Giraffes and the Okapi

by Sir Ray Lankester

The baby giraffe at the gardens in the Regent's Park is a most interesting and beautiful creature. In that respect she only resembles on a small scale her grown-up relatives. Next to elephants, giraffes take precedence for strangeness, beauty, and imposing size. Certainly they have done so with me ever since I turned one Sunday afternoon long ago from the great novelty of the day, the first hippopotamus sent from Egypt, round whom the world of fashion was crowding, and gazed into the beautiful eyes that hung over me, supported by a gracefully-curving neck. My tender regard for the beautiful creature was not shaken even when I felt a sudden jerk to the elastic band passing under my chin and saw my new Leghorn straw hat, with its ornamental bunch of Egyptian wheat and broad pink ribbon, disappear between the lips of the beauty. A slow right and left movement of the jaw followed, accompanied by a tranquil kindly look suggestive of a desire for more. That was one of the old stock of Regent's Park giraffes, who bred freely at the gardens and made money for the society. They died out thirty years ago or more. From time to time since then there have been one or two mis-shapen giraffes in London, but they did not eat children's hats nor produce young of their own. A new dynasty of Kordofan giraffes has now arrived, and a better spirit prevails.

The most interesting thing about the giraffe is the okapi. The remark sounds absurd, but it is true. The okapi is the new animal from the Congo forest of Central Africa, discovered in 1901 by Sir Harry Johnston. It is as big as a very large stag, has a neck like a deer, and is striped on the haunches and legs, not spotted as is the giraffe. Yet its teeth and its horns prove it to be a close ally, not of deer, but of the giraffe. Any points of agreement between giraffes and the okapi are, therefore, important. I have examined the baby giraffe at the Zoo, and find that she has stripe-like bands of hair on the face and on other parts of the head. Both her father and mother are from Kordofan, and have some six or seven strongly-marked bands of dark hair over the eyes and on the muzzle. It is important to note any colour-striping in the giraffe's skin, since the giraffe's colour-markings are mostly in the form of great spots, whilst the okapi is only marked by stripes or bands something like those of a zebra, but confined to the haunches and the legs, the rest of the body being dark brown. The tendency to develop colour stripes in the giraffe is important, since it shows us that the stripes do not separate the okapi absolutely from the camelopard; they are a common possession or possibility of the two animals. It was my examination of a half-brother of the little giraffe now alive at the Gardens which led to the discovery of striping on the head and face of giraffes. The mother in that case had died before the birth of her young one, and the dead calf was given to me by the secretary of the Zoological Society. Sixty-eight years ago Sir Richard (then Professor) Owen received a new-born giraffe from the Gardens, and reported on it to the Zoological Society. No one had examined one since that date; none were obtainable from the Zoo, and I could get none from African travellers and sportsmen, in spite of urgent requests. I was accordingly greatly pleased to secure one from the London Gardens. A great peculiarity of the young giraffe is that it is born with a pair of well-grown horns, nearly an inch long, and covered with coarse black hair. No other horn-bearing mammal—no antelope, buffalo, ox, sheep, goat, stag, or other deer—is born with horns, so far as we know, and we know a good many of these animals well. Before birth the young giraffe's horns are flat from back to front, and quite soft and flexible. They can be pressed backwards, so as to be made to lie flat on the head. Directly after birth a hard, bony deposit commences inside the horn, and after some years' growth it becomes firmly fused to the skull. But the hard bony core never breaks through the hairy skin which covers it. The bony core of the okapi's pair of horns, on the contrary, does "cut" or break through the skin, exposing a sharp, hard point, a quarter of an inch in length. In the deer tribe, as everyone knows, the point of the bony horn-core spreads out as a large,

branching growth from which all covering is shed, and forms the "antler." The deer tribe shed the antlers every year from the top of the horn-core, and grow a new and larger pair to take the place of the old ones. Moreover, in them the horn-core itself is a stem-like upgrowth of the bone of the skull (of the frontal bone). In the okapi and the giraffe the horn-core is a separate bone, free at first and fusing with the skull only when the adult condition is reached. The little antlers or bare-points of the okapi's horn-cones or cores seem to be shed in segments as growth goes on, and are only minute things compared with the antlers of stags. The giraffe's horns, on the other hand, always remain covered by skin and hair and have a broad, rounded top, not a sharp point.

The real clinching feature in the okapi and giraffe which decides at once their close affinity to one another is found in the outer tooth on each side of the group of eight teeth placed in the front of the lower jaw. In both this particular tooth has a broad, chisel-like crown, divided into two portions by a deep vertical slit. None of the other ungulate or hoofed animals have this very curious shape of tooth. It is a sort of family "mark" or "feature" in okapis and giraffes, as may be seen in specimens shown in the gallery of the Natural History Museum, where we have now no less than three fine, well-stuffed okapis and several varieties of giraffe.

Source:

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