specimens rather than individuals (Wells, 2011, p. 608; Ito, 2011, p. 442).

In Germany, zoological gardens were closely linked to urbanization, bourgeois civic culture, scientific professionalization, and international competition. The foundation of the Berlin Zoological Garden in 1844 marked a decisive shift toward the modern, publicly accessible zoo that combined scientific research, public education, and leisure, as well as growing popular interest in natural history and evolutionary thought. Deeply embedded in global networks of animal collecting and trade, exotic animals reached cities such as Hamburg, Frankfurt, Cologne, and Berlin through colonial routes, commercial animal dealers, and scientific expeditions. Zoos also functioned as important sites of knowledge production, contributing to zoological classification, breeding experiments, and the popularization of scientific ideas.

During the Nazi regime, German zoos became embedded in National Socialist ideology. Lutz Heck, Berlin Zoo director, pursued *völkisch* "back-breeding" programs attempting to recreate extinct "primordially Germanic" species like aurochs, while establishing a "German zoo" showcasing wolves, bears, and eagles. The zoo became a site for applied racial theories, with Heck encouraging parallels between animal and human racial diversity. Jewish board members were expelled and the institution was used as a venue for propaganda shows (Roscher, 2018; Goldner, 2015; Zoologischer Garten Berlin, 2026), evidently combining political spectacle with institutional animal display, carving the zoo as a space serving the regime's ideology.

From 1939 to 1945, the animal populations of zoos were covertly reduced as much of the staff was drafted into the army and food and other resources had to be rationed. But this was concealed to keep the outer appearance of the gardens intact and not draw attention to the scarcities of wartime (Goldner, 2015). Animal movements reflected ideological hierarchies as older and non-breeding animals were deemed expendable, but near-extinct and "symbolically German" species were prioritized for evacuation. Germany's expansion and invasions brought

in “war booty” like Russian wolves and North African gazelles (Roscher, 2018). Heck seized animals from the Warsaw Zoo after the invasion of Poland, claiming “safekeeping” as the reason. Roscher and Wöbse (2015) have convincingly labeled this “zoological occupation and plunder.”

Roscher and Wöbse’s (2015) account of the Berlin Zoo is a telling example of how spatial and symbolic boundaries between humans and animals broke down. From 1943, Berlin Zoo experienced a catastrophic collapse. November 1943 air raids killed roughly a third of 2,000 animals in one night, including elephants, rhinoceroses, and giraffes. Eyewitnesses described shocked survivors and disturbing scenes like escaping crocodiles turned into meat, dwarf hippos moved into a men’s toilet, Berliners taking ponies and parrots into their homes, and people seeking shelter in surviving animal houses. Despite the devastation, the regime rapidly cleared and partially rebuilt the zoo using prisoners of war and veterinarians to render carcasses into animal meal and soap. In the final days of the war, it became a battlefield with only ninety-one animals surviving amid street fighting and trench warfare.

Post-War Renewal: The Deutsche Indien Expedition (1955-58)

Continuing with Berlin’s example, Roscher and Wöbse (2015) demonstrate that post-1945 German zoos were not marginal cultural institutions but became highly politicized spaces through which competing visions of nationhood, normalcy, and global belonging were articulated. Roscher (2018, p. 128) frames them as microhistorical sites where prewar legacies, postwar reconstruction, and Cold War antagonisms converged.

Despite catastrophic destruction, Berlin Zoo reopened remarkably quickly in July 1945 under British supervision, with Allied support for reconstruction. It served as both a refuge for traumatized Berliners and an emblem of renewal, linking restoration of fauna to broader moral and cultural reconstruction while distancing itself from Nazi-era “German zoo” ideology. In West Berlin, director Heinz-Georg Klös modernized the Zoologischer Garten backed by private patrons and industrial sponsors, aligning it with the Federal Republic’s emphasis on order, scientific rationality, and progress (Roscher, 2018, p. 126). Exhibits followed systematic taxonomic logic based on visitor preferences, while corporate advertising intertwined commercial culture with zoological representation. Additionally, to establish distinction, Klös prioritized breeding apes and monkeys, animals that were unavailable to the East. Across the ideological divide, the German Democratic Republic established the Tierpark Berlin in 1955 under Heinrich Dathe, despite harsh economic conditions. Conceived as a “people’s park,” it emphasized open, naturalistic landscapes symbolizing socialist inclusivity and human-animal harmony. Mass participation through *Nationales Aufbauwerk* (National Reconstruction Works) made construction itself embody collective socialist labor. In this sense, building the Tierpark and building the nation became mutually reinforcing projects. Though opened in a provisional state this sufficed to portray East Berlin as the legitimate GDR capital and model institution (Roscher & Wöbse, 2015, pp. 75-76).

In this symbolic competition, Roscher (2018, pp. 115-116) sees zoos as “microstates within states.” As the Federal Republic and GDR functioned as mutual “reference societies,” the idea also percolated into institutions like zoos. West Berlin’s zoo grew within the city center while the Tierpark boasted five times the space. The latter became a major hub and quarantine facility for animal exchange through socialist networks across Eastern Europe, East Asia, and Cuba, in contrast to West Berlin’s reliance on capitalist markets and corporate sponsorship. The ability to acquire, house, and breed animals signified geopolitical prominence. As Roscher

(2018, p. 116) demonstrates, space and design created a “zoopolitical geography of inclusion and exclusion” central to defining German culture, society, and national identity.

Viewed across the *longue durée*, animals emerged repeatedly as symbolic arenas where emerging polities projected, negotiated, and contested their collective identities. Zoo reconstruction, far from being a mere technical undertaking, became a profoundly political and symbolic process—an act of cultural and scientific renewal through which citizens and institutions articulated nationalism and ideas of the future. Through a re-reading of zoo histories, it is possible to uncover animals’ entanglement within the networks of reconstruction. Fueled by zoo rebuilding efforts, the demand for exotic and rare animals surged across Germany and beyond. This demand was met through the thriving international animal trade, the advancement of professional breeding programs, and ambitious scientific expeditions. A landmark expedition to India significantly enriched one zoo’s collections during its post-war revival.

The Deutsche Indien Expedition (Grimm, 2011) set sail from Hamburg on July 26, 1955, aboard the ship “Goldenfels,” carrying Dr. Helmut Pirson, Heimo Schmidt, Gustav Adolf Freiherr von Maydell, and Botho Prinz zu Sayn-Wittgenstein-Hohenstein. They sailed toward India’s west coast, carrying three tons of equipment and ambitious scientific goals. Following nearly three years of meticulous preparation by von Maydell, the expedition aimed to collect zoological, botanical, and ethnological species and objects in less-explored regions of India. Beyond specimen collection, the team planned to study species characteristics and cohabitation, conduct altitude and meteorological measurements, create detailed photographic and film documentation, and fulfill specific requests from German institutions seeking research materials to rebuild collections destroyed during the Second World War. The mission carried both scientific and diplomatic significance, as von Maydell envisioned the expedition as an opportunity to strengthen German-Indian relations and establish new collaborative ties between institutions in both countries.

The financing of the expedition is not comprehensively documented. However, various documents and newspaper articles in the Expedition’s archive refer to donations or contributions to the expedition, the largest being from the city of Wuppertal. For example, a report from 27 July 1955 (Neue Rhein Zeitung, 1955; Grimm, 2011) mentions, “It took months of extensive preparations for the two-year India expedition that has been especially facilitated by the city of Wuppertal whose zoo will celebrate its 75th anniversary next year, but also supported by the states of Württemberg-Baden, North Rhine-Westphalia, and the Hanseatic city of Hamburg” (translated by the author). Another such newspaper report (Wuppertal im Bild, n.d.; Grimm 2011) confirms the city’s significant contribution to the expedition: “The Mayor as the patron. India expedition starts—Wuppertal pays a grant. The first large expedition to the Indian subcontinent starts in the spring. The Wuppertal Zoo and the city are participating in it by paying an advance of 20.000 DM” (translated by the author).

This raises two critical questions: Why did Wuppertal, backed by its zoo director and mayor, invest so heavily in this expedition? And why did India become the expedition’s destination? The answer to the latter question requires an understanding of the historical, scientific, and diplomatic ties between “India” and “Germany,” (the quotation marks signal that the contemporary nation-state names are used for convenience, even though their meanings and borders differed historically and do not apply uniformly across the periods discussed) and the contemporary diplomatic context of the 1950s, in which von Maydell strategically positioned himself as an ambassador, seeking to establish new contacts and revitalize bilateral cooperation. In a press release, he says (Hamburger Anzeiger, 08/09.01.1955; Grimm, 2011):

Through this scientific exchange of experience, through contact with Indian officials, and, above all, with the population in all parts of the country, the expedition—the first German undertaking of this kind since the war—is also making a valuable contribution to deepening the friendly relations between Germany and India (translated by the author).

Furthermore, the Expedition received official status through the support of the Zoological Survey of India (ZSI), along with many other institutions. In response to Maydell's cooperation request, Dr. S. L. Hora, the then Director of ZSI, agreed to extend "all possible help after approval from the Govt. of India" (Hora, 01.11.1954). He further mentions:

The usual practice with regard to foreign expeditions working in India is that a share of the collections made by such expeditions is made over to this and other institutions interested in their collection for the benefit of Indian students. Small parties from such institutions are also often attached to the expeditions to work in selected areas. (translated by the author)

The scientific relationships between Germany and India have deeper historical roots extending back to the nineteenth century, when German scientists played influential roles in British Indian colonial institutions, particularly in forestry and agricultural chemistry. Notable figures like Sir Dietrich Brandis shaped colonial forest administration and created lasting institutions, including the Indian Forest Department and the Dehra Dun Forest School (Mann, 2020). These historical entanglements operated on both individual and institutional levels. They reflect deeper political interests and societal forces that, presumably, set parameters for sustained German-Indian scientific cooperation well into the postcolonial era, providing context for expeditions like the Deutsche Indien Expedition.

The 1950s and early 1960s represented a high point in diplomatic cooperation between the two countries, driven by the shared challenges faced by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Chancellor Konrad Adenauer as they built their respective nations after colonial rule and a devastating war. Formal diplomatic relations began shortly after the German Foreign Office reopened in 1951, as India was among the first countries to recognize the Federal Republic (Rothermund, 2010). This period witnessed significant German investment in India's industrial and educational development. The Rourkela steel mill in Orissa and the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) in Madras became a flagship German development project (Wittje, 2019). Cultural and economic ties expanded through the opening of multiple Goethe Institutes (named Max Mueller Bhavan after the German Indologist admired by Indian nationalists) and the establishment of the Indo-German Chamber of Commerce in 1956.

During Nehru's early years as prime minister, elephants were mobilized as diplomatic gifts to several countries, in what came to be known as "elephant diplomacy" (Menon, 2019). In 1951, an elephant named Dhatri or Shanti (meaning "peace") was gifted to the (West) Berlin Zoo, as a response to Berlin children's appeals, according to the popular narrative (Wangchuk, 2022). The elephants' presence in zoos materialized abstract political intentions into concrete exchanges. Similar elephants dispatched to Japan, the Netherlands, and Canada each negotiated their own relationships with new environments and audiences, making diplomacy tangible through their bodies.

Animals as Cultural and Historical Actors in the Making of the Wuppertal Zoo

Understanding Wuppertal's motivation for this large donation to the expedition requires examining the zoo's institutional background. The joint-stock company "Zoologischer Garten" was founded in Elberfeld in December 1879. Many well-known citizens of the area bought shares priced at 300 Deutsche Mark each. Two years later, the Zoological Garden Elberfeld opened its doors with thirty-four animals (Der Grüne Zoo Wuppertal, 2026; Bossy, 2018). Established through such a civic initiative rather than courtly patronage, the zoo reflected the ambitions of an industrializing city to position itself within modern scientific and cultural networks. Like other German zoos, Wuppertal relied on international animal trade and increasingly aligned itself with scientific and educational missions.

In 1937, a change in the stock corporation law led to the dissolution of the joint stock company "Zoologischer Garten." As a result, it was taken over by the city of Wuppertal, which has been its owner ever since (Der Grüne Zoo Wuppertal, 2026). A few years earlier, Josef Keusch, who had served as zoo director for 34 years, was fired for refusing to cooperate with the National Socialists, who wanted to hold concerts at the zoo. He was replaced by a party member, and the Wuppertal Zoo became a stage for Nazi concerts on Sunday afternoons (Bossy, 2018). During the Second World War, "air-raid precautions" (*Luftschutzmaßnahmen*) demanded that the animals, especially predatory species, be shot or transferred to other zoos (Der Grüne Zoo Wuppertal, 2026). In 1942, animals came to embody hope as the zoo population was rebuilt with newly purchased polar bears and many other animals. In around a year, the plans changed again, with the animals being rescued and transported to the eastern part of Germany. Like at the Berlin Zoo, the former animal keepers of Wuppertal were drafted while the zoo remained abandoned. Most of the remaining animals died of diseases or were slaughtered. The zoo infrastructure itself was only slightly damaged in the war (Der Grüne Zoo Wuppertal, 2026).

After the war, the zoo premises served as a space for denazification and renewal. People classified as offenders, ranging from those accused of minor crimes to party members, stood before the tribunal of the British forces (Bossy, 2018). The importance that the city placed on reconstructing and replenishing the zoo is reflected in its donation to the Deutsche Indien Expedition to acquire animals. This situation was complicated by competitive tensions among zoos in West Germany, along with overlapping motivations of local patriotism and individual ambition from both the mayor and zoo director. For instance, the zoo planned a special exhibition for its 75th anniversary in autumn 1956, anticipating that the expedition would make a key contribution. The newly acquired Indian animals were expected to enhance the spectacle of this anniversary celebration. It was reported in January 1955 (Stadtanzeiger Wuppertal, 15.01.1955), "In return (for the funding), Wuppertal Zoo, as the only German zoo, would receive the right to exhibit the entire scientific results of this journey first—this will be around the second half of 1956—and also receive the first rights on the animals collected" (translated by the author). A subsequent report from July in a Wuppertal-based newspaper (unknown newspaper, 27.07.1955) stated, "Zoo director Dr. Müller explained that the Wuppertal zoological garden would probably benefit most from the expedition. This followed a good old German tradition of zoological gardens sending their own expeditions to foreign continents" (translated by the author). When asked which animals the zoo expected from the expedition, Dr Müller responded, "We have no special requests, but we will be happy about everything they send us, from grasshoppers to elephants" (translated by the author).

Animal trade and the cultivation of distinctive zoo collections became arenas for national, civic, and personal competition. These competitive dynamics shaped not only

acquisition strategies but also public narratives about the expedition. Von Maydell's words (that reached the public through press reports) reveal the pressure of competing against better-funded American zoos: "The greatest difficulties, however, come from the buyers of American zoos. Equipped with funds that are almost unimaginable by European standards, these managers pay any price" (Neue-Rhein-Zeitung Wuppertal, 09/10.06.1957) (translated by the author). He emphasized the need to work faster than the Americans, also operating in India during the expedition (Generalanzeiger Wuppertal, 06.06.1957). Significantly, although von Maydell wrote these concerns presumably privately to Dr Müller, the director ensured that this narrative reached the public through press conferences or direct communication with journalists, as evident from the archives. The theme of competition with wealthy American institutions appeared repeatedly across newspaper coverage of the expedition's shipments, suggesting a deliberate effort to frame the zoo's work as part of a broader international contest. This transformed logistical challenges into a story of German resourcefulness against American financial dominance, reinforcing both civic pride and the zoo's importance to Wuppertal's prestige.

The zoo's 75th anniversary in autumn 1956 proceeded without expedition materials, as the first shipment only arrived in June 1957. Yet the contractual promise of an exhibition remained a driving ambition until von Maydell's death. By summer 1958, correspondence between Müller and von Maydell shows intensive planning for a March 1959 opening, including detailed discussions of floor plans, material requirements, and scheduling (Müller, 1958; von Maydell, 1958; Grimm, 2011). More revealing than these logistical preparations was their consistent attempt to secure Indian "crafts and applied art objects" (*handwerkliche und kunstgewerbliche Arbeiten*) from the embassy in Bonn. His efforts positioned the zoo as more than a zoological institution, as it became a venue for diplomatic and economic negotiations. In official letters to embassy officials, Mr. Mukherjee and Dr. Chablani, Müller framed the exhibition as mutually beneficial (Müller, 1958): "We at Wuppertal Zoo are also convinced that this lively participation will meet with great public interest and can only contribute to increasing understanding for your challenges and respect for your cultural achievements" (translated by the author). He specifically requested the objects already being displayed at the Leipzig Messe, hoping to redirect them westward rather than back to India. When Chablani declined the invitation in January 1959, citing insufficient preparation time, Müller escalated his rhetoric, emphasizing the Zoo's geopolitical significance (Müller, 1959):

Given the exceptionally high visitor numbers at Wuppertal Zoo, the most visited zoological garden between Frankfurt and Hamburg, this would have been a unique opportunity for you to highlight the practicality and advantages of strengthened trade relations between India and the Federal Republic of Germany to the widest possible audience." (translated by the author)

This appeal explicitly linked zoo attendance to economic diplomacy, revealing how Müller envisioned the institution as a platform for trade promotion between West Germany and India.

Müller simultaneously cultivated a network of German institutions. The Übersee Museum Bremen had already committed its expedition materials, while he was in talks with Museum König Bonn. Müller understood that Indian participation would attract further institutional involvement, positioning himself as a broker between international diplomacy and domestic scientific collaboration. This reflects how he and the Wuppertal Zoo positioned themselves as a cultural-political institution with an ambitious project that would set them apart.

The media campaign surrounding the arrival of the gharials (also known as gavials or under the scientific name *Gavialis gangeticus*; critically endangered, fish-eating crocodilians endemic to north Indian and Nepalese rivers, specifically the Ganges and its tributaries) exemplifies how the zoo leveraged press coverage to manufacture sensation and distinction. Newspaper reports transformed them, which could easily be overlooked without interpretive framing, into spectacular attractions that validated Wuppertal's national and international standing. The press constructed narratives of scarcity and access as articles emphasized their highly endangered status, sacred significance in India, near-absence from animal trade, prohibitive costs, and the impossibility of "clandestine shipments." Labeled "the biggest surprise of the German expedition to India" (Neue-Rhein-Zeitung Wuppertal, 03.08.1957; Die Glocke, 06.08.1957), they became proof of the zoo and expedition's unparalleled collecting achievements. The following are a few examples of how headlines amplified this excitement and exclusivity: "Four animals that may no longer exist on earth in just a few years now live in the Wuppertal Zoo's aquarium!" (Neue-Rhein-Zeitung Wuppertal, 03.08.1957; Die Glocke, 06.08.1957); "Probably the only specimens of their kind to be shown in Germany"; "...has hardly ever been in the Zoological Garden" (Generalanzeiger Wuppertal, 03.08.1957) (translated by the author).

This narrative also linked zoological success to diplomatic privilege. Reports highlighted that the acquisition required "lengthy negotiations with Indian authorities" and "special permission and concessions" (Neue-Rhein-Zeitung, 1957) granted exclusively to the expedition. One journalist wrote (Lippstädter Tageblatt, 06.08.1957), "It is considered a particularly generous gesture that the Indian government granted the expedition leader, Baron von Maydell, permission to catch and export the four gharials" (translated by the author). The ZSI Annual Report for 1956–57 notes that by 1954–55, the government had imposed restrictions on the export of wildlife and their products. Exports for educational or commercial purposes were thereafter subject to review and required special permits issued by the ZSI. Among the approved cases for 1956–57, a leopard, pythons, and six gharials are indeed mentioned. The expedition's official standing and institutional support from the ZSI likely facilitated the export of live animals to Germany.

This framing reveals how international scientific cooperation was instrumentalized to serve patriotism "at home." The gharials were not just zoological specimens, but also material evidence of West Germany's diplomatic standing and India's recognition of German scientific authority. Animals mediated and materialized bilateral relations, transforming bureaucratic permissions into narratives of national achievement. The zoo's collection thus served dual purposes of attracting local visitors through sensationalized rarities while projecting Wuppertal's (and West Germany's) international connections and privileged access to protected wildlife.

Finding Animal Agency in the Expedition Archives

The tricky subject of animal agency has been heavily debated. Without entering into extensive philosophical and scientific discussions, especially regarding animal agency and anthropomorphism (Radick, 2017; McFarland & Hediger, 2009; Philo & Wilbert, 2000), my goal is to read the archival records "along and against the grain" (Neumann, 2022) to emphasize how animal lives influenced and continue to influence historical events and processes as agents and actors within heterogeneous networks. ANT rejects fixed capacities tied to specific entities, instead viewing agency as distributed across networks of human and non-human "actants" (Callon, 1986; Callon & Law, 1995; Latour, 1993). Orders like nature and society are instead seen as emerging from struggles, enrollments, translations of interests, and processes of

purifications involving vast networks of “micro-actors,” both human and non-human (Philo & Wilbert, 2000). In this way, ANT opens space to view agency performatively in material configurations instead of as static possession. I do not claim that it is possible to completely shake off the human perspective, especially while writing historical analysis based on human-made archives. However, I attempt to reveal how animal agency structured the expedition at multiple levels, from logistics and infrastructure to spatial practices and public representation.

According to the final inventory preserved in the expedition archive, the Wuppertal Zoo received sixty-four species (seven hundred and thirty-nine individuals) of animals, birds, and reptiles from India in three separate deliveries during 1957 (Grimm, 2011). These shipments did not follow a uniform logic of collection or transport. Instead, their sequencing, timing, and composition were shaped by the biological possibilities and needs of the animals themselves.

The first delivery, which arrived in Düsseldorf in June 1957 after what newspapers described as a “long period of silence,” consisted primarily of birds and reptiles, including rare and highly venomous species such as Russell’s vipers and king cobras (Duisburg-General-Anzeiger, 06.06.1957). Wuppertal’s terrarium was expanded to include these reptiles. In a letter, presumably to Müller, von Maydell explained the absence of large mammals by citing the difficulties of transporting them through the forested Himalayan regions. He hoped that he would be able to send them before the beginning of the monsoon season in India (Westf. Zeitung Bielefeld, 07.06.1957). The physical realities of animal life, such as geography and species-specific characteristics, thus determined the temporal structure of what the expedition could collect and when. The second delivery, in July 1957, included two Asiatic black bears and a leopard, alongside other mammals and birds (Westdeutsche Rundschau Wuppertal, 27.07.1957). These animals immediately attracted public attention and excitement as newspapers in the area reported the arrival of these “cute” bears to the zoo. The bears were named “Teddy” and “Petz” by the caretakers (Neue-Rhein-Zeitung Wuppertal, 15.07.1957). The third and final delivery included the gharials discussed above.

Across all three shipments, animals compelled the creation of elaborate logistical systems and demanded bureaucratic procedures. Special cages, crates, and quarantine facilities were commissioned in Calcutta. The Expedition archive includes a bill from “Broger Enterprise” (1957) that mentions that ten rupees were spent on a python crate made to exact specifications. A newspaper report mentions that the gharials travelled in specially made crates for the air journey, as they could not survive even the shortest transport without water and sufficient humidity (Das ist Wuppertal, 16.8.1957). It is also of significance that while animals were transported by air, a 26-hour flight from Calcutta to Düsseldorf, expedition members and most materials travelled by ship. Moreover, the flight attendants of the British Overseas Airways Corporation (BOAC), which transported the bears and the leopard to Brussels, were given a feeding schedule by von Maydell “for the care of their passengers” (Neue-Rhein-Zeitung Wuppertal, 15.07.1957). Upon arrival in Wuppertal, quarantine facilities had to be prepared in advance.

Although the gharials, bears, and leopard were recorded as logistically successful transfers, archival delivery lists indicate that mortality among many other species was strikingly high. Numerous squirrels, mongooses, small birds such as starlings and finches, several duck species, and multiple snakes either died en route or survived only a few months after arrival in Germany. A delivery list shows that a water snake was delivered already dead, while another record shows that of 125 spice finches received on 2 June 1957, only 53 remained alive by 21 October of the same year (Grimm, 2011). Even allowing for differences in age,

species-specific life expectancy, and acclimatization stress, these figures suggest that loss and failure were not incidental but structurally embedded in the logistics of animal transfer.

These logistical arrangements should be treated as evidence of animal agency rather than as background context. The fact that living animals required specially designed crates, humidity control, feeding schedules, and quarantine infrastructure demonstrates that their bodies imposed non-negotiable demands on human systems. Their survival depended on humidity, feeding schedules, veterinary oversight, and speed. Animals could not endure the duration and conditions of maritime transport, and this biological constraint reorganized routes, costs, and institutional priorities. In this sense, animal bodies structured the geography and temporality of the expedition.

As Bull, Holmberg, and Åsberg (2018, p. 2) have argued, animals act as place-making agents by producing materialized meanings in specific locations. The airplane cabin, the quarantine station, and the zoo enclosure were not pre-existing neutral spaces, but were activated and reshaped by animal presence. This exemplifies how animals make spaces and how they could offer different stories of events and processes. Animal presence also reshaped social relations and spaces. As animals moved, their meanings shifted. Bears transitioned from “wild animals” in Indian forests to airline passengers, quarantined bodies, and finally named zoo personalities. Each spatial transition produced new forms of human–animal relation, reorganizing authority, care, and affect. These transformations did not end with physical settlement in the zoo but continued through representation.

Bull, Holmberg, and Åsberg (2018, pp. 6-7) have pointed out that representations, whether of text or imagery, mediate our understanding of the “non-human” world. They form our cultural imagination and act as guides that create, sustain, or contest our identities and relationships. Hence, examining these representations, for this article, these local newspapers are key to understanding their role in promoting zoos and producing new attractions. Lengthy and extensive descriptions of the new animals, their behaviors, and characteristics were often the subject of newspaper reports. An extensive article (*Generalanzeiger Wuppertal*, 27.07.1957) narrates a story of how the reporters visited the bears who were out of quarantine to “show them to our readers.” They write, “It was midday. The two bears were lying together in a hutch corner, taking their midday nap. Such a nap should definitely be respected.” While the bears slept, the reporters observed the chimpanzees play. When the bears finally woke up, they wrote,

Meanwhile, Teddy and Petz, the two Asiatic black bear children, had woken up. They stretched, yawned heartily and unashamedly, and blinked sleepily around the cage with their button eyes. What should we do with the rest of the afternoon? Teddy, the little bear girl, first occupied herself with her makeup. After all, one cannot appear in public completely without it! She thoroughly polished her claws, brushed her collar, and carefully smoothed her white vest. Petz was not so meticulous. “A man is captivating simply because he is a man. What is the point of all the external fuss?” he thought to himself, and immediately threw himself into his work. His goal for today was to master the descent down the leaning climbing tree without a single mistake. A difficult task when the branch is narrow, and when one is naturally inclined to go over the “big uncle.” Suddenly, an idea seemed to come to him on how to solve this difficult problem. A kind of Columbus’s egg of climbing. Why were two of the branches so close together? You simply put your right front and hind leg on one branch, and your left hind and front leg on the other, and then you could descend quite comfortably. Unfortunately, Petz had not factored

in the treachery of the object. The branches were not parallel, but rather diverged like the legs of a triangle. There hung the poor little fellow, his limbs spread wide apart, afraid to move forward or backwards, and grumbling miserably. At this exciting moment, Teddy, who had meanwhile finished her toilet routine, slid down one of the smooth branches on her bottom, fresh, cheerful, and without any problems, collided with Petz, and a fraction of a second later, the two black balls of fluff were tumbling around the cage floor. It was not serious, but very annoying when you think about it. In front of all those spectators. Who was to blame? Petz or Teddy? Far from it. The peculiar logic in such a situation always points to a third party. (translated by the author)

By individualizing, anthropomorphizing, and, in this case, genderizing, the zoo animals, such reports and representations create a feeling that one could know this individual animal as if in one's own "circle of acquaintance" (Haraway, 2016; Cichosch & Borgards, 2019). This is also seen in the case of a Russell's viper that gave birth shortly after arriving at the Zoo. One headline (*Neue-Rhein-Zeitung Wuppertal*, 19.06.1957) reads, "Russell's Viper from India experiences maternal joy in the zoo. The zoo management had not expected this" (translated by the author). Similarly, another report (*Generalanzeiger Wuppertal*, 15.06.1957) states, "Baby snakes arrive at the Zoo. Russell's Vipers from the India Expedition have offspring" (translated by the author).

According to McFarland and Hediger (2009), "fictional" thought experiments can reveal what we previously overlooked. Such narratives actively organize human-animal relations in spaces like zoos by portraying them as friendly, intimate sites where humans and animals co-constitute each other's identities—bears seen as "cute" and visitors as "caring spectators." Using comedy, human gender stereotypes, and slapstick structure helps the reader identify the new and foreign animals as harmless, playful, and entertaining. Bekoff (2007, p. 86) argues that play behavior reveals the moral basis of other animal species. Play behavior and underlying rules reflect animal agency, because play cannot take place without a trust that the other participants will follow the rules (McFarland & Hediger, 2009, pp. 7-8). Moreover, Bekoff's research reveals that play requires cooperation, which he claims drives behavior more than competition does. Cooperation requires a choice, and choice is a part of what defines agency.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the *Deutsche Indien Expedition* of 1955–1958 reveals how animal mobility was central to the reconstruction of scientific authority and institutional credibility in postwar West Germany. The expedition's timing, coinciding with the Wuppertal Zoo's 75th anniversary celebration and Germany's broader post-war repositioning, demonstrates how zoological institutions served as projection spaces for scientific legitimacy, civic prestige, and geopolitical belonging. Rather than treating animals as passive objects of collection, the analysis has shown that their movements, bodily needs, and capacities structured the logistical, temporal, and diplomatic dimensions of the expedition and the zoo. Their successful transport and survival became indicators of scientific competence and international reliability. Moreover, far from being merely scientific endeavors or institutional rebuilding projects, these networks transformed animals into historical and cultural actors whose bodies materialized abstract political ambitions and mediated complex transnational relationships.

A zoo-sensitive reading of archival correspondence and newspaper reports further shows how animal agency extended into public culture. Representations that individualized and anthropomorphized zoo animals did not merely entertain; they structured human–animal relations and produced the zoo as an affective space. Taken together, these findings suggest that writing animals back into histories of postwar reconstruction adds another perspective that underlines their constitutive nature to this process. Attending to animal agency reveals scientific rebuilding as a multispecies process shaped by interdependence, constraint, and negotiation rather than unilateral human control. Such an approach challenges human-centric histories of science and underscores the analytical value of animal mobility for understanding how institutions, authority, and knowledge were reconstituted in a postcolonial world.

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