When Zoos are Justified

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Abstract

This paper examines the ethics of zoos and whether the captivity of animals is justified. The treatment of animals and their surroundings are important factors that are discussed. Environment plays a crucial role in the lifestyle and behavior of the animals. Another one of the main issues reviewed is conservation. Many species have become endangered or extinct. Modern zoos have taken on a conservation role in which they house and breed endangered species. Under the right conditions zoos are not only justified, but are also man's duty to the species he has endangered.

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Since the beginning of time man has been fascinated with other living creatures. He has studied, worshipped, and used them for food and entertainment. Zoos have evolved from this fascination and the intellectual ability of man to dominate over other animals. Although most zoos today were founded rather recently, many zoos existed in the past. These however were not like modern zoos and did not have many of the same standards, if any.

In ancient Egypt some animals were considered sacred. It wasn't unusual for pharaohs to keep cats, large and small. Rameses II had a lion that he often kept chained near his tent. Nobles in other countries like Greece, Mesopotamia, and China kept many wild animals as pets. Kings in Europe had parks or menageries where they kept large exotic animals. In times of peace rulers would give exotic animals as gifts. Henry III received a polar bear, whose food London residents had to pay for, that he kept tied to a rope and chain and muzzled. He also received an elephant from Louis IX. Chaining these wild animals up would be characterized as cruelty today. Animals worshipped in the past probably received the best care but many animals had to endure much more than being chained up and muzzled.

Assyrian kings liked to express their power by fighting lions released from cages. The Roman Colosseum is an extreme example of the brutality that occurred in history. Cruelty and exploitation of animals led to rapid decline in many species. This is not surprising because many zoos wanted great diversity. Cortes gave accounts of Montezuma’s palace in Mexico having such extremes as deformed humans and albinos among the collection of wild birds, reptiles, and mammals (Bostock 8-22). Obviously keeping humans in zoos is not an issue today and nor is much of the cruelty that occurred
toward animals in history. Animals, however, do feel pain and share many emotions that people do. The question then arises whether zoos, which have been engineered for human entertainment in the past, are justified in terms of the animal’s welfare.

Those seeking to answer this question must not ignore the benefits that zoos have to offer. Man was and always will be fascinated by other animals. This curiosity is not evil. Zoos attract the public by exploiting this curiosity and desire to see wild strange creatures. They also take advantage of it to provide a learning experience.

Zoos generally have information available close to each animal’s exhibit. They contain basic information about the animal, where it lives in the wild and what its lifestyle is like. There is no doubt that children make up a large portion of the population attracted to zoos. They provide a good source of outside the classroom education. Children can learn from the information provided and through direct observation of the surroundings in the animal’s exhibit and their actual behavior, assuming that the zoo tries to mimic the animal’s natural environment.

Learning is an ongoing process and not too many adults already know all of the information the zoo has to offer. Many adults attend for the learning experience. This is extremely important for conservation. Much of what the public knows about wildlife conservation they learn at zoos. Deforestation and habitat destruction are real issues. In order for people to be concerned and take action they must first be aware of them and respect that they are important. Seeing first hand the beauty of the creature may be enough to spark the respect and concern necessary.

Many people do not know it but by attending the zoo they are contributing to the zoo. Zoos often raise money for wild habitats that need conservational help. Most
engage in some form of conservation within the zoo but the money given as assistance helps maintain other animals in their own environments. Zoos should also be given some credit for keeping people out of wild life’s natural habitat. By bringing the animals to the people, it decreases many of their desires to go see them in their natural environment. Tourists can have a profound detrimental effect on the environment as seen with coral reefs. Without zoos to satisfy the desire of first hand observation, many other habitats would be disrupted by tourists, pollution, and the extinction of even more animals could occur (Bostock 153-154).

Zoos bring wildlife to the public but they do not keep the balance of the creature’s life intact. In many ways introducing the animal to the zoo is disturbing. New animals can be raised captive, either born in the zoo or some other facility, or taken from the wild, many of which are young taken from their mothers. The transport and capture of these animals can be very stressful. Since very little of the animal’s lifetime is spent on transport, the quality of life in the zoo is the main issue.

In the wild, animals are able to choose the environment they live in. Obviously they are not able to chose their lifestyle in a zoo but they should be able to engage in much of the same behavior that they would in the wild. Zoos can have either a naturalistic environment or nonnaturalistic. Naturalistic settings seem like the best environment type because they mimic where the animals live in the wild. They can be expensive, however, easy for the animals to destroy, and may not be as safe. For example, a tree can be used to climb and if near the perimeter of the exhibit the animal could escape. Shrubs and other landscape can be good cover. If the animal chooses it could remain hidden from the public. The public is not attracted to zoo exhibits where
the animals can never be seen. Naturalistic settings must keep the animal’s safety in mind and encourage them to come within the public’s view at times.

Unnatural environments may be unrealistic but they have their benefits. They are often safer and provide stimulating enrichment for bored animals. Each animal’s behavior, time spent eating, sleeping, and socializing in the wild, must be considered before developing its surroundings. Polar bears enjoy toys like traffic cones that float. The ideal zoo environment probably combines both types of surroundings. The animal should be surrounded by the same items it would find in nature but not to the extent that it is dangerous or boring for the individual. Cheetahs spend much of their time in the wild watching for prey. It would be cruel and unrealistic to set live animals loose in their display, so the workers at Glasgow developed a different way of keeping the cats busy. They built a platform that the cheetahs could climb up without escaping and look at the elephant house or cars on the road (Tudge 223-225).

No zoo exhibit can completely match the realistic habitat of wild animals. They must be enclosed to ensure public safety. Wire fences and glass is frequently used. They both provide safe ways for the visitors to easily view the animals but may also make the animals feel trapped and on display. An alternative that is more realistic is a moat. The animals must not be able to swim or drown in it though (Tiger). One way mirrors are expensive but could relieve some of the stress caused by the constant visitors.

Stress is part of life for any creature. Most animals spend a good portion of their day in search of food in the wild. In zoos they are given a certain diet and don’t have to work for it. For many animals this causes boredom that leads to unnecessary stress. One way to keep them entertained is to hide their food. At Glasgow they made scent trails by
dragging the Himalayan bear's meat around on a stick. This provided a hunt in which the bear didn't always get rewarded, similar to their experience in the wild. Jane Goodall discovered that chimpanzees use twigs to search for termites in logs. In a London zoo a plastic fruit filled pipe with holes in it mimicked these logs for the chimps entertainment (Tudge 221-227).

Zoos can provide the enrichment for their animals to lead content lives. The difficult part is determining whether or not they are unhappy. Animals, just like people do express their moods through their behavior. Pacing is often indicative of restlessness. But unless the individual's behavior was tracked in the wild and then compared to that of captivity, which is impossible for the animals that have always been captive, there is no means of comparison for the animals normal behavior. Animals also have their own personalities so it is difficult to label one behavior as abnormal for all individuals. Since we do not speak the same language, humans must rely on the general behavior of captive animals to determine whether its inhabitants have a quality life (Bostock 87-90).

It is not reasonable to expect that captive animals would behave the same as those in the wild. There are so many factors that are different. Not only does the food and surroundings vary but many times the health and condition of the animal does. Limited space leads to crowded conditions favorable for the spread of disease. Captive animals share the same space, water, and food feeders in which disease may be spread. In these cases where several animals share the same area, it may be difficult to determine which of them are sick. Without direct observation it could be impossible to determine which individual displays vomiting, diarrhea, or loss of appetite. Once the sick animal is detected treatment can cause further stress to the individual and group it came from. The
sick individual may need to be isolated for treatment and to prevent further contamination. This imposes stress on both the animal and the social group that its removal disrupted. Exposure to new animals can also introduce strange diseases with detrimental effects on some species. Primates in zoos are exposed to tuberculosis and measles that they usually don’t encounter in the wild. Although there are many health risks associated with zoos they can be minimized by careful monitoring and sanitary conditions (Shepherdson 292-294).

In zoos animals have the potential to be healthier than in the wild. Infection and parasites are a part of life in the wild. Frequently, the individual must live with the discomfort if death is not its fate. A sick or injured individual in the wild soon becomes a dead one due to its incapability to compete (Bostock 66-67). Zoo animals have the luxury of on hand veterinarians that administer antibiotics, vaccinations and other helpful preventative measures and treatments.

Zoos today have found ways to make the animal veterinarian encounter less stressful. Many animals receive positive reinforcement for cooperative behavior (Shepherdson 294). One way that veterinarians can treat large cats is through a squeeze cage. It is a narrow caged area often leading to the animal’s night room. It allows the animal to be vaccinated as it brushes past the bars. This method is safer for the animal because it avoids being sedated with a dart gun that may miss its target and injure the animal. It is also faster and less stressful for the cat (Tiger).

It is in the zoos best interest to keep its animals healthy and alive. In the wild animals must fend for themselves and have no one to watch over or nurture them when they get hurt. Captive predators are not faced with starvation due to lack of food. At the
same time prey are not plagued by the constant stress and injury inflicted by their predators. Zoo animals are better off health wise because they don’t lack the medical care and nutrition that they do in the wild.

Animals in captivity are faced with a different problem though. With no natural population control the population of the species can grow too large for the zoo to keep all of them in limited space. Culling is an unfortunate solution to this problem. It involves the killing of helpless animals due to excess numbers. In the wild animals are at least given the chance to escape, but in a zoo environment they have no choice. It is as if the ones fortunate enough to thrive in the artificial environment are punished. This method of population control is wrong. The human population is at alarmingly high levels. If the same method of control were used on humans it would be considered cruel and immoral. There are alternatives that zoos can use. Various forms of birth control can be administered or the at risk individuals can be sterilized. Overpopulated species could also be given to other zoos or reintroduced into the wild when possible (Bostock 146-148).

Although it seems wild and untamed nature has its own methods of control. Zoos also have methods to maintain control. The trainers and caregivers have a dominant relationship over the animals to sustain the order of the zoo. The form of domination in zoos should be one of respect. Humans must respect the animals by giving them proper care and in turn this respect is reciprocated from the animals. In many ways it is much like the relationship of a domesticated dog and its owner. The dog takes on the submissive role and the owner the dominant one. Given the owner has respect for its pet, both parties can be content and have a loving relationship. This bond depends on the
pet's acceptance of domestication. Zoos should have some level of order within for the safety of the public and workers. When the relationship nears the level of the dog and owner example, then the zoo must redefine what its purpose is. The animals cannot be considered wild if they are obedient servants to those that care for them. Man has the natural tendency to want to dominate, but zoos should be about preservation, animal welfare, and knowledge. Any caring pet owner cannot deny the family member like-bond they feel for their pet. In most cases the feeling is mutual and provides a good healthy relationship. Zoo workers, however, cannot allow this form of a relationship to develop if they want to maintain the atmosphere of wild and undomesticated animals.

Many zoos encourage these relationships and the argument can be made that the animals are domesticated. Elephant keepers must exhibit some form of domination in order to handle and care for the large mammals (Bostock 96). This does not imply that exploiting the relationship for public entertainment is right. Circuses are a prime example of misuse of man's ability to dominate. In my opinion, rides and public contact with wild animals should not occur at zoos. It sends a misleading signal to the public that it is okay to degrade animals for simple entertainment. Some places have petting zoos where children can pet goats and other domesticated animals. This is fine if the zoo feels like it must have some sort of interaction for the public and allows a place for the animal to escape the public if it chooses. It sends the message to children to respect animals and that there is a difference between the tame and wild animals.

Places like Sea World are well known for their marine shows. It would be easy to say that they exploit their animals to draw the public. However there are many factors that must be considered when making this decision. Many of the animals that they work
with learn quickly and form a strong bond with their trainers. They also need stimulation and enrichment through exercise and feeding routines. For example the killer whale has an exercise session as a form of enrichment. They are never forced to participate, but they almost always chose to. Sea World has also built facilities that allow the whales to stay in groups, which they seem to prefer (Shepherdson 314-319). It is obvious that the marine mammals at Sea World are fairly domesticated, but well taken care of. If marine animals are to be kept in zoos, it would be cruel to deny them the enrichment and bond to humans that they readily take to. In turn it is understood that they have become tame animals, but should always be given the option of whether or not to perform in the shows. Terrestrial mammals that don't require human contact for exercise or enrichment should be left to lead their untame and content lives with as little human intervention as possible, otherwise the zoo would become a circus.

There are several small zoos that are almost as bad as circuses. Like businesses many times the smaller independently owned zoos just do not have the funding and resources that the larger ones do. A zoo with little funding is a bad situation. Often the owner is caring and has the best intentions but is unable to see the poor environment that the animals are forced to reside in. ME's Zoo in Parker City is a good example. The owner's husband wanted to start a zoo. After they acquired a few animals and bought the land, he became ill and died. She kept on with the zoo out of respect for her husband's dream. The zoo has an impressive diversity of animals but inadequate funding. It is open during the summer and relies on admissions and employees' carnival work to pay for the food and care. The zoo contains several primates, all of which are kept in a small building, not open for the public to observe during the winter months. The zoo also has a
lion and a Siberian Tiger, which is on the endangered species list. These large cats are kept in a small fenced in area, like a yard for a domestic dog. Their surroundings consist of grass and a dog houselike structure for them to escape bad weather. Although the owner has several veterinarians, an inspector that shows up unannounced, and feeds each animal a proper diet, it does not mean they have a good quality of life. The big cats are individually caged. They have no interaction with other animals and therefore nothing to do but sleep and eat all day.

One would think that if the zoo did not provide a good environment for the animals then the inspector would make them. This is obviously not the case with ME’s Zoo. Things like sanitation, diet, veterinary care, and interbreeding are the main reasons that the inspector visits. The overall lifestyle of the individuals are obviously not a main concern. That is why zoos that don’t have the financial ability to provide spacious enriching environments for their animals should not exist. A zoo must make the animals’ psychological well being a priority and if it does not have the funding to do this it should shut down (Oren).

In a perfect world zoos would not even have to exist. Humans would revere wildlife as they encounter it in nature and would find no reason to cage it up for display. The world is not perfect though and many of the problems in it today are man’s doing. Man found that it was able to intellectually dominate and took that to his advantage. The human population has rapidly increased. Meanwhile much of the planet has been destroyed. Expansion has lead to deforestation and destruction of habitats.

Deforestation occurs mainly for agricultural and logging purposes. It is the depletion of forest biomass or the conversion of the land to other uses. The impact of
Deforestation is deadly to the species that live in the forest. One area that receives a lot of publicity is tropical rain forests. They are some of the most diverse habitats in the world. Many of the species that live there are not found in other habitat in the world. By destroying the environment animals live in, humans are removing them. Another consequence of expansion is isolated patches of forest. It creates less area for movement and also introduces different predators and parasites to the inhabiting species (State).

Man is continually disrupting ecosystems. Without a quick change, the growing human population is going to continue to destroy other animals’ environments to make room for his own. It is therefore man’s duty to preserve the species that he is destroying and set aside a place for them to live in habitats similar to theirs in nature.

Extinction is occurring at alarming rates. Man cannot save all of those in danger of extinction. It is his obligation to try and save those he can. It is wrong to say that one species is more important than another in nature, but often the cute mammals receive most of the attention. Many species are beyond saving, but it is better to save some than none at all. It is easier to appeal to the public to save a cuddly adorable mammal than it would be for a despised parasite. This can be taken advantage of to help get the public involved with support and contributions. Therefore man is faced with the dilemma of who to save on a planet with limited life sustaining capabilities.

NGOs and other organizations do much to support conservation of endangered species. They cannot do it all and unfortunately cannot completely stop the destruction of species’ habitats. Zoos are necessary in today’s world to help preserve some of the species in danger of extinction.
Many have captive breeding programs, especially for endangered species. One of the most publicized species is the giant panda. In the wild giant pandas usually begin breeding around 5 or 6 years and can care for only one cub at a time. A newborn’s weight ranges from 2.6 to 5.3 ounces. Since they are so small they require all of their mother’s attention. Panda’s have the digestive system of a carnivore but forage on bamboo. This forces them to consume a great deal of bamboo to survive. Unfortunately the synchronized flowering of bamboo has put a strain on how much is available for the panda. The giant panda is now dependent on small patches or reserves due to deforestation.

In 1963 the first panda was born in captivity in the Beijing Zoo. Over the past few decades survival rates have improved because zookeepers were able to learn what the panda’s preferred during pregnancy. They have learned that infants fair better if natural breeding rather than artificial insemination occurs, and if their mothers raise them. A breeding center was finished in Hetaouping in 1996 that is able to hold ten more pandas. Their goal is to eventually introduce some of the captive bred pandas into the wild (Angel 8-55, 70).

Humans also threaten many tiger species. There are eight tiger subspecies, three of which are extinct and one is very close. They are characterized by their phenotypic and geographic differences. Once tigers used to be distributed throughout southern and eastern Asia but are now limited to approximately 160 fragmented populations. Small population size leads to low variability. It also increases the chance of interbreeding and little genetic variability. The African cheetah is a good example of population
bottleneck. Because of the decrease in genetic variation in the cheetah, it suffers from low fecundity and is more vulnerable to disease.

There are about 5000 tigers left in Asian forests today. They are also threatened by poaching. The tiger is a symbol of power to the Chinese so its parts are used in medicinal products. In order for their populations to escape extinction attitudes have to change (Seidensticker 5-41). Zoos that are taking on conservation roles are increasing awareness and reinforcing the severity of the decline in animal populations. The Tiger Global Conservation Strategy is a network between zoos and conservation groups that allows communication and efficient resource use for tiger species. It is important because it gives the small isolated populations access to more genetic diversity. Zoos can share their genetic material either by reproductive transfers, artificial insemination and other methods, or by reintroduction of captive individuals into the wild. Zoos provide a safety net for endangered species. Without them when population levels and genetic variability get low in nature the species is either faced with extinction or the consequences of genetic bottleneck that the cheetah suffers from (Seidensticker 202-206).

In some species reintroduction back into the wild is not easy. Chimpanzees are very territorial. If a nonresident is introduced into their territory they will often attack and kill them. Another problem with releasing captive chimpanzees is that they are no longer wild. Many become aware of their strength and lose their fear of man. Once this occurs they may be dangerous if they contact man in the wild.

Even though there are many complications with reintroduction of chimpanzees into the wild, their declining populations cannot be ignored. Zoos can play an active role in saving this endangered specie. They can set up exhibits that allow for large
populations. There is an orphanage in Zambia that has approximately 43 orphans. The owners use farming profits and donations to care for the chimps. Zoos could set aside enough room to raise large populations. If human contact is limited and groups are prepared for release, then zoos could potentially release populations of chimps into unoccupied territory in nature (National 120-123).

Jane Goodall began studying chimpanzees several decades ago. Her observations in the wild contributed a great deal to what is known today about the creatures. Since man has destroyed a lot of land once occupied by other animals, field studies are harder to accomplish. Zoos can be centers for learning. The more naturalistic the animal's captive environment is, the more likely the individual's behavior will resemble that in nature. Details concerning gestation periods, courtship, eating, and grooming can be recorded and observed over long periods of time in zoos. If designed properly zoos can provide valuable information to scientists and veterinarians. This information can increase the quality of care and lifestyles for captive animals and those that remain in the wild (Bostock 156-159).

Zoos in the past were often built for selfish reasons such as glorification of rulers. Much has changed throughout the history of zoos except the recreation aspect. If the only benefit of zoos was entertainment than they would not be justified. The planet, however, is overwhelmed with the human population and many ecosystems have been destroyed. Man must take responsibility for his actions by providing adequate areas for animals to reside. Not every animal in danger of extinction can be saved, but that is no reason to give up on those that can. Zoos can act as conservation centers and are essential to deter the amount of extinction occurring. They house genetic information
important in maintaining population diversity and serve as centers for education about the importance of maintaining population diversity.

Conservation is a concept that recognizes the importance of life. An animal’s happiness cannot be ignored for the sake of population maintenance. Zoos that make no attempt to recreate natural or enriched environments have no right to exist. Therefore by transforming zoos into preservation centers the individual’s lifestyle is preserved and so is the species.
Sources Cited


