

Ontario Zoo Review Series - #6

Northwood Zoo and Animal Sanctuary



August 2008



Zoocheck Canada Inc.
788 ½ O'Connor Drive
Toronto, Ontario, M4B 2S6
www.zoocheck.com

ZOOCHECK CANADA INC.

Zoocheck Canada is a national animal protection charity (#13150 2072 RR 0001) established in 1984 to promote and protect the interests and wellbeing of wild animals.

Policy

Zoocheck objects in principle to the keeping, confinement, use, exhibition and performance of wild animals in captivity as captivity is not in the best interests of those animals¹. Nor does the exhibition of live wildlife provide a positive educational experience for the general public. Wild animals removed from their natural environment and ecological context bear little or no meaningful resemblance to their counterparts in the wild.

Nonetheless, animals are kept in zoos and similar captive situations at present and for these animals, improvements in the conditions to which they are subjected are urgently needed. Zoocheck believes the onus must be on the owners/operators of facilities who choose to keep these animals captive, to provide for them the best possible care in the circumstances.

The Investigation

This report provides an overview of the Northwood Zoo and Animal Sanctuary in Seagrave, Ontario on August 24, 2008. It is the third in a series of investigative reports aimed at providing a snapshot image of the current status of captive wild animals in Ontario.

Investigator Profile

In 1978 Else Poulsen received her BSc. in Biology from Brock University and in 1995 her 4 year Diploma in Zookeeping from the City of Calgary Apprenticeship Programs. She has dealt with variety of animal species, in her work as a field biologist in Alberta's energy industry, as a zookeeper at the Calgary Zoo, and as a bear specialist in several other facilities.

She has provided expert assistance and advice about modernizing bear husbandry methods, environmental enrichment programming and enclosure design issues to zoos, sanctuaries and animal welfare groups around the world.

Poulsen has more than 40 papers and articles to her name in scientific research and technical journals, textbooks and other publications. She consults as an animal behavior and captive environment trouble-shooter. She has also lectured on modern bear care and animal welfare issues to audiences as diverse as university students studying population genetics to First Nations Band Council members in northern Canada.

¹ In limited circumstances, exclusively for the purpose of benefiting the individual animal or species, Zoocheck Canada supports the keeping of wild animals in captivity as part of a legitimate rehabilitation and release program, or for non-releasable animals that have been retired or rescued, or that are part of a legitimate captive propagation initiative, provided the animal's physical, psychological and social needs are addressed as the primary concern.

THE SITUATION IN ONTARIO

There are currently few rules governing the operation of zoos and other kinds of captive wildlife displays in Ontario. This lack of regulation has resulted in a proliferation of zoos and zoo-type exhibits in the province. Ontario has more of these facilities than any other province, including many of the worst in Canada

Unlike many other jurisdictions, in Ontario, non-indigenous exotic wildlife species are not regulated. Virtually anyone can acquire exotic wild animals, house them in conditions of their choosing and then open up for public viewing. There are no laws or regulations requiring the owners or operators of zoos to have expertise or experience in wild animal care, the financial resources to properly operate their facility or an ability to conduct their business in a humane and safe manner.

"Specially protected and game wildlife," defined as native wildlife listed in the *Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act*, can only be kept and displayed if a license to do so has been obtained from the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR). Three general animal welfare conditions are attached to all licenses, but they are not specific and are open to interpretation, so enforcement is problematic.

Ontario's lack of zoo licensing and comprehensive wildlife in captivity standards has resulted in a large number of zoos and wildlife menageries operating at a standard of their own choosing. There is nothing in place that specifically addresses the many issues associated with the capture, breeding, keeping and display of wild animals in zoos and zoo-type exhibits.

The unfettered proliferation of wild animal displays in Ontario has been recognized as a problem for approximately 30 years. Numerous measures to deal with this issue have been initiated, but none have been fully supported by government, so the captive wildlife industry remains essentially unmonitored and uncontrolled to this day.

The Government of Ontario has the ability to create a regulatory regime for all wildlife in captivity that is consistent with other jurisdictions, comprehensive, fair to license holders and respectful of the many individual animals whose lives are directly affected by it. In addition to numerous workable and adaptable models being available in other jurisdictions, in 2001, the MNR published its own set of standards for zoos.

Comprehensive Licensing and Regulation is Required

The Ontario government should implement and administer a comprehensive zoo and wildlife in captivity regulatory program that requires anyone holding native and/or exotic wild animals in captivity to obtain a license and to satisfy a series of conditions as to their knowledge, experience, financial abilities, wild animal housing and management practices, safety procedures and other relevant issues. Licenses should be issued annually and only after an inspection of the premises to be licensed is conducted. The regulatory program should include the ability to conduct special inspections, penalties for non-compliance and provisions for license revocation.

Bill 50, An Act to amend the Ontario Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act

In 2008, the Ontario government introduced *Bill 50, An Act to amend the Ontario Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act*. During the buildup to the introduction of the Act, government officials and elected representatives said the Act would deal with a variety of animal welfare issues, including roadside zoos.

Bill 50 would:

- Make it a provincial offence to abuse any animal. Ontario is the only province where it is not an offence to abuse most animals. It is only an offence to abuse cats and dogs in commercial breeding operations.
- Establish penalties including a lifetime ban on owning animals.

- Allow the Ontario SPCA to inspect roadside zoos and other facilities that keep animals. Currently, anyone can refuse to show the Ontario SPCA their animals.
- Establish animal care standards and make failing to comply with these an offence.

While Bill 50 contains a number of very positive features and will significantly improve the existing Ontario SPCA Act, it will not address most of the problems that have been identified in zoos and zoo-type exhibits across the province.

Even though the Ontario government has repeatedly indicated its intent to deal with wildlife in captivity issues through Bill 50, there are currently no standards or regulations being proposed at this time. If standards of some kind are developed in future, they will not contain up front licensing of zoos and zoo-type exhibits that screen persons wanting to own wild animals or open public displays. Standards promulgated under Bill 50 will be enforced retroactively after animals have been acquired or a zoo or wildlife display opened.

If, as the Government of Ontario has stated, Ontario is to move from "worst to first" in animal protection, then Bill 50 must include comprehensive regulations for zoos. With the weakest zoo regulations in the country, Ontario is the only province that does not require zoos and zoo-type facilities to meet specific public safety requirements and does not require residents to obtain a license to keep exotic wild animals.

The lack of appropriate laws and regulations, and the difficulties inherent in enforcing the existing relatively minor welfare provisions attached to licenses issued under the *Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act*, mean that Ontario's zoos and wildlife exhibits go more or less unchecked. This has left a need for independent animal welfare agencies, such as Zoocheck Canada and the World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA), to proactively and comprehensively monitor and evaluate these facilities for concerns of human health and safety and animal welfare.

COMMENTARY – Northwood Zoo and Animal Sanctuary

General

The Northwood Zoo and Animal Sanctuary (changed from its previous name of Northwood Buffalo and Exotic Animal Ranch) describes itself as “a non-profit sanctuary,” but they appear to be neither non-profit or a sanctuary.

The facility advertises trained animals for “film, still photography, parties, television, community and corporate events, commercials, and business gatherings” on its website. As well, a red vehicle advertising “Predator Productions” was observed on the property during my visit. The telephone number on the side of the vehicle was the home number for Tony Vanzuilekom, Northwood’s head zookeeper.

The generally accepted definition of a sanctuary is a facility where animals, usually rescued from poor conditions, live out their lives in natural environments and appropriate social groupings, and they are not typically on public display, except under very controlled circumstances. As well, they are not bred, trained to perform or used in commercial activities.

On the Northwood website, it states, “If your production calls for something [animals] we don’t have, we will find it – [through their] extensive lists of contacts with our professional animal sources – providing our clients with any animal they need.” This clearly is not in line with normal sanctuary operations.

The website also states, “Northwood is a Non-Profit Sanctuary Dedicated to providing a clean, safe and loving environment to over 100 exotic animal species. Including Tigers, Lions, Primates, Bears, Wolves, Buffalo, Eagles, Owls and other wonderful creatures... Here they are provided the care and respect they deserve so that they may live out their lives with dignity. We have a responsibility to provide for them the best life possible. Hopefully, despite some of their respective backgrounds, they can learn to trust people again.”

Despite the Northwood Zoo and Animal Sanctuary proclaiming itself to be both a zoo and a sanctuary, it seems clear the facility is primarily a commercial operation.

Animal Husbandry and Welfare

The facility is situated in a predominantly agricultural area of open fields. Most of the large enclosures, including those containing bison, brown bears, tigers, and lions, have no trees or significant shade areas. Several enclosures, including those confining wolves and cougars, are reminiscent of large, outdoor, kennel-type runs.

The birds of prey are housed in corncrib-style cages, while the majority of the primates live in a row of old-style rectangular cages attached to a building structure that provides them with some interior shelter. Other cage structures housing midsize cats are generally square or rectangular in shape. These are simplistic in design and not constructed with the species-specific needs of the animals in mind.

All enclosures that I observed have earth substrates, except for the Snow and Amur leopards, that were in barred cages with cement floors elevated above ground level.

All cages and enclosures were relatively barren and lacked species-specific enrichment, sufficient appropriate furnishings or privacy areas that allowed the animals to retreat from public view or the view of conspecifics. Most enclosures had small den structures that appeared in some cases to be insufficient to contain the number of animals in the exhibit. For example, a male and female Kodiak bear pair live in an open enclosure with a small pond. The female showed clear signs of being fearful of the male bear and kept her distance from him during feeding, waiting to catch her “airborne” food (being thrown in by the zookeeper) after the male got his and walked away from the feeding site. After feeding the female stayed on the opposite side of the pond from the

male. The female bear waved her paw at the zookeeper to get her food; it appeared as though she had been trained to perform this trick.

After the feeding, the zookeeper stayed to answer questions. He said:

- They do not clean up in the enclosures as they believe in the “natural” way of “self cleaning enclosures” [decomposition] indicating that they have earth substrates.

Since animal territories in the wild are much larger than zoo enclosures, the animals do not typically contact their own waste. In zoo enclosures, which are orders of magnitude smaller than home ranges in the wild, animals do contact their own waste. Therefore, feces should be cleaned out periodically. This does not seem to be the case at Northwoods.

- Animals are fed once a day in single-piled feedings or their food is thrown over the barrier. The zoo keeper told the crowd that the brown bears are not fed everyday and to “accommodate” denning they withdraw food on Dec 1st and do not feed them again until the end of March.

Modern facilities accommodate denning by gradually reducing the quantity of food to stimulate or coincide with the natural tendency of the bears to lose their appetites as winter approaches. A sudden stoppage of feeding at an arbitrary point is an outdated husbandry method.

The brown bears are fed together during a public program where the zookeeper throws meat over the fence. The bears fight for position and are clearly stressed, anxious and in direct competition for food.

While observing this feeding one bear bit another in the left rear flank. I saw a substantial raw, red, superficial wound on the second bear after the feeding, but I was unable to photograph it. The zookeeper was there but did not seem to notice the attack.

According to gift store staff, animals are bred and some are removed from their mothers to be hand-raised and then trained for Predator Productions. They indicated that the three tiger cubs that visitors are able to play with through the fence were removed for that purpose.

There are a minimum of 12 lions in various enclosures, housed in various groupings or singly. One group is a “pride” consisting of one male, two adult females (mother and daughter), and three cubs. Gift shop staff said their breeding was accidental. Lions are social animals that should be kept in a natural social context. Since they are already in a surplus situation in captivity, they should not be allowed to breed.

Several primate species, including vervet monkeys, lion-tailed macaques, Celebes crested macaques, and white-handed gibbons, were housed in rudimentary, relatively barren cages with minimal perching, where I observed them sitting or lying. Some were inappropriately housed alone, while others were in pairs or small groups.

Northwoods also houses wildlife species native to Ontario, including an American black bear, cougar, bobcat, lynx, fox and wolves. They are licensed by the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (OMNR) as a zoo. The OMNR should require this facility to improve the level of stimulation provided to these animals, particularly through various modes of environmental enrichment.

In general, the animals had nothing to do, so they did nothing except recline and stare out of their cages. I did observe several animals pacing and many of the enclosures had grooved, well worn pacing paths along their interior fence lines. This is typically a sign of animals that are bored and/or frustrated.

Northwoods also advertises its role in the European Snow leopard and Amur leopard SSP (Species Survival Plan). The SSP however is an American-based program, while endangered species breeding programs in Europe are known as EEPs. Regardless, the keeping of single individuals in old-style, raised, cement floored cages that

are devoid of appropriate structural enhancements, furnishings, enrichment, bedding and privacy does nothing to contribute to conservation.

Animal and Human Safety

The gauge of wire used in the fencing for several large carnivores and bison appears inappropriately light. For example, one tiger is confined behind what appears to be a standard chain-link fence with significant gaps under the entry gate. Most zoos recognize that heavier gauge mesh is best for large, potentially dangerous animals.

Some of the primary barriers are not nearly high enough. For example, the brown bear fence is only about 2.4m (8 ft) high and is not equipped with an inwardly angled upper segment to discourage climbing. Hot-wires seem to be the primary method for containing the bears, but they are not usually recommended as primary barriers for these animals. The lion, tiger and wolf enclosure fences were also extremely low. I expect that if properly motivated the animals could climb or jump out.

I was unable to determine whether there was any buried fencing in the cat and bear enclosures to prevent digging underneath the barrier. I did not observe any.

The brown bears were fed by the zoo keeper throwing food items over the fence causing stress and conspecific aggression.

One cougar enclosure had a square opening in the gate (presumably so the zookeeper can feed the animal) that was covered with only a rubber flap. This is potentially dangerous to the zookeeper as the cat can paw at the keeper through the opening. In one cougar enclosure, the cat had begun to dig under the fence.

I did not observe any double-door entry gates into animal areas that allow an outer door to be closed, prior to opening the door into the actual animal living area.

The emu pen has a roll of fencing in the yard with a number of metal ends sticking out, a potential hazard to the birds.

Zoo visitors are able to reach into numerous cages and enclosures and potentially contact animals. This is both physically dangerous and, as there do not appear to be any hand-wash stations, there is the potential for disease transfer from animals to humans.

Public Education

Signs throughout the zoo provide basic information about many of the animals. While it is not consistent, some signs also contain information about conservation issues as well.

Summary

Northwood Zoo and Animal Sanctuary could greatly improve the wellbeing of the animals through a zoo wide enrichment program involving the introduction of furnishings, objects and various animal management changes, including modifying their inadequate feeding routines.

There are also numerous physical improvements that can be made to the animal living conditions, including tilling all hardpan surfaces, providing soft substrate areas for the leopards, phasing out the antiquated caging, increasing the number of shelter and privacy areas and increasing the amount of space available to the animals.

In addition, if Northwoods truly wishes to be an animal sanctuary, they must stop breeding animals and removing them to be hand-raised and trained for commercial use.



This relatively barren brown bear enclosure has a very low primary barrier and no substantive shade or privacy areas.



This barrier fence is very light gauge for housing brown bears.



The primary barrier fence in this tiger enclosure is far too low.



This corncrib-style bald eagle cage is an inappropriate design, poorly equipped and provides no stimulation for the birds.



This fence on this wolf enclosure is low and not equipped with an overhang at the top.



This snow leopard exhibit is simplistic, poorly equipped and outdated in design.



This leopard's living space is Spartan leaving the cat with very little to do.



This lion enclosure is flat, overly simplistic and surrounded by a very low fence.



This cage housed three infant tiger cubs. Tigers are already overabundant in captivity and should not be bred.



This lion cage is poorly designed and lacks any meaningful enrichment.

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

This series of investigative reports highlight animal welfare and human safety concerns in zoos and wildlife displays across the province.

Key problems identified in Ontario zoos in 2008 include:

1. Poor animal health and welfare;
2. Undersized, badly constructed, poorly designed cages and enclosures;
3. Inappropriate substrates (floor surfaces);
4. Lack of adequate shelter and privacy;
5. Lack of stimulation (e.g., furniture, objects, other enrichment);
6. Lack of nutritive food and potable water;
7. Inadequate safety and security measures.

Many of these problems have been identified in previous reports by various parties in past years.

Recommendation

Bill 50, An Act to amend the Ontario Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act is currently being considered by the Government of Ontario. It contains a number of very positive features and will significantly improve the existing Ontario SPCA Act. However, there are currently no standards or regulations being proposed at this time within Bill 50 or in any other provincial legislation that will properly address issues associated with the keeping of wildlife in captivity. Ontario has the ability to create a regulatory regime within Bill 50 and in other legislation that is both comprehensive and workable but, so far, has chosen not to do so.

In order to properly handle the various animal welfare and human safety concerns inherent in the operation of zoos and wildlife displays, a comprehensive regulatory regime is required. Regulations must require anyone holding native and/or exotic wild animals in captivity to obtain a license and to satisfy a series of conditions as to their knowledge, experience, financial abilities, wild animal housing and management practices, safety procedures and other relevant issues. Annual licenses should only be issued after an inspection of the premises that is to be licensed is conducted. The regulatory program should include the ability to conduct special inspections, penalties for non-compliance and provisions for license revocation.

If, as the Government of Ontario has stated, Ontario's animal protection laws are to be brought from "worst to first," then *Bill 50, An Act to amend the Ontario Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act* must include comprehensive zoo regulations that adequately and proactively address animal welfare and human safety concerns in Ontario zoos and wildlife displays.