

A Review of Discovery Wildlife Park



**Based on the
Alberta Zoo Standards**

WSPA
World Society for the Protection of Animals



Introduction

Zoocheck Canada is a national animal welfare charity established in 1984 to promote the interests of wildlife in captivity and in the wild. For the past twenty years, Zoocheck has carried out assessments of captive wildlife husbandry and housing conditions in a wide range of facilities; evaluated and addressed public safety and security issues related to wildlife in captivity; and evaluated the effectiveness of live animal-based education and conservation programming.

The World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA) is an animal welfare charity that works internationally and locally to end cruelty to animals through field work, campaigning, and education. WSPA is the world's largest federation of humane societies and animal protection organizations, representing over 802 member societies in more than 147 countries.

Zoocheck and WSPA have been monitoring the conditions in zoos across Canada for many years. Discovery Wildlife Park (formerly known as Doug's Zoo) near Innisfail, Alberta has been a concern to both organizations for several years due to its substandard animal husbandry conditions and safety practices. Zoocheck and WSPA have documented many of these concerns in a variety of reports and papers. In response to concerns about roadside zoos in Alberta, both groups worked diligently to assist the province to develop standards to deal with the problems at the substandard facilities in the province.

In 2005, the Alberta government finalized standards for zoos in Alberta with a stated purpose "to ensure that facilities requiring an Alberta Zoo Permit meet acceptable standards that provide: a suitable environment for the animal collections and visitors; an environment that emphasizes education; where off-site display occur, there is minimum risk to surrounding free-ranging wildlife, domestic animals and people, and in some cases provide an opportunity for scientific research and animal propagation to support wildlife conservation programs."

The Alberta Government announced the new zoo standards in October 2005. The standards came into effect on April 1st 2006 and zoos were given until October 2006 to comply. Now, more than one year after the standards were introduced, Zoocheck and WSPA have conducted an inspection of Discovery Wildlife Park (DWP) to assess their compliance with these new regulatory requirements. This report is a summary of violations that we observed during a visit to the zoo on July 10, 2007. Photographs have been included showing many of the violations.

Zoocheck and WSPA have produced this report to highlight the ongoing and unresolved problems at Discovery Wildlife Park. The Government of Alberta should, in the interests of both animal welfare and public safety, move to enforce the Alberta zoo standards to the full extent of the law. If this facility is unable to come into compliance with provincial law after all this time, it may be time to revoke the zoo license and relocate the animals.

Animal Care and Confinement

The stated purpose of the animal exhibit standards is “to ensure the exhibits meet the needs of the animals that will occupy them” and yet the animals at Discovery Wildlife Park continue to live in impoverished enclosures and some without the most basic necessities such as fresh and appropriate food and potable water.

Food & Water: Section III. E. General Animal Care Standards states that “Animals must be provided with nutritious food as set out in the veterinary written agreement and a potable water source must be available to all animals at all times.” And “Feeding and watering containers must be kept clean and self-feeders and watering devices must be checked daily.”

Since the Alberta government chose not to provide us with a copy of DWP’s development plan, which would include the veterinary written agreement, which outlines the recommended diet for the animals, compliance with the diet section of the standards cannot be determined. However, “rotting” carcasses of small rodents and birds were scattered around the badger enclosure.

Cleanliness of cages: Section III. E. General Animal Care Standards states that “Buildings and substrates to which animals have access must be kept clean as follows:

- Washable surfaces must be washed clean and disinfected regularly to prevent potentially dangerous accumulations of organic and inorganic materials and organisms.
- Substrates which cannot be washed must be cleaned of gross waste (e.g., perishable food and animal waste) on a daily basis (enclosures smaller than 0.5 acres) and less frequently for larger enclosures. The animal care protocol may indicate longer cleaning intervals for some species to reduce psychological stress. To facilitate cleaning all areas of the enclosures must be accessible to keepers.
- Substrates such as loose bedding material must be changed if soiled with feces and urine and any bedding provided must be kept dry and changed on a regular basis.”

The Grizzly bear enclosure contains a hand dug pool without recirculation systems or the ability to empty and refill the pools easily. As a result, the water in the pool is filthy and may be a source of bacteria that would pose a health risk to the bears and possibly the public if there is any overflow from excessive rainfall or snow melting in the spring.



The water in this pond in the grizzly bear enclosure is filthy

Overcrowding and enclosure size: Section III. B. 1. General Exhibit Standards states that “Exhibit enclosures must be of a sufficient size to provide for the physical well being of the animal. All animal exhibits must be of a size and complexity sufficient to provide for the animal’s physical and social needs and species typical behaviours and movements.” And that “Enclosures must be of a sufficient size and design to allow individual animals the opportunity to avoid or withdraw from contact with other animals in the enclosure or remove themselves from the view of visitors using topography (e.g. large earth mounds, large rocks), fixed features (e.g. fences, walls screening, shelter boxes), moveable fixtures (e.g. brush piles, root balls) or other design methods.”

A number of DWP’s enclosures are poorly designed, undersized and do not allow the animals to express a full range of their natural movements and behaviours. For example:

- The staff indicated that the lion, leopard and tigers are locked into the back areas when the facility is not open, meaning the cats spend 12-16 hours per day in dark sub-standard areas which are not large enough to allow the animals to exercise or bathe. In addition there very little light and poor ventilation in these areas.
- The badger, raccoon and porcupine enclosures are too small to accommodate running, climbing or walking any distance.



This dark, barren room is where the large cats are housed when the zoo is closed.

In addition, a number of animals do not have adequate privacy opportunities including the tiger, black bears, leopards, lions and the grizzly bears. The only way these animals can have privacy is to enter their sleeping boxes or off exhibit, “winter” holding area. In some cases this is not even an option because the animals are locked out during the hours the facility is open to the public.

Breeding: Section II. A. Animal Collection Management Standards states that “Breeding of animals in the zoo facility may take place if it is approved as part of

the Zoo Development Plan. If not approved, breeding must be prevented through drug therapy, appropriate management (i.e. opposite sexes kept in separate enclosures) or sterilization.”

Information provided by the Alberta government through a Freedom of Information request did not include any documentation regarding which species of animals the owner is permitted to breed, so we were unable to determine compliance with this section of the standards. However, infant macaques were observed at the zoo. While having infants in the group helps to form an appropriate social group, there are concerns about the group becoming too large for the enclosure and about what will happen to the surplus animals given that these animals are plentiful in zoos and the exotic pet trade. In addition, there were young elk, deer, caribou and wolf pups.

Shelter from the elements: Section III. B. 1. General Exhibit Standards states that “Animals must be protected from injurious heat and cold associated with ambient outdoor conditions or any other weather conditions that are detrimental to their health.”

A number of enclosures do not have adequate shelter to protect all animals, at the same time if necessary, from heat, cold, sun, rain, wind and snow. These include the elk, caribou, white-tailed deer, camels, Japanese macaques, leopards and ostrich enclosures.



In captivity, all animals should be provided with shelter and shade opportunities.

Enrichment for animals: Section III. D. Animal Behaviour Husbandry Standards states that “The purpose of these standards is to facilitate development of animal enrichment that improves the psychological well being of the animals. Enrichment consists of a range of measures, including fixed exhibit features, non-fixed features and novel objects that attempt to provide a more stimulating environment for the animals.” And that “there must be a written document outlining an enrichment program for each species, species group or species assemblage (if appropriate) at the exhibit level that may include fixed features, non-fixed features and how food is made available.”

The Alberta government chose not to provide Zoocheck with a copy of DWP’s enrichment plan through the Freedom of Information process, so compliance with the plan cannot be determined.

Lack of enrichment for animals at DWP continues to be an ongoing problem. The following enclosures did not have adequate enrichment, such as furnishings and browsing opportunities, to keep the animals physically and psychologically engaged and active: tigers, black bear, ungulates, badger and porcupine.



This tiger enclosure provides no enrichment to encourage natural behaviours



This black bear enclosure is devoid of enrichment with often results in bears becoming bored and developing abnormal behaviour

Poorly equipped, relatively barren enclosures do not encourage species typical movements and behaviours. Many animals appear lethargic, possibly because they have nothing to do.

Safety risks to animals: Section III. D. Animal Behaviour Husbandry Standards states that “The zoo operator must ensure that any new materials introduced in an enclosure are not toxic to the enclosed species.”

This unmarked felid enclosure (appeared to be a bobcat) contained a plastic bag next to the shelter.



Public feeding: Section III. B. 1. General Exhibit Standards states that “Feeding of animals by visitors must not be allowed except in specific circumstances where food prepared by the zoo is provided to the public and amounts are carefully controlled.”

There is animal food available for purchase at the shop near the entrance to the zoo marked “monkey feed”. Zoo visitors were observed feeding raccoons and primates without supervision of zoo staff.



Containment

The stated purpose for containment standards is “to prevent direct contact between zoo animals and free-ranging wildlife, domestic animals, and visitors to the zoo facility; to prevent escape from the zoo facility; to prevent the transmission of disease and/or parasites, and; to prevent interbreeding (genetic contamination) between zoo animals and free-ranging wildlife.”

Perimeter fence: Section II. D., Wildlife and Controlled Animal Containment Standards states that “A perimeter fence (equivalent to chain link fence) a minimum of 2.5 meters high all around all the animal enclosures will be required, unless the species held in the zoo facility already have a fully contained perimeter (e.g. amphibians and reptiles in cages within a building) or have an alternate system as identified and approved in the Zoo Development Plan.”

As stated previously, the Alberta government chose not to release the majority of DWP’s development plan through the Freedom of Information process, so we are unaware of any specialized agreement regarding an alternate perimeter containment system. AT DWP, the perimeter fence does not to all around the entrance to the zoo from the parking lot. In addition, the back gate forms part of the perimeter fence and is left open and unsupervised.

Gates in perimeter fence: Section II. D., Wildlife and Controlled Animal Containment Standards states that “Individual animal enclosures and the perimeter fencing must be locked when the zoo facility is closed and staff are not present. When the zoo facility is open to the public, the perimeter fence may be unlocked; however, individual animal enclosures must remain locked except when staff are present and working with or displaying the animals.”

While the regulations allow for the gates to be unlocked during the hours when the zoo facility is open, they do not permit gates to be left wide open. Professionally operated zoos ensure that their public entry gates are set up so that if an animal escapes while on the zoo property they still act as a secondary barrier to contain the animal.

This photo shows the open gate at the back of the zoo which is part of the perimeter fence. If an animal were to escape, there does not appear to be any immediate way for the zoo staff to close the gates and focus on recapturing the animal.





There is no perimeter fence at the entrance to the zoo near the parking lot

The slide door to the indoor portion of this leopard enclosure is unlocked. These cats could easily lift the slide door enough to escape through the open door.



Fencing for animals that dig: Section II. D. Wildlife and Controlled Animal Containment Standards states that “Animals that can dig must have adequate flooring or material buried under the ground at the enclosure perimeter to prevent them from digging out of their enclosure or shelter.

A number of enclosures housing species of animals that dig do not appear to have buried fencing to keep the animals from digging their way out of their cages. These include the leopard, black & grizzly bear, tiger and lion enclosures.



This is a hole in the ground at the fenceline in the grizzly bear enclosure where the bear appears to have been attempting to dig under the fence.

Fence strength: Section III. B. 1. General Exhibit Standards states that “Fencing must be of a design and strength suitable for the particular species and

must be attached to posts firmly fixed into the ground in a manner that prevents animals from detaching the material or dislodging the posts.”



At DWP, a number of animal enclosure barriers are constructed of materials lacking the strength and/or design to properly contain the animals, should they be sufficiently motivated to escape. These include the lion and tiger enclosures which are made from chain-link fence with hotwire. In addition, this grizzly bear enclosure is made from fencing normally used to contain ungulates.

Enclosures for animals that climb or jump: Section III. B. 1. General Exhibit Standards states that “Dangerous animals that can climb or jump must be kept in completely fenced or walled enclosures with roofs, or in enclosures with fences or walls of the type and construction which prevents animals from jumping over or climbing up and over the top of the fences or walls, or enclosures surrounded by suitable dry moats or wet moats of adequate depth having sufficiently high outer-edge walls or fences above the water surfaces. These moats must be surrounded by fences, walls, hedges or other shrubbery sufficient to prevent visitor approaching to close to the edges of the moats.”



There is no overhang or roof on this tiger enclosure to keep the cats from jumping out and there is a gap in the fencing above the shelter making it even easier for the animals to escape.

In addition, some of the bears are kept behind hotwire and a short stand-off barrier. If a bear is sufficiently motivated a hotwire is not enough of a deterrent to keep the animal from escaping. Therefore, this is not a safe method of containment.

Public and Staff Safety

Public contact with animals: Section II. H., Public and Staff Safety Standards, states that “Direct contact (i.e. touching) between the public and animals is allowed only when this activity is approved in the Zoo Development Plan. Such contact must occur in a contained area and all applicable Alberta Health regulations must be followed.” And “Animals in areas where direct contact with visitors is possible must pose no danger to the public, be comfortable with human contact and be under direct supervision by zoo staff.”

For many years DWP has had a ‘kiss a grizzly bear’ attraction where visitors can be photographed having their face licked by a grizzly bear, kissing a bear or with a grizzly bear posing in an attack position behind them. While this activity is “supervised” by a zoo staff person, it does pose a significant risk to the public. There are numerous examples of well trained carnivores attacking people despite having been hand-raised and trained. When this photo was taken, there was no kill weapon readily available to staff if something were to go wrong and the zoo staff person supervising this activity would be no match for an attacking grizzly bear.



Zoocheck and WSPA consulted with various experts regarding the safety of this activity and were told the following:

Victor Watkins, one of the world’s leading bear experts and wildlife advisor to WSPA advised that “This is certainly a foolish and irresponsible activity to put the public into such close quarters with a wild animal – no matter how well “trained” the bear appears to be – the animal has wild instincts and can react to evens in an unpredictable way. It is not good enough to say the bear has not done anything to harm people before, as it could do so tomorrow or the next day. I have seen too many bears in captivity react to a certain stimulus by swiping at people or objects which may not have been an aggressive act but could nevertheless cause injury or even death to people. It is also a terribly negative educational message to have wild animals such as bears used in these circus-style acts as it gives the public the wrong impression about the animal. It does enhance a Disney-like image of animals and can create an impression that the animals are cute and cuddly and harmless, which can have a devastating effect if that image is taken into the wild when people try to feel wild bears etc.”

Dr. Steve Herrero of the University of Calgary made the following comment about the “bear kissing” activity at DWP. “No valid education can be achieved through these kinds of displays, they only serve to teach the public a false image that bears are gentle and kissable animal. Bears are very dangerous animals and should always be treated with respect.”

In addition, during the “behind-the-scenes” tour, a zoo staff person offered an opportunity to touch or scratch a Siberian tiger and a woman was walking wolf pups on a leash and allowing children to pet the wolves. There were no hand-washing stations anywhere near these activities.

If these activities are sanctioned activities under the Zoo’s Development Plan, the Alberta government is complicit in placing the public at significant risk of injury or contracting a zoonotic disease.

Standoff barriers: Section II. H., Public and Staff Safety Standards, states that “Effective guardrails or barriers must be constructed to prevent contact between the visiting public and any animals posing a safety hazard.”

There are a number of enclosures at DWP that do not have adequate barriers to keep the public back from the animal enclosures. The enclosures without adequate standoff barriers include the muntjac deer, camel, white-tailed deer, caribou, elk and ostriches.

Double door entry: Section II. H., Public and Staff Safety Standards, states that “Animals must be safely confined. Enclosures with potentially dangerous animals must have double door entry systems or a separate, secure shift area where the animals can be secured during routine maintenance, cleaning or veterinary care.”

A number of enclosures that contain dangerous animals do not have double door entry or shift cages to allow safe cleaning of cages and feeding, etc. These include the tiger, black bear, lion, leopard and grizzly bear enclosures.

Education

Signage: Section II. G., Conservation Education Standards, states that “The purpose of these standards is to promote positive attitudes about wildlife by providing information and knowledge to the public. The standards for education programs for wildlife and controlled animals in a zoo facility are:

- The zoo must have an active educational program as outlined in the Zoo Development Plan and all exhibits must have signs that identify the species and provide information about the status and range in the wild. Educational programs may also include species not present at the zoo facility (e.g. SRD has information covering species at risk). See Appendix C for further information.” Appendix C contains suggestions for the type of information that could be included in education programs.”

This felid enclosure had no signage indicating the species of cat or any educational information about the species. The small sign on the right of



the photos says only “vanishing animal”.

Since the Alberta government chose not to provide DWP’s educational program outline from their Zoo Development Plan through the Freedom of Information process, we are unable to determine compliance. However, it would be highly irresponsible for a government to permit people to “kiss” grizzly bears, if this is permitted within the plan. Given that the Alberta government is currently talking about the need for education about wild grizzly bears in order to protect the species, this activity is particularly irresponsible.

Staff training: Section II. I., Staff Experience and Training Standards, states that “The purpose of these standards is to ensure that the keepers at the zoo, whether the owner, the operator or the staff (including volunteers), have the necessary experience and training to ensure the zoo facility is operated according to the standards in this document and good zoo practice.”

The expectations of zoo staff are presumably outlined in DWP’s Zoo Development Plan, but Zoocheck and WSPA were denied access to them through the Freedom of Information process. Therefore we are unable to determine if the facility is in compliance with these standards.

Our investigator spoke with two zookeepers at DWP during the visit and was told that they do not have any formal training and that during their interview they were told that if the animals respond positively to them when they approach the enclosures they would be hired.

Record Keeping, Transportation and Animal Health: There are specific standards outlined in the Government of Alberta Standards for Zoos in Alberta in each of these areas, but because the Alberta government chose not to release that information through the Freedom of Information process, compliance cannot be determined.

Conclusion and Request for Enforcement of Provincial Legislation

Our review of Discovery Wildlife Park revealed more than 50 individual violations of the Alberta zoo standards. Therefore, Zoocheck and WSPA request that the Government of Alberta to take immediate action to enforce its zoo standards, thereby bringing DWP into compliance with the regulations.