

Zoos and the End of Nature

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The zoo is a perfect microcosm of the postmodern world. As we swim in a sea of simulated, pseudo-realities of the National Entertainment State, where everything from human bodies to national politics is faked and contrived, why not simulate nature, wilderness, animal behaviors, and entire species too? At this late stage in the capitalist colonization of the planet, few pockets of the natural world remain, and the zoo embodies the commodification, fragmentation, and technification of living processes -- biodiversity reduced to artificially sustained "exhibits."

As the contradiction between society and nature unfolds, nature is increasingly dependent upon culture for the sustenance of advanced life, but culture, wedded to mechanistic models and primitive philosophies of hierarchy and domination, is not sufficiently advanced to preserve evolution. The zoo is the perfect symbol then for the entombment of the planet, for the sarcophagus of animal species, and for a human power pathology spiraling out of control. Zoos are first and foremost about power relations; they are both a cause and a symptom of the human will to mastery over the natural world.

Imperialism By Other Means

"In many ways, the zoo has come to typify the themes of the Age of Control: exploration, domination, machismo, exhibitionism, assertion of superiority, manipulation." David Ehrenfeld, Ethics on the Ark

By definition, a zoo is a public park that exhibits animals for purposes such as entertainment or "education," and they should be distinguished from a "menagerie" collection of

animals maintained for various exploitative purposes, traveling zoos, or small "roadside zoos," such as the Tiger Truck Plazas in Louisiana and Texas that confine tigers under ghastly conditions. The American Zoo and Aquarium Association (AZA) accredit the "best" zoos, but many AZA-approved zoos still badly abuse their animals (as was evident in the infamous beating of Sissy the elephant by the El Paso Zoo in 1998). Moreover, only about 10% of the more than 2,000 animal exhibitors licensed by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) are accredited by the AZA. We must also distinguish zoos from sanctuaries such as the Elephant Sanctuary in Tennessee that preserve animals within expansive natural surroundings, often completely closed from public viewing. Often, however, zoos and menageries like "Noah's Land Sanctuary" in Harwood, Texas misleadingly claim that they are "sanctuaries," when in fact they are notorious animal abusers (all-too-tolerated by the USDA), and so the title "sanctuary" can be phony advertising to lure money and no guarantee of humane policies.

Today's zoos claim to be in the business of preserving species, but zoos and their prototypes always have been involved in capturing, killing, and trafficking in animals. Menageries date at least as far back as ancient Egypt, where bulls, serpents, elephants and other animals were kept for religious purposes. The Romans kept animals such as leopards, lions, bears, elephants, antelopes, giraffes, and rhinoceroses in order to slaughter them at gladiator shows. Some of these gory spectacles played out for months and involved the massacre of thousands of animals. Whether the victims were people or animals, the blood lust was popular entertainment. In 1519, Hernando Cortez reported that the Aztec ruler, Montezuma, kept a large menagerie for supplying sacrifices for religious ceremonies. Numerous rulers have kept animal menageries as signs of their wealth and status. As long as animals were collected for exhibition or amusement throughout Western history, they frequently were hunted for food or sport, used in fighting contests against one another, or slaughtered in grotesque orgies of violence.

As Dale Jamieson writes in his essay "Against Zoos," modern zoos were founded in Vienna, Madrid, and Paris in the eighteenth century and in London and Berlin in the nineteenth century. The first American zoos were established in Philadelphia and Cincinnati in the 1870s. In his superb

book, *Reading Zoos: Representations of Animals in Captivity*, Randy Malamud exposes the zoo's unwritten history in its relation to colonialism. Zoos were inextricably bound up with imperialism and its ideologies of conquest, and they provided much-needed symbols and legitimation for conquering nations. Animals captured in foreign lands during imperialist adventures were brought back to capitals such as London in order to be displayed for a gawking public. Exotic animals symbolized the empire's prowess to gain dominion over nature and culture, and they became prized objects of conspicuous consumption.

Empires require signs of their power and magnificence. Since inanimate commodities like guns and gold exude little semiotic splendor, exotic animals have been deployed as symbols of imperial conquest and power over foreign lands. To be placed in zoos, animals have been captured in the wild, taken from their habitat and families, bound, manhandled, transported, caged, confined, subjected to various timetables, compelled to feel pain, re-presented in anthropocentric categories, and made subject to a continual human gaze. Zoos thus are extensions and manifestations of both state and species empire. As Malamud writes, "Animal and human exhibitions each demonstrate the tenacious cultural compulsions to reify imperialism: they celebrate the power and conquest necessary to acquire specimens for exhibition, integrate the dynamics of commercial trade and economic exploitation; and engage crowds in the imperial enterprise by vicariously confirming their place in the empire. Modern zoos replicate imperial traditions of displaying the other, constructing a privileged sense of spectatorial positioning -- deciding when to come, look, and depart, while the [animal] subject must stay."

As Marjorie Spiegel describes in her book *The Dreaded Comparison: Human and Animal Slavery*, the exploitation of animals provided models for dominating African slaves, and numerous classes of human beings -- those belonging to "inferior" gender, race, or class categories -- are categorized as "animals" or "subhuman." Once human beings can be consigned to the same category as maligned animals, they are subject to similar exploitative treatment. Consequently, the English used animals to link lower classes of human beings to subaltern status.

Zoos, in particular, provided models of dehumanization. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, humans frequently were exhibited in cages with animals. In blatantly racist ways, Moors, Tartars, Indians, Asians, Eskimos, and African Bushmen, among a host of global others, became part of an exotic collection of life forms on display, as various "freaks" ("dwarfs," giants, bearded women, and people with all kinds of "oddities" and "deformities") too were confined in zoo cages and menageries. Humanitarian movements eventually stopped these practices, but the "freaks" moved onto circuses where they perform to this day.

While moral progress compelled people to realize the wrong of exhibiting humans, we await the next step whereby the world comprehends the injustice of exploiting animals in zoos. Yet today no city is considered complete without a public zoo as a major "tourist attraction." In a crude reduction of animals to commodities and spectacle, zoos are a cornerstone of "quality of life" issues, along with parks, libraries, symphonies, and recreational facilities. Of course, the "quality of life" referred to is that of humans and not the animals; so long as they are on display for the human gaze and part of a city's entertainment resources, the quality of the animals' life is irrelevant to most city politicians and the public.

The Berlin Wall of Species

"They pay the price for their beauty, poor beasts. Mankind wants to catch anything beautiful and shut it up, and then come in thousands to watch it die by inches." David Garnett, A Man in the Zoo

The most fascinating thing about zoos is not their materiality -- the cages, bars, walls, windows, moats, and enclosures; the closed world of loneliness and pain pierced by cries in the night; the dank and fetid smells of festering illness and misery. Rather, the main interest of zoos lies in their underlying psychology; in the human mindset that seeks to master nature, to domesticate wildlife, to exert its will to power over what it deems inferior to itself; in the epistemologies of hierarchy and rule that have defined the

totality of Western culture since its inception. The architectures of separation exist not so much to detach us from any particular zoo animals, but from the natural world as a whole; they are ontological dividing lines. Zoos separate us not only from particular animals but also, more generally, from our own animality, our evolutionary heritage, our biological ancestors -- the sentient and thinking beings with whom we share the dynamic adventure of evolution and whose existence paved the way for our own. Thus, the walls are not a physical as much as cultural means of separation; they split life into "us" vs. "them" rather than establishing an evolutionary continuum.

Zoo goers occupy the position of spectators, purveyors of a gaze that objectifies animals and reifies them in a debased and inferior state of being. The mere act of looking establishes a power relation as the looker defines its visual target with the contemptuous values that inform its judging eyes. There is no understanding or respect when the subject beholds an object for its entertainment. To spy on the voyeurs is unnerving because you see how frivolous their experience is, and how inured they are to the haunting sadness and loneliness of captive animals. As Malamud observes, people who behold animals in zoo settings are no more likely to respect them than they would appreciate cultural diversity by looking at the dark-skinned human beings behind the bars of the nineteenth century menageries

Zoos speak simultaneously about the animal objects they dominate, and the human dominating subjects. The abomination of zoos is a projection of the horror that haunts the human spirit, its utter revulsion from its own psychic roots and animalic origins. When we stare through the bars at confined animals, at the hirsute commodities imprisoned for entertainment value, we peer into the face of our own alienation. Simultaneously, we see our past sins and our future mortifications, as we ourselves decay with the death of nature. As we gaze upon our genetic brethren who never look back at us, we demean ourselves. The fact that -- as insipid parents claim -- their children "enjoy" the zoo is not an argument for it, but a disturbing indication of an early stage in the warping of a young mind. Apparently, Schaudenfreude--the delight in the suffering of others -- is good fun for the whole family.

Daniel Quinn's novel, *Ishmael*, involves a Socratic dialogue between a smug humanist and a philosophical gorilla. The gorilla startles the man with the argument that they share something profound -- the experience of captivity. The gorilla has been captive to various circuses and entertainment institutions, but the man, indignant and nonplused, schooled in the philosophical premises of Judeo-Christian culture, comes to realize he is exiled in the deeper bondage of the staid and dysfunctional paradigm of anthropocentrism.

The School of Disinformation

"The simple basis of my opposition to captivity in zoos is that we are holding animals in grossly unnatural, debilitating, and aberrant circumstances. None of their beauty and force and intelligence is apparent. Confined, frustrated, performing the same ritualistic and often dangerous damaging behavior of acute boredom, they caricature the real thing." Euan C. Young, Professor of Zoology, Auckland University, New Zealand

Because of increasing public awareness about animal suffering and animal rights, zoos are compelled to trot out flimsy justifications for their existence. To warrant their existence, zoos advance three main arguments. Zoos provide the only chance most people will have to see animals like giraffes, lions, and elephants; they help to educate the public about animals and promote greater respect for them; and they promote conservation efforts through education and breeding and housing of endangered species.

The first point begs the question by assuming that human voyeuristic pleasure and curiosity trumps an animal's right to enjoy its life undisturbed in its natural habitat. The pain caused to animals in confinement for their entire life (decades in cases such as chimpanzees and elephants) in no way justifies the value of a momentary experience for entertainment-jaded human beings.

The second claim assumes that the animal behaviors spectators see are accurate, true, and natural, when in fact the artificiality of the zoo environment distorts their entire life process. First, zoo spectators pay little if any attention to

information provided them about the animals they observe. Studies document -- and one's own experience easily confirms -- that zoo patrons rarely read the plaques that provide factoids about the animals name, diet, and natural range. The assumption that people would read signs, ponder the information, and be able to contextualize it is unfounded in a culture of consumption and entertainment. Children especially are blithe to reading what little information exists, as they run frantically from one penned area to another, shouting and screaming, jacked up on Coca-Cola, Ritalin, and video games. Studies show that zoo goers know little about animals, they hold typical prejudices about animals, and make profound remarks such as the animal is "cute" or "funny looking." The problem is two-fold: zoo-goers typically seek entertainment, not education, and zoos rarely make a serious effort of public education. One can learn far more about animal behavior through media such as the Discovery Channel or through "virtual zoos" and webcams that feed live images of animals in their natural surroundings.

When I recently visited the El Paso Zoo, I heard a child exclaim, "Is that animal real?" The parents laughed, but it was an unintentionally profound question. For what spectators see are expressions of stunted, distorted, thwarted beings, animals who are sad, lonely, injured, and depressed. We don't see tigers, elephants, and chimpanzees, rather, we see what is done to them; we behold a social construction of the animal. To be sure, the lumbering elephant is not just someone's idea, but human concepts of it are constituted through the prism/prison of cultural perspectives that are more or less enlightened and scientifically accurate. Spectators think they are seeing animals directly, but they are seeing them through historically shaped paradigms and the crippling effects of the zoo institution itself.

One might as well approach a study of human nature by examining people locked up in asylums and prisons. Indeed, animals suffer the same psychological effects from confinement and isolation as do people, and thus the term "zoochosis." Perhaps taken from their families in the wild, unable to freely move, denied a rich social life, their every need and instinct thwarted, and in possession of complex minds, zoo animals suffer from various psychological problems, from "stereotypic" behavior that includes pacing,

head-bobbing, rocking, walking in circles, compulsive licking, bar-biting, and even self-mutilation (as in the case of chimpanzees who inflict serious bite wounds on their limbs). According to Bill Travers and Virginia McKenna of the Born Free Foundation, for instance, over 60% of polar bears in British zoos are mentally deranged. Jane Goodall claims that over half of the world's zoos "are still in bad conditions." One review of zoo necropsies at the San Diego Zoo, widely considered one of the best zoos in the country, documents "widespread malnutrition among zoo animals; high mortality rates from the use of anesthetics and tranquilizers, serious injuries and deaths sustained in transport, and frequent occurrences of cannibalism, infanticide, and fighting almost certainly caused by overcrowded conditions" (cited in Jamieson).

The main education a zoo provides is insight into what an animal is not and into the alienated psyche of human beings. Animals are denaturalized, shorn of their natures. You see gorgeous Green-winged Macaws in an open area and wonder why do they not fly away, and then realize their wings are clipped and they are no more capable of flight than a fat tom cat. You witness two elephants together and think they are an endearing pair, but come to understand that they live in large herds and family groups of up to 20. You watch a beautiful white tiger, only later to grasp that it is not a real species, but rather an inbred genetic freak that could not survive in the wild because it lacks adequate camouflage and suffers from a hip problems, club feet, and cataracts. No matter how zoos try to beautify the penal complex, the fact remains animals are penned up for human purposes, and they are not the animals they are advertised to be.

Even at their best, zoos give a mixed message where, on the one hand, they may help people understand the crisis facing species survival and make animals more than an abstraction, but, on the other hand, they aggravate alienation from nature and disrespect for life through institutionalizing a human-nonhuman dualism via the spectator-object split. Zoos inculcate a distorted sense of our place in the world, as they indoctrinate us into a worldview that claims animals are resources for us to eat, wear, experiment on, or be entertained by. And thus it is most disturbing to see hordes of school children frolicking at zoos, and one must wonder how this "fun" is poisoning their sensibilities toward the

natural world and exacerbating an ecological crisis. More than 120 million people visit zoos every year in the United States, so the messages zoos give out are of considerable importance.

The Myths of Conservation

"Unfortunately, the vast majority of zoos have confused their original purposes and have placed recreation and commercial success above the more pressing needs of conservation and education." Debra Jordan

Today's new and improved zoo does all it can to sever its ties from its sordid legacy, as it seeks new legitimation in kinder and gentler guise. In the last few decades, the zoo industry shifted from a focus on entertainment to education, research, and conservation. Today's zoospeak is rife with euphemisms: captivity becomes "preservation"; entertainment is "education," and the institution itself is christened a "conservation park." Since zoos are first and foremost businesses, they still have to be entertainment-oriented, and all too often the profit imperative of the ticket office supersedes the moral imperative of humane treatment of animals.

The most plausible defense zoos have at their disposal in a time of species extinction, habitat loss, and ecological crisis is that they serve conservation purposes. In 1981, the AZA created the Species Survival Plan program (SSP), designed to help prevent animal extinction and to educate the public about conservation needs. Through its managed breeding programs, the SSP boasts successfully preserving and reintroducing into the wild numerous species such as black-footed ferrets, condors, and red wolves.

But zoo conservationist credentials are highly dubious and they play a minimal role in saving species from extinction. The species zoos favor for "conservation" tend to be of the cute and cuddly variety (what the AZA calls "flagship species which arouse strong feelings in the public") that do more to attract visitors than abate an extinction crisis. Only 2% of

endangered species are part of zoo breeding programs, and few zoos are registered for captive breeding and wildlife preservation. Often it is not zoos themselves that do the breeding but remote breeding facilities, so why give zoos conservation credit? Zoos have poor records of conservation and reintroducing animals to natural habitat (as in the case of the Mexican Grey Wolf). Often, the animals are too accustomed to human care and flounder on their own. Breeding herds typically are too small, and inbreeding is a problem that leads to unhealthy animals and a diminished gene pool. Further, zoos are not actively involved in habitat preservation. Zoos therefore beg the question of what the point of preservation is if there is no habitat to which animals can be returned. As an example of false advertising by the SSP, the El Paso Zoo has two female Asian elephants that are part of an SSP program, but neither can breed.

As exposed in a 1999 San Jose Mercury News investigation and meticulously documented in Alan Green's shocking book *Animal Underground: Black Market for Rare and Exotic Species*, the dirty little secret of zoos is that they breed a surplus of many species, and these animals become offloaded into a vast underground multibillion-dollar-a-year market which attracts buyers through resources such as *The Animal Finders Guide*. Zoos are an integral part of a labyrinthine, shady world that includes dealers, hunters, menageries, roadside attractions, fur farms, pet stores, circuses, vivisection, and slaughterhouses. Zoos often obtain breeding animals from sleazy dealers and breeders. When "cute" zoo animals grow up and have lost their initial attraction, and zoos need to make room for more cuddliness, the animals are sent back to the underworld where they end up as fodder for canned hunts, experimental laboratories, or even meat for human consumption. As Green establishes, AZA policy prohibits this kind of market but in practice they tolerate it, and even breed animals specifically for hunters, with whom zoo board members often have cozy relationships. Some of the world's most highly regarded zoos, such as the San Diego Zoo and the San Diego Wild Animal Park, have been among the greatest offenders, cited for reselling thousands of rare and endangered species between 1992 and 1998.

If zoos were successful in saving species from extinction, we would expect the numbers to improve, but they are rising dramatically. A recent poll conducted by the American

Museum of Natural History revealed that seven out of ten biologists believe the world is currently in the midst of the fastest mass extinction of species in the entire history of the planet, and unlike past mass extinctions, this one is not precipitated by natural causes but rather is entirely human-made.

Clearly, zoos are not the answer to the problem of regenerating biodiversity. They are not "modern arks," as zookeepers like to think of them, they are much closer to plain-old capitalist markets.

Fade to Black

"We are facing a truly formidable threat not only to the health of the planet but also to humanity's own well-being and survival -- a threat that is virtually unrecognized by the public at large." Ellen V. Futter, President of the Museum of Natural History

Tragically, there is not much habitat left to which animals can be returned. We are in the midst of rapid species extinction and habitat loss. Due to insane spasms of greed and violence, animals are being hunted and poached as humans move deeper into their territories. "Evolution" -- which advances through speciation and the fecund creation of biodiversity -- has ground to a halt and is reversing direction toward homogenization and simplification of life forms. Add to this global warming and the thinning of the ozone layer, and it is easy to see the earth is in the biggest crisis state since its emergence some 4.6 billion years ago. Some conservation biologists estimate that within a few decades up to a third of existing species will be wiped out.

Zoos exploit this crisis to justify the need for their existence. Yet the alternative is not between zoos and mass extinction, but rather sanctuaries and preservation of habitat. Places like the Elephant Sanctuary in Hohenwald, Tennessee; the Shambala Preserve in Acton, California; or the PAWS sanctuary in Lynwood Washington; provide the best opportunities for animals. Even the best zoos are but a band-aid approach to the symptoms of a profound problem, the roots of which lie in the rapid destruction of habitat and ecosystems. Unlike zoos, bona fide sanctuaries are

compatible with the complex physical, psychological, and social needs of animals. So if we need to conserve animals in artificial spaces, we certainly can do better than the standard zoo environments. But sanctuaries too are only an ad hoc, stopgap measure to slow, but not stop, mass extinction.

Frozen zoos now exist that preserve animal DNA in liquid nitrogen, in order to be cloned later when habitats can support them. Animals cannot survive without vast areas of wilderness connected by ecological corridors. The return of habitats, however, is a risky hedge. Technoanimals created through captive breeding, in vitro fertilization, and cloning and who live in artificial settings in effect become zoo animals that may look like the real thing, but do not have natural behaviors, no more than would "humans" cloned in isolated prison compounds would act like "human beings."

One can have deep reservations about the viability of trying to preserve life at this stage, and, in effect, some animals still alive are already extinct. If their original habitat is bulldozed into oblivion, the animals exist in confinement as mere simulacra of themselves. As Jamieson argues, "Is it really better to confine a few hapless Mountain Gorillas in a zoo than to permit the species to become extinct? æ In doing this, aren't we using animals as mere vehicles for their genes? Aren't we preserving genetic material at the expense of the animals themselves? If it is true that we are inevitably moving towards a world in which Mountain Gorillas can survive only in zoos, then we must ask whether it is really better for them to live in artificial environments of our design than not to be born at all." Too many animals are in the process of becoming akin to a human being still alive, but only through the aid of a respirator.

To turn this crisis situation around, human beings have to make radical changes on numerous fronts. First and foremost, we have to dramatically reduce the world's population. We must remove ourselves ever farther from wilderness as we restore habitat and populate ecosystems with indigenous species. We must quench insatiable consumer appetites and return to simpler modes of living. Human beings need to shift from a meat-based to a plant-based diet to conserve land, resources, and energy. We must create an Endangered Species Act with ferocious teeth in it that protect animals instead of the corporations invading their habitat. We must

deal with poachers in draconian terms and shut down all markets for trade in animal products.

It is without question the case that human beings have created a problem only they themselves can solve, and we must harness the same amount of creative energy as we have amassed destructive energy for millennia. As we hopefully begin to make needed changes on a global scale, human beings must for now become stewards of the planet, as they bear the burden of repairing evolution. That means we must actively nurse the earth and its precious biodiversity back to health, and create aggressive breeding and reintroduction programs.

From virtual reality and mass media, to artificial intelligence, robotics, genetic engineering, and the gradual transformation of human beings into cyborgs, everything once wild and without technological mediation is disappearing. The natural world is becoming transformed, redesigned, and merged into technological systems. While we need not yearn for the days of hunters and gatherers, nor see the move toward a technoworld as bad in every sense, it is nonetheless the case that species are vanishing off the face of the earth at an alarming rate and the forms in which they survive could be mere fragments and simulacra.