

Great Gerbils & Humans

A story for a proposed museum

by Dr Clem Fisher

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Dr Clemency Fisher worked at London's Natural History Museum in the early 1970s and joined the staff of the Vertebrate Zoology Department at what was then Liverpool Museum in 1975.

She is now Curator of Vertebrate Zoology, World Museum Liverpool (National Museums Liverpool), but is also acts as natural history liaison officer for the Content Team for the new Museum of Liverpool.

Her main interest is in the Australian upper vertebrate fauna, and she is writing a biography and collections assessment of the English naturalist John Gilbert, who explored and collected in many parts of Australia between 1838 and 1845.

Ever since that fateful day when a small but persistent population of the Great Gerbil *Gerbillus yetiensis* was discovered in the mountains of Tibet by the 2010 expedition of Sir Timothy Truffle-Winkleout (previous brief sightings over the years having been mistaken as being of a giant ape), the Human race (*Homo sapiens*) had unexpectedly found itself in the role of Subservient Species. The Great Gerbils are highly intelligent creatures, with an average IQ of 170 and a genius for complex philosophical and mathematical thinking. They also have an opposable thumb, making them at least as dextrous as Humans. Most notably, the poisonous spur on the outside finger of their right front paw allowed them to dominate the human race – one small scratch from the spur on even the bare skin of Humans proving fatal within an hour.

Within two years of being led out of their remote native ravine by Sir Timothy, having supplemented their previous diet of moss and lichens with agricultural grains and the odd chicken, and breeding at breakneck speed, Great Gerbils had spread rapidly throughout the world. Their size (approximately that of the domestic cow *Bos taurus*), and the threat of poison, ensured the evolving serfdom of the human race as the gerbils moved relentlessly on throughout the world. However, being naturally inclined to live in burrows, they in general allowed humans to remain in their houses and businesses, although the gerbils' annexation of the New York Metro, London Underground and both Mersey Tunnels, as well as other underground railway and road systems, caused much chaos. The Great Gerbils solved this problem by arranging the digging of thousands of new tunnels using Humans as forced labour. This harked back to many dark episodes in the history of inter-Human relations, such as the 19th century importation of thousands of Chinese labourers to build the trans-American train lines, or the use of African-American slave labour in the plantations of the Deep South and the West Indies.

However, Great Gerbils are at heart benevolent, if somewhat manic, intellectuals, and as such are learning to live with, rather than dominate, the human race. In the 2050s a gerbilian pressure group, SPURNOT, was formed by such high-profile individuals as Gladstone Swiftleg and his cousins Nelson and Mandela High Hopper, along with a few prominent and brave Humans. This group sought to advance the status of the Human race to that of equality with the Great Gerbils,



and to make the use of the poisonous spur illegal except in self-defence.

Ten years on, the Great Gerbils and Humans have travelled far along the route of mutual nirvana, and indeed last week a new law was agreed making it mandatory to remove the gerbils' poisonous spur as soon as possible after birth. In celebration, the two species wish to collaborate in building a new Museum, which will tell both their histories up to their first meeting in 2010 and their joint history thereon, to include the long and successful campaign for equality. A site has been chosen and purchased in Buckinghamshire, England and a Trustee body has been appointed (consisting of four members of each species, half of which are SPURNOT members), and there is already a small but growing collection of objects, donated by existing museums, societies and private individuals. Examples include Sir Timothy's equipment and harnesses used to lead the first Great Gerbils out of the mountains, and the first pair of stout boots (for general use on hard pavements), made for the gerbils by the bespoke boot makers Hunterian.

Many items from the Great Gerbil Collection, which is at present stored in the underground vaults of The Great Pagoda in Milton Keynes, England, are also available. The gerbils' collection is very strong on items of food preserved by freeze-drying, perhaps inevitable given their ardent interest in their stomachs. This material helps map their change in diet from the most basic of plant life, through the unfortunate period when they became addicted to Fast Food outlets selling poor quality junk food such as "Pork-an-Peanut Nibbles", to modern times where the Foodstuffs Division of the Great Gerbil Council carefully oversee the diet of their race.

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Cordon-bleu recipe books for Gerbils are now one of the top-selling lines in bookshops.

The Great Gerbil collection also includes many mounted specimens of their rodent cousins - from the small Australian Hopping-mice, through the Alsatian-sized Capybara of South America, to the several species of rodent equalling their huge size - which might be suitable for a display to help demonstrate Great Gerbil evolution. Together with the enormous primate collections assembled by Humans, there is a wide range of possible evolutionary history exhibits, but with their attendant display requirements of low light levels, constant humidity and good insect pest control.

An extremely sensitive issue will be the display of material from the Great Gerbil and Human species themselves, and few museum specimens of *Gerbillus yetiensis* exist. These are three cabinet skins (neatly folded) in the collections of two British National Museums, and a mounted specimen in a University Museum in China - all obtained in the early days of colonisation, and subsequently the subject of much trial and retribution. The Great Gerbil's own collections include much Human material, obtained during the early and darkest times, and much of which is not well provenanced or preserved. After much discussion, both species have agreed that it is crucial that some of this material should be exhibited, but under very strict control of display conditions and labelling. They are also very concerned about the way Great Gerbil and Human material is stored if not on display.

As far as the most intense period of political activity is concerned, items such as political banners, leaflets with such titles as "Equality!! Are we not all the same under the fur, however sparse?" and photographs of the many political rallies in support of equality, have been offered as donations by SPURNOT. There are also films, videos and photographs covering campaigns such

as the Sit-In of the Blackwall Tunnel by millions of one of SPURNOT's greatest allies, the Brown Rat *Rattus norvegicus*.

The Trustees of the new Museum wish to encourage the newly-appointed joint species team of Curators, Educationalists and Exhibition Officers to tell the true story of the 50 year serfdom of the Human race, but without exaggeration or threat of rancour. The exhibitions should include a fair account of the initially confrontational relationship of the two species, comparing and contrasting this against previous Human history (focusing in particular on slavery, racial conflict, and terrorism).

Both Great Gerbils and Humans are also anxious that the new Museum should give a thorough account of their Sport and Culture, pointing to the relative strengths of the two species and their efforts to overcome the differences. In Sport, of particular interest is likely to be representations of the great talent for athletics shown by Great Gerbils - who can move at twice the speed of Humans and jump much higher. In comparison, the exhibitions should also demonstrate the gerbils' long and fraught battle to train themselves to be able to play a full game of football, basketball or even baseball without giving in to the temptation to eat the ball. There is also an agreement amongst the Trustees that the Museum should include displays about the history of music. The dearth of materials with which to make instruments in their native Tibet, or paper on which to record either the written word or musical scores, means that there is instead a rich oral tradition of stories and songs in Great Gerbil history, and there has been an increasing effort to record and publish these.

The Museum's plans give two floors above ground for exhibition, both of 1,500 cubic metres, and 4 floors of a similar size below for storage, which should also be easily accessible to researchers and students. It is due to open in five years time.

Exercise

Your task is to:

1. Write an outline exhibition brief for the Museum, and suggest a title for the Institution. Please use your imagination!
2. Write a short collecting policy for the Museum, to cover items which will best represent the history of the Great Gerbils, of Humans, and of their struggle to co-exist, with recommendations for storage methods and conditions.
3. Devise a working list of possible Educational Activities for the first two months after opening
4. Outline a request for the Trustee Board to add an Oral Historian to the existing staff.



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