

Face to face with a killing machine

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A Sumatran tiger was able to maul a zookeeper at the San Antonio Zoo last weekend because the custodian forgot to close a series of gates behind him before releasing the animal into the exhibit area, zoo officials revealed Wednesday.

The key to the zookeeper's survival is more mystifying.

The 244-pound tiger, named Berani, knocked Jeff Tierney down, bit him several times and dragged him by the head into a service hallway, said Steve McCusker, executive director of the zoo. **But for some reason, the male tiger released the injured zookeeper for an instant — long enough for Tierney to retrieve a vial of pepper spray from his belt and repel the creature.**

Tigers "are killing machines. Jeff was very fortunate," McCusker told reporters at the zoo as Berani yawned and lounged on a platform behind him.

McCusker credited the zookeeper for his quick response to the threat.

Tierney, 28, was in good condition at University Hospital on Wednesday, one day after McCusker visited him to learn more about the accident. The zookeeper still was recovering from injuries that included claw marks and puncture wounds to his head, left arm and left leg.

Tierney and his family have declined repeated interview requests.

"He's alert, a bit sore and eager to make a full recovery," McCusker said, adding that he welcomed Tierney to return to his job when he recovers. "I told him he probably won't be working tigers and lions the first week. He thought that was funny."

Tierney was alone in the Lion House, an enclosed hallway bordered by tiger and lion dens, when the attack occurred Saturday around 2 p.m. He was there to feed one of the zoo's two Sumatran tigers and allow the other animal to roam in the yard.

Malaya, a female tiger, was in the exhibit area. Berani was in his den, secured by cable-operated "guillotine" doors that slide up and down. Responsible for keeping the tigers separate, Tierney lured Malaya back into her den to eat and enclosed her inside.

He then passed through three gates leading from the hallway out to the exhibit area, where he filled a pool with water and picked up debris. When he was finished he walked back through the gates into the Lion House to release Berani into the yard.

But Tierney, a five-year employee of the zoo, forgot to close and lock the gates behind him — a daily procedure, zoo officials said. After opening a guillotine door to release Berani, the zookeeper realized his mistake and walked to the outermost gate to shut it.

"The tiger met him there," McCusker said.

The animal knocked Tierney down and dragged him by the head into the Lion House, where the beast bit and clawed him.

At one point, the tiger paused in his attack. Tierney, lying on his stomach, unlatched the pepper spray canister from his belt and shot the liquid over his shoulder into the creature's face.

Berani retreated. Tierney stood up and sprayed the tiger again in the face.

"These sprays are designed to deter (grizzly) bears. The tiger became quite disoriented at that point," said Ryan Gulker, living collections manager at the zoo.

Tierney, bleeding from his injuries, managed to escape behind another gate and lock it, isolating the tiger in the Lion House. Another zookeeper noticed Tierney through the window of an outside door and initiated a rescue effort that included zoo security personnel and police, officials said.

McCusker said the incident might be investigated by outside agencies, including the U.S. Department of Labor's Occupational Safety and Health Administration and the Association of Zoos and Aquariums.

But he said he didn't expect the zoo to be penalized by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal Plant Health Inspection Service, which investigated the site Monday, because the accident was a result of human error and not a problem with the zoo's system of guillotine gates, considered state of the art in the zoo industry, he said.

McCusker was hesitant to speculate why the 5-year-old tiger injured Tierney, but he said the mostly solitary animal might have perceived him as an intruder.

"He was doing what tigers do," McCusker said, later adding, "He may have wondered what the guy was doing in his territory."

As for Berani, zoo officials hope to breed him in an effort to help preserve the Sumatran tiger, among the more rare of the remaining tiger subspecies. If they're successful, the tiger could be transferred to breed with a female at a different zoo under an international species survival plan.

The San Antonio Zoo opened its tiger exhibit Wednesday for the first time since the weekend attack. Admiring Berani from a safe distance, a cluster of excited children shared their favorite attributes of the tiger. Among them — his speed and razor-sharp teeth.

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Staff Writer John Tedesco contributed to this report.