Secrets Behind the Bars: An Examination of Zoos as an Unethical Practice: Stereotypic Behaviors in Captive Animals, Inadequate Enclosures, and the Improper Representation of Wildlife

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Author Note

This paper was prepared for Writing 50, taught by Professor Peter Huk.

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Bear attacks, kills animal trainer at facility in Big Bear City, *Whale kills female trainer at SeaWorld's Shamu Stadium*, *Horrified Zoogoer Recalls Tiger Attack*, *Zoo Mourns Mauled Keeper*, *Chimp Gathers Stones for "Premeditated" Attacks on Zoo Visitors*. These alarming captions are only a few of the many similar headlines that have been stamped across the top news in the United States over the past two years. What can these striking headlines tell us about the current captive conditions of wild animals in US zoos? What do these unfortunate deaths and injuries reveal to us about the well-being and safety of zoo keepers and visitors, as well as of the animals themselves? As Syed Rizvi (2009), Founder and President of Engineers and Scientists for Animal Rights has stated, "[The notion] that zoos play an important role in the conservation of endangered species is a misleading one. The truth is that the primary motives of zoos are cheap entertainment at the cost of animal exploitation."

The present circumstances of inadequate enclosures, premature animal deaths, zookeeper and visitor maulings, and stereotypic behavior in captive animals are clear indicators that zoos are neither ethical, nor safe for animals. The obvious detriment that captivity has on wild animals is both saddening and wrong. The only way to draw closer to a solution to this unfortunate problem is if influential zoo curators and public officials take a united stand against zoos and promote conservatories instead. Captivity in zoological parks challenges the tradeoff between the asserted educational values of operating zoos versus the obvious detriment that captivity has

on these confined wild animals. Furthermore, it confronts the question of valuing human entertainment over animal rights.

The following research paper will explain exactly how and why zoos are unethical by looking at case studies, revealing facts and statistics regarding inadequate enclosures and animal injury, and reflecting upon personal experiences. The issue of stereotypic behavior in captive animals, a physical, emotional, and psychological medical condition that afflicts an astounding number of zoo animals, will be thoroughly explained and interpreted. Stereotypic behavior describes trance-like behaviors in confined animals, an obvious and sad sign that animals in captivity are neither happy nor mentally stable (Carlstead, 1996, p.). Meanwhile, an examination of the present goals and functional purposes of zoos is also necessary in opening a discussion about what is currently being done to protect captive wildlife, and how much more we can still be doing. Altogether, case studies about animal stereotypic behavior alongside interviews and personal essays by wildlife professionals will help us delve deeper into this investigation.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, this research paper aims to encourage a solution for the problem at hand. Zoos are not the almighty key in saving and protecting animals, nor are they a realistic way to educate our youth about wild animals, or even morals and ethics for that matter. However, because society's fascination with seeing captive wild animals will never cease, in order to preserve wildlife in their most natural form while still allowing the public to be aware of and educated by these live animals, we must focus on conservation rather than confinement. Zoos should be raising money to send their animals to conservatories, rather than spending millions of dollars that they profit every year on building higher metal bars and buying more plastic beach balls. Only when influential zoo curators and government officials take proactive measures of banning zoos and promoting conservatories, then the public will follow

suit. Until then, however, the public will continue to be miseducated about true wildlife, while captive animals will continue to suffer.

Historic and Modern Goals of Zoological Parks

The physical structure and functioning purposes of zoos have evolved drastically over time. Certainly, the zoos of today hardly resemble the barren and small exhibits of the very first private zoos that wealthy Europeans owned centuries ago. One can easily argue and substantiate with facts and logical sense that any changes to zoos over time have all been done for the better (for both society and the animals). However, throughout modern day, zoos still follow one primary concept: zoological parks largely function as a form of easy entertainment for the public. This is primarily the problem that animal rights activists see in zoos. Although zoos boast that their goals are education, conservation, and research, they knowingly fail to acknowledge that one of their primary functions is also human entertainment and mass profit.

Amidst outcry from animal rights activists and educated field anthropologists that zoos are both unethical and immoral, zoological parks continue to reason that zoos are essential to the education of the public. They argue that visitors who go to modern, well-maintained, and accurately portrayed animal exhibits will leave with a better understanding and appreciation for the animals and their natural environments (Anderson, 2007, p.). Meanwhile, educational programs such as live talks and interactive shows, as well as a ready and knowledgeable staff on hand contribute to the educational goals of zoos. In a recent 2007 survey that assessed the impact that visiting a zoo or aquarium had on a visitor in the long-run, it was found that 54% of visitors leave with a reconsideration of their role in the conservation action (and saw themselves as a part of the solution); 57% of visitors found that their visit strengthened their connection to

nature; and 42% believed that zoos played an important role in conservation education and animal care (Faulk et al., 2007, p.). While the researchers in this particular study concluded that these findings were significant enough to claim that zoos are necessary for the public's education, statistics such as these are simply skewed and misleading.

While the education of the public may have been a reasonable justification to operate zoos a century ago when the only way to encounter any form of undomesticated wildlife was to venture far away from civilization, this validation does not hold true in the modern world. As Baron Hugo van Lawick (1987), the world-renowned cameraman behind Jane Goodall's wildlife film series, stated, "We have films that can show far more clearly what animals look like and how they behave." Hugo van Lawick makes a very valid point – humans can learn very little about the true nature of wild animals such as a polar bear, by simply looking at its captive and human-reared counterparts. What can we learn about polar bears on the icy planes of Alaska by watching a captive bred polar bear that was raised by humans, that has never interacted with another polar bear, that has never experienced fresh snowfall, and that is fed butchered meat by its handler? Likewise, what can we learn about a colony of penguins in Antarctica by watching thirty captive ones crammed in a tiny manmade exhibit, that swarm around the zookeeper and beg for food at the exact hour of the each day? By going to zoos in hopes of expanding our knowledge about true wildlife, in reality, we are only fooling ourselves. Sadly, what we see is only the tragedy of animals bred and captured under a strict and ordered institution. Hugo van Lawick is right – we are much better off watching the many videos available to us on television and online.

To develop the argument against the educational claims of zoos even further, we must also look at the zoological goal of scientific research. Many zoos claimed that, "in captivity, the

natural behavior of animals can be studied" (as cited in Hugo van Lawick, 1987, p. 116). Again, this claim cannot be substantiated because (as we will discuss more later) most captive wild animals are extremely limited in how much or how easily they can engage in their natural behaviors, such as hunting and courtship. Thus, in order to obtain accurate measurements and seek the most reliable observations, researchers should logically be studying animals in the wild, not in captivity. Thus, the claim by zoos that zoological parks are essential to research, does not make much sense.

Lastly, zoos also tout that they both promote conservation in the wild, while also directly contributing to the cause by breeding nearly extinct species. However, there is much to argue about this assertion. Firstly, the claim that zoos play a vital role in the preservation of species is invalid; in reality, most species kept in zoos are not on the verge of extinction. In fact, in a 2000 report, it was found that only 5% of all species in UK zoos were endangered, while less than 1% of those endangered species were reintroduced to the wild ("Zoos"). In examining these statistics, it is obvious that zoos clearly skew the public's perceptions of their good deeds. Meanwhile, also contradictory to zoos' conservationist boasts, zoos as a whole engage heavily in the market of animal trade. As Rizvi (2009) has stated, "Instead of providing lifetime care, zoos shuffle their surplus animals around like checkers on a board — even though many species, including elephants and primates, form deep and lasting bonds that are critical to the animals' long-term health and happiness." By trading animals with other zoos on a regular basis, zoos are treating animals like a commodity and promoting imperialist motives. Furthermore, not only is engaging in animal trade unethical, but it is also harmful to the animals. Firstly, it is very stressful for animals to have to readjust to new environments and new keepers once they have become accustomed to their old one (Rizvi, 2009). Secondly, the process of moving animals

from city-to-city, state-to-state, or even country-to-country, can have injurious effects on the animals. Blackshaw (1986) has admitted that their zoos often do not follow proper techniques and safety procedures when transporting animals; animals are usually transported in cramped trailers and are usually not tranquilized. Thus, from the evidence above, it is clear that zoos' claims of conservationism are meaningless once their unethical and contradictory practices are revealed.

The Impact of Captivity

Stereotypic Behaviors

While zoos claim that they are "conserving" wildlife both for the sake of the wild animals and for society's education, at the heart of these exhibitions, animals are held captive primarily for our entertainment. Meanwhile, in a case-to-case perspective, we are doing these animals more harm than good. Not only are we holding these animals captive, but also we leave nearly all of them with long-term psychological and at times physical damage. Stereotypic trance-like behavior, self-injury, and depression are only a few of the symptoms seen in zoos across the world. The Department of Zoology at the University of Wroclaw in Poland conducted a research study that examined the stereotypic behavior of a captive female elephant over time. The study reported that the elephant spent 52% of its normal day engaging in stereotypic movements, which included swaying its trunk and body while lifting its hind legs in a repetitive pattern (Elzanowski & Sergiel, 2006, p. 228). Interestingly, Elzanowski and Sergiel (2006) found that this behavior occurred at the highest rate in the fall, when the elephant spent much of her time in her pen; versus the lower rates during the summer, when she regularly spent time outdoors. These cases of stereotypy in elephants are only a couple among many, many others.

A significant conclusion that can be drawn from these two examples is that the environmental richness, or lack-there-of, in an animal's exhibit can have extreme effects on an animal's physical and mental well-being. As Humane Society Press reporter David Hanocks (2001) has stated, "It is not unusual for the 'natural habitat' to be composed of nothing but concrete and plastic… In the worst examples, such as Omaha Zoo's Lied Jungle building, many animals spend their entire lives in cramped, completely artificial environments and never have contact with anything natural" (p.137). Hanocks' points highlights the fact that many captive animals' exhibits are boasted as authentic, natural environments, but in reality, provide little natural settings for the animals. With nothing natural to interact with, such as trees or shrubs that are native to the animals' natural habitat, captive animals can become extremely bored and lonely in their barren environments. Consequently, as research has shown, this leads to stereotypic behavior, a mental detriment to the well-being and happiness of zoo animals.

Stereotypic behaviors have long been noticed in captive zoo animals. As Carlstead (1996) has explained, stereotypy involves a repeated patterned movement such as pacing back and forth or head bobbing. Stereotypy is an important issue to examine because researchers have found that it is "relatively invariant in form, and has no apparent function or goal" (Pitsko, 2003). Also, because these behaviors are rarely (if ever) seen in the wild, the cause and effect relationship between captivity and stereotypy becomes clear. Captivity is believed to have many negative effects on an animal's physiological and psychological well-being; these detriments become apparent through stereotypic behavior. When animals' natural behaviors are constricted by their unnatural captive environments and conditions, they will be more likely to exhibit stereotypy as are response. For example, in Pitsko's 2003 study, she found that captive tigers who were unable to exhibit natural hunting behaviors and who had little or no pool access

exhibited behaviors such as pacing, excessive grooming, and constant resting our of boredom and lack of stimulation. In contrast, tigers in Pitsko's study that had larger and more diverse exhibits showed significantly less stereotypic behavior.

Solutions within the Institution: Environmental Enrichment

Pitsko's study on captive tigers and stereotypic behavior is a very thorough and relevant research article to examine because it summarizes the effects of inadequate enclosures very well. Her findings can be applied to all other captive animals because her solutions to reducing stereotypy are clearly explained. Leigh Elizabeth Pitsko's Master's thesis (2003) for the Virginia Polytechnic Institute describes the difficult case of tigers, which have "large home ranges in the wild and natural predatory hunting behaviors," but are unable to exhibit most of their normal behaviors in generally small and artificial zoo exhibits. On the whole, her research found that several elements in the tigers' captive environment had significant effects on stereotypic behaviors; these elements included "shade availability, the presence of a body of water, cage size, the presence of a conspecific, vegetation, environmental enrichment, and substrate type" ("Abstract"). She found that the more natural an environment was, the less stressed a tiger was and therefore exhibited less stereotypy. Pitsko (2003) also has given sample solutions to better enhancing a captive animal's environment. She noted that food could be hidden throughout exhibits to encourage foraging behaviors, while whole carcasses can be given to tigers to encourage hunting and to promote healthy jaws and teeth. Meanwhile, wooden blocks and logs "can be given to satisfy felid scratching behavior when trees are not available" (p. 14). Scents of other animals that are native to the tigers' natural habitat can also be rubbed on items throughout the exhibit to better simulate a tigers' natural environment. Lastly, Pitsko noted a very important

factor in exhibits that needs to be changed. Most enclosures are still made with concrete or unnatural flooring. This is both unnatural for the animals and harsh on their soles. Thus, she encourages the use of "substrate and vegetation," which includes grass, wooden chips, and dirt (p. 14).

Wildlife Conservation: The Bigger Picture

Even if we do as much as we can within a zoo to make life for wild animals less stressful, more engaging, and more natural, researchers will still argue that environmental enrichment is simply not enough to solve the problem at large. While environmental enrichment provides for a better captive life for the animals, the animals are still being exploited for human entertainment and amusement. Furthermore, if the purpose of zoos is to promote conservation, then we should be doing just that — protecting wildlife in its natural habitat, not exploiting animals in captivity for our leisure. The money that is profited every year in zoos could make a world of difference if only used for the cause of protecting wildlife around the world from poachers and industrialism or for the cause of moving zoo animals to conservatories. In 1987 Hugo van Lawick stated, "I heard of $10 million being spent on gorillas in captivity. One can imagine how well the gorillas in Rwanda (and a few other places) would be protected in the wild if anything like that sort of money was available" (p.119).

While abolishing zoos entirely is not feasible at this time and day, what we still can do is focus on promoting conservatories for animals that are already captive. Conservatories provide the proper care, space, and natural, live environment that captive wild animals need. With conservatories, the focus is on the well-being of the animals – not the entertainment of humans. Conservatories go above and beyond the environmental enrichment concept that Pitsko

suggested above. Enriching an enclosure will certainly better a captive animal's conditions, but realistically, the animal is still captive and stripped of most of their freedom. In a wildlife refuge or conservatory, animals can at the very least regain some of this freedom.

Conclusion

The practice of animal captivity in zoos is unnecessary and unethical because it leaves nearly all captive animals with some form of long-term emotional, psychological, or physical trauma. While zoos claim that they are conserving wildlife for both the sake of the wild animals and for society's education, at the heart of these exhibitions, animals are held captive primarily for our entertainment. Stereotypic trance-like behavior, self-injury, and depression are only a few of the symptoms seen in zoos across the world. Clearly, what zoos are currently doing to protect and conserve wildlife is not enough.

Zoos' three main goals of conservation, education, and research are also invalid and irrational, as the very concept behind captivity completely contradicts the notion of conservation. Meanwhile, wildlife is also improperly represented to society. Watching a caged and hand-reared animal can give very little insight on how a true wild animal behaves in the wild. When going to zoos, we are not appreciating wildlife or showing the love for animals that so many people claim to have. By supporting zoos, we are treating animals as novelty. While enriching the environment of captive animals is both appealing to the visitor's eye and can also increase the quality of life and happiness of the animals, the ultimate goal in animal rights activism should be the push towards conservation, rather than confinement.

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