



Zoos

Zoos & Conservation

The subject of the rights or wrongs of zoos can be very emotive with many unbalanced views being put forward by people who have little real knowledge of zoos and their aims. A good zoo can be of tremendous value to the cause of conservation and education, although there are those that believe that animals should not be kept in captivity at all.

Years ago zoos existed purely as what could be described as 'freak shows', there for the entertainment of the public, while the animals were often badly cared for and kept in poor conditions. Nowadays, the Victorian idea of a caged collection for people simply to look at is rather dated, although zoos like this still exist in some parts of the world, keeping the animals in tiny cages, exploiting their collections solely for the purpose of making money and 'amusing' the public. However, in Britain the majority of zoos are actively involved in research, breeding and reintroduction programmes which may well help to prevent the extinction of some rare species in the wild.

The World Association of Zoos and Aquariums (WAZA) has over 200 members. Its strategy provides a common philosophy for zoos and aquariums across the globe and defines the standards and policies that are necessary to achieve their goals in conservation. WAZA's mission is to guide, encourage and support the zoos, aquariums, and like-minded organizations of the world in animal care and welfare, environmental education and global conservation. They are at the forefront of environmental campaigning and ran a petition in the run up to the Copenhagen Climate Change Summit (December 2009) calling on governments to set targets of atmospheric carbon dioxide levels below 350 parts per million in order to prevent a mass extinction of animals.

The Zoological Society of London (ZSL) runs conservation projects in Britain and in over 80 countries around the world, working with local communities to conserve their environment and promote the sustainable use of resources. ZSL's mission is to promote and achieve the conservation of animals and their habitats, through a broad range of activities. These activities include projects assessing the wild population of animals and encouraging biodiversity. Their Wildlife Wood Project works alongside timber companies in Ghana and Cameroon to manage the areas where endangered wildlife may go, since animals do not always stay within

the boundaries of national parks. ZSL runs breeding programmes and reintroduces animals back into the wild. One of their projects is the 'EDGE of Existence' programme, EDGE meaning 'Evolutionarily Distinct and Globally Endangered'. Their scientific research is used to inform and influence conservation policy among politicians and world leaders. Their EDGE coral reef campaign highlights the threat to this precious eco-system which could be lost by 2065, should atmospheric CO2 levels continue to rise.

Why are so many species becoming extinct?

There are three main reasons for the alarming decline and extinction of so many species namely:

DESTRUCTION OF HABITAT

(which includes the loss of food source etc.),

POACHING

POLLUTION

- all play an important part in the loss of animal and plant species.

There is also a fourth reason of increasing influence which is

CLIMATE CHANGE

You can also add to this list 'introduced species' which upset the balance of an eco-system and 'disease' which is in the case of amphibians responsible for their rapid decline in numbers.

The destruction of habitat seems almost invariably to be caused by

OVER POPULATION

. If we allow the human race to multiply at its present rate we will destroy more vital habitat and the plant and animal life it contains. The main threat to these natural habitats is, of course, the steadily and dangerously increasing human population which currently stands at 6.9 billion people (January 2010). Approximately 132 m

million more people come into the world each year. Although the birth rate has now leveled off, births are still outnumbering deaths so the world population is on target to rise to 8 billion by 2025 and 9 billion by around 2050. There will be an extra 2.3 billion people on the planet, the world population was only 2.5 billion in 1950! The ultimate picture of a world inhabited by starving humans and very little else seems too fanciful for words at present, but is the awful possibility which concerned and sensible conservationists wish to prevent.

People need homes to live in, shops, schools, hospitals and other amenities. They also need food to eat. Animals' territories are shrinking as villages and towns are built and crops planted in those areas. The fragmentation of habitats restricts the availability of food and water to the animals as they can't move as easily from one place to another. Sometimes wild animals try and follow their original routes, only to find themselves confronted by people trying to protect their crops and livestock. Elephants have been known to trample crops in India and lions have taken cattle in Africa. This increased level of human and animal confrontation is becoming a major problem and can result in casualties on both sides.

Unless we can eventually check this increase of around two and a half million people every week, there will be no wild habitats left. If such a terrible situation did ever come to pass, then the good zoos would be the last hope for most species of wild animals.

Hunting and poaching was and to a lesser extent still is a significant cause of the decline in endangered species. If we can EDUCATE people into not purchasing the end product of the poachers' work - whether a fur coat, carved ivory, crocodile handbags or shoes, etc., then the poacher will become redundant and one pressure will be relieved as far as wild animal species are concerned.

We must preserve areas of this world in which natural ecosystems are able to flourish. Zoos and wildlife parks - however good they may be - are no substitute for natural habitat, but where it has become so degraded that animals struggle to survive there, perhaps this is a sensible time to take some into captivity to breed in safety. This has been the case for the golden lion tamarins from Brazil where their habitat has all but gone and the Amur leopard where only 30 remain in the wild.

Should animals be kept in captivity when they could live in the wild?

There are three justifications for keeping animals in captivity; these are conservation, breeding and education.

Zoos within WAZA receive around 600 million visitors every year, providing a great opportunity to educate the general public about wildlife and environmental issues. London and Whipsnade zoos alone welcome 1.7 million visitors a year including many school groups.

Breeding programmes between zoos ensure that a population can grow and some of its members possibly reintroduced to the wild. They are an insurance policy should numbers become critically low in the wild, and many of these schemes have been successful. Zoos must collaborate to ensure that the genetic variety is maintained and avoid inbreeding. Critics of zoos argue that in many cases animals are still kept for show without any intention of releasing them and that we cannot learn anything about the behaviour of wild animals when they are being kept in captivity.

"We can learn as much about lions by studying them in their captivity as we can about men by studying them in their prison cells."

Virginia McKenna

Born Free Founder & Trustee

Dolphins are highly social and intelligent animals and the ocean provides a very challenging and ever changing and stimulating environment for them, which is by no means replicated in a small pool with chlorinated water. The Born Free Foundation, argues that these are stressful conditions for the dolphins and the aquariums should be closed down. They believe that keeping animals in captivity cannot be justified from an animal welfare or a species protection point of view. They are especially critical of zoos which do not breed endangered species and do not protect wildlife in situ, in the wild, and do not have programmes to release them into the wild. There are zoos such as London zoo which do all of these things and share the Born Free Foundation's aims of protecting animals in their natural habitats through educating and working with local communities. However, since 1984 the Born Free Foundation has been working towards its campaign called ? Zoo Check? to phase out zoos, marine parks and animal circuses altogether.

Reintroducing Animals To The Wild

Reintroduction plans are not straight forward since an animal will never have had to hunt and kill its own food. Learning survival skills is obviously essential. There are of course negatives to keeping wild animals in captivity since we will never be able to recreate their natural environment perfectly. In the wild, species live as part of a social organisation, some more than others. For example chimps learn from their elders how to care for their young. They can also be vulnerable to attack when as an outsider they try to join existing social groups. It is possible though, as in the classic tale of Christian, the lion cub, born of captive parents and sold in Harrods in 1969, who was successfully reintroduced to the wild in Kenya and became the head of his own pride.

Yet if a zoo is to be successful in breeding animals, they must feel at home and happy. If they do not, they will not become pregnant. This is especially the case with very sensitive creatures such as pandas which rarely give birth in zoos. Pandas cannot revive a depleted population very quickly as they are notoriously poor breeders, only having one young at a time, which is why their small population is of such concern. There are only 1,600 left in the wild and about 200 in captivity. The males for some reason are not very good at breeding in captivity and the females are only fertile for 24-36 hours each spring so there is only a small window of opportunity.

Facilities In Zoos.

A zoo is defined as a permanent place where wild species are kept for exhibition to the public.

In theory all zoos should provide the following;

- * Food and water
- * A suitable environment
- * Health-care
- * An opportunity to express most normal behaviour

* Protection from fear and distress

If any zoo does not come up to the required standards of housing, environment, care and feeding, and perhaps even 'philosophy' one could question why it is allowed to operate at all.

The standard of facilities is, in most zoos, governed by the amount of space available, the size of the collection, costs and income. This is especially an issue in less developed countries where the zoos may have noble conservation intentions, but limited income. All zoos now face huge feeding bills each year. Maintenance and heating add further outgoings, as do staff salaries and veterinary care. The admission fee to most zoos is expensive, but reflects their running costs - the average family of four spending around £53 just to get in. It has been suggested that the best zoos in the country should receive a government grant each year to help zoos develop their two main aims of a) study, research and breeding of endangered species and b) education.

Even in the past 30 years zoos have much improved their facilities and the quality of life of their residents. It is not usually the case in the UK to see an animal pacing up and down its cage out of frustration and boredom, needing to release some energy. The aim of any good zoo should be to recreate the habitat from which the animal came as accurately as possible, with enough space to move around and enough stimulation so that they can behave naturally. Monkey cages should have plenty of branches for them to swing from and bird cages should have enough room so that they can fly. Some zoos hide the lion's or tiger's food so that they have to use their senses to explore and find it. This burns up some of their energy and means that they don't get used to set feeding times which they would not have in the wild.

The amount of space in any zoo is limited and can rarely compare to a creature's range in the wild. A lion's territory can span 100 square miles or more. Therefore, in a zoo they get much less exercise and can put on weight. They also lack the freedom and stimulus of living and surviving in the wild. No matter how good a zoo is, it is no substitute for the real thing. Some people think that this is justification enough to not agree with zoos at all.

In captivity animals can, on the whole, experience a longer life with vets on hand to give medical attention and a plentiful supply of food, it's a more comfortable life but a less free and exciting life. A lion can expect to live 10 to 14 years in the wild, but over 20 in captivity.

Leaving animals in the wild is the ideal solution where they can express natural behaviour and live as part of the bigger eco-system. The sad truth is that the loss of habitats for animals in the wild and the predicted rarity of so many species mean that zoos may be the final refuge for many creatures and the last hope of conserving

their species.

World Association of Zoos and Aquariums

<http://www.waza.org/en/site/home>

Zoological Society of London

<http://www.zsl.org>

Born free Foundation

www.bornfree.org.uk

Born Free Kids? Club

www.bornfree.org.uk/kids-go-wild

Harrods Lion Cub

www.youtube.com/watch?v=pNv2A4Kfx4k&NR=1

www.youtube.com/watch?v=cvCjyWp3rEk

Captive Animals Protection Society

www.captiveanimals.org

[Click here](#)

for our Extinction factsheet.

Click below to download relevant issues of Conservation Education (pdf format)

[Wildlife & Climate Change](#)

[Population Explosion](#)

Last updated:

04/02/10

All content copyright of YPTE.

