

Keeping Animals in Zoos Is not Justifiable

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A debate that has recently been brought into focus in the public eye is that of whether wild animals should be kept in aquariums, zoos, and other wildlife sanctuaries. Recent tragedies, like the one at Sea World in Orlando, Florida, where a trainer was dragged to her death by a whale, has increased continued scrutiny on the needs of wildlife and how captivity hinders their physical and psychological well-being. Some argue that animals in captivity provide a number of services for both the animal kingdom and humans. Others contend that the benefits are small or can be achieved by some other means. Indeed, when one examines the opinions in favor of keeping wild animals in captivity, such as in a zoo, one finds that these arguments can be discounted with viable alternatives that are more humane in the treatment of wild animals. In effect, keeping animals in zoos is not justifiable.

One reason that zoos and wildlife sanctuaries are so popular is that they feed a major tourist industry world-wide (Woods, 2002). Cities certainly do not want to lose revenue by dismantling their zoos. In addition, they argue that zoos provide a way for the public to view animals up close which they might never see in person otherwise. Zoo officials also insist that animals in captivity are well cared for and are made comfortable in natural-like settings. However, although the zoological industry goes to great expense and trouble to provide animals with a simulation of a natural habitat, it is a costly and time-consuming enterprise. Animals do not typically have access to vegetation. Dirt and grass contain harmful bacteria, and animals do fight among themselves. Furthermore, Woods (2012) cites some studies that indicate that the educational benefits of zoos are

minimal. Besides, animals tend to stay out of sight of humans if their zoological habitats allow it. Furthermore, zoo animals suffer from freedom to move and to socialize.

Another argument for the existence of zoos is that they are ideally located for scientific monitoring stations. Zoos network to collect and build up a collection of serum banks and to develop medical record-keeping systems (McNamara, 2007). This has proven extremely beneficial to identifying and monitoring the spread of deadly, infectious diseases. For example, the West Nile Virus was first identified at a zoological institution. Prior to the identity of the disease, wild crows began to die in the United States from unknown causes. It was not until crows at a zoo began to die that the problem was successfully identified. This virus threatens both animals and humans.

The United States General Accounting Office (GAO, 2000) noted the fact that zoological institutions were instrumental in quickly identifying the virus, which brought into focus the value of public and animal health agencies working together in partnership in studying health issues for humans, domestic animals, wildlife, and animals in captivity. Upon further investigation, GAO also noted that the zoo community was not an integral part of the public health paradigm and that because zoological institutes were not within the federal agency jurisdictions, the diagnosis of the West Nile Virus was much slower in coming than might have otherwise been the case. The diseases that have followed the West Nile Virus in the past decade, including a serious respiratory syndrome (SARS), monkeypox, H5N1 avian influenza, have increased the pressure to fund and develop bio surveillance capabilities. Because zoos routinely add to serum banks, tissue banks, and maintain medical record-keeping systems, they are in a unique position to contribute

meaningfully to bio surveillance. Zoos tend to the needs individual animal on a daily basis, so zoo personnel are quickly attuned to illnesses. In addition, zoos share among themselves data banks which collectively provide a wealth of information that can have positive implications in both human and animal health care and disease prevention (McNamara, 2007). The lack of funding for bio surveillance causes serious disparities in how much and to what extent biological factors can be studied concerning threats to humans, agricultural livestock, and wildlife. It has been proposed that one possible source of funding is to have public-health professionals to work with zoo professionals to create electronic surveillance networks (McNamara, 2007). The problem with the argument that zoos provide opportunities for bio surveillance is that public-health officials do not presently work with zoo agencies in this capacity. If funding can be found for such a partnership, why can it not be used to monitor animals in their natural habitat for signs of diseases? Animals in the wild, including in the ocean, are already tagged for research studies.

Basically, some human-animal relationships can benefit both humans and animals, such as illustrated with the West Nile Virus example (Zamir, 2006). However, Bostock (1993) argues that placing animals in zoos is cruel. He acknowledges that zoo animals cannot be considered wild animals since the majority are born in captivity. He also concedes that zoo animals live longer, healthier lives than those in the wild. Still, he states that those arguments are not sufficient for supporting the captivity of animals in zoos, that they are not inherently dependent on humans for survival. If left in their natural inhabitant unbothered by humans, they will survive as nature intended. Another argument against zoos is that animals in captivity have limited space. They do not have the space

they would in their natural habitat (Zamir, 2006). This has recently been brought to the public's attention with news media stories of trainers, such as those who interacted with whales, being killed. The argument is that whales in their natural habitat swim many miles a day but are severely limited from doing so when they remain in captivity by humans. This may cause them to act out in violent ways.

In summary, zoos are not needed. Individuals can learn much from watching documentaries of wild animals filmed in their natural habitats, much more so than visiting a zoo. Plus, surveillance equipment can help monitor wildlife activity so that data can be gathered and studied for various purposes. Finally, to keep a wild animal that would otherwise not be dependent on human contact from roaming in its natural habitat, free to interact with nature and socialize with other wildlife is unconscionable. Society needs to re-evaluate the use of zoos and other such organizations to determine how to end or modify their present use and existence.

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