

Zoos: Myth and Reality

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In recent years, zoos have become the target of intense public scrutiny and criticism. In response, many have tried to repackage themselves as institutions devoted to wildlife conservation, public education and animal welfare. But most zoos fail to live up to their own propaganda, and vast numbers of zoo animals continue to endure lives of misery and deprivation.

Nearly every zoo, from the smallest amateur operation to the largest professional facilities, claim to be making important contributions to conservation, usually through participation in endangered species captive propagation initiatives, and public education programming. The zoo world buzzword of the moment is “conservation.”

Yet, with an estimated 10,000 organized zoos worldwide, representing tens of thousands of human workers and billions of dollars in operating budgets, only a tiny percentage allocate the resources necessary to participate in captive propagation initiatives, and fewer still provide any “real” support for field conservation work.

So far, the record on reintroductions to the wild is dismal. Only sixteen species have established self-sustaining populations in the wild as a result of captive breeding efforts, and most of those weren't zoo-based initiatives.

As the futility of captive breeding as a major conservation tool becomes evident to those in the industry, many zoos are now turning to education to justify themselves. Despite years of claiming to educate and motivate members of the public to become “conservation ambassadors”, the truth is that scant empirical evidence exists to prove that the primary vehicle for education in most zoos - the animal in the cage - actually teaches anyone anything. In fact, viewing animals in cages may be counterproductive educationally by conveying the wrong kinds of messages to the public.

But there is one issue about which there appears to be widespread agreement—at least in principle. So long as wild animals are kept in captivity, they ought to be treated humanely.

The fact that animals can suffer physically, mentally and emotionally is well established. For this reason, captive environments must be complex enough to compensate for the lack of natural freedom and choice, and they must facilitate expression of natural movement and behaviour patterns. This principle has been widely espoused by the modern zoo community in various articles, books and television documentaries.

Yet despite the best of intentions or claims, *most* animals in zoos in North America are still consigned to miserable lives, in undersized, impoverished enclosures, both old and new, that fail to meet their biological and behavioral needs.

Many in the zoo industry will bristle at the above statement and point to numerous improvements in the zoo field. They'll claim they've shifted from menagerie-style entertainment centers where animals were displayed in barred, sterile, biologically irrelevant cages, to kinder, gentler, more scientifically-based kinds of institutions.

But many of the "advances" in zoo animal housing and husbandry are superficial and provide little benefit to the animals. For example, the many new, heavily promoted, "arctic art deco", polar bear exhibits that are springing up in zoos across the continent consistently ignore the natural biology and behaviour of these animals. The artificial rockwork and hard floor surfaces typically resemble a Flintstones movie set more than the natural habitat of polar bears. These exhibits are made for the public and dupe them into believing things are getting better. What they really achieve is more misery and deprivation.

As well, many new exhibits are hardly larger than the sterile, barred cages of days gone by. And one look at the prison-like, off-display holding and service areas in most zoos, where many animals spend a good portion of their lives, is proof of the hypocrisy of zoo claims that things are better for the animals than they were in the past.

If not all is well behind the invisible bars of North America's more luxurious zoos, a more transparent problem is found in the hundreds of substandard roadside zoos that dot the continent. These amateurish operations fall far below any professional standard and do nothing but cause misery and death to thousands of animals.

My own investigations have revealed animals in visible distress lying unprotected from the full glare of the hot summer sun; primates in barren cages with no opportunity to climb; groups of black bears begging for marshmallows as they sit in stagnant moats of excrement-filled water, scarred and wounded from fighting; nocturnal animals kept without shade or privacy; animals without water; and the list could go on and on.

Many zoos, including those that meet industry guidelines, also produce a predictable livestock surplus annually that may end up in the hands of private collectors, animal auctions, circuses and novelty acts, substandard zoos, and even "canned hunt" operations where they're shot as trophies.

A look at compliance with the zoo industry's own standards (which in the author's view do not necessarily constitute adequate standards) demonstrates how bad the situation really is. Of the estimated 200 public display facilities in Canada, only 26 or slightly more than 10% have been deemed to meet the standards of the Canadian Association of Zoos and Aquariums (CAZA).

In the U.S., out of the 1800-2000 licensed exhibitors of wild animals (which includes small exhibitors, travelling shows, educational programs using live animals, zoos and aquariums),

about 175 are accredited by the American Zoo and Aquarium Association (AZA), equivalent to less than 10% of all facilities.

Are there good captive environments where the biological and behavioral needs of animals are being satisfied. The answer is yes. But they are few and far between.

Can zoos make a useful contribution to conservation and education. Again, the answer is yes. But few actually do.

I can't understand why the more responsible segments of the zoo industry have not come to their senses and acknowledged the obvious - the present state of zoos is untenable. Either zoos can voluntarily adopt humane policies and practices, push for the closure of substandard facilities, and participate in advocating for laws to help wildlife, or they can be dragged kicking and screaming into the new millenium. It's their choice.