

# Zoos: Good or Bad?

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Most of us have been to a zoo, wildlife park or aquarium at some point in our lifetime. We



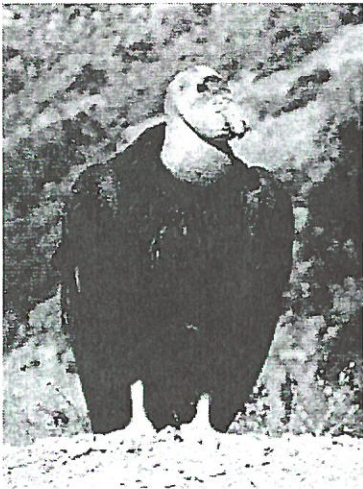
I can remember the first time we saw a huge lion, a friendly river otter or a dolphin show. As a child, I remember going to the zoo and being a cat lover, I couldn't wait to see the wild cats. My excitement was depleted when I got to the exhibit and saw the cramped cement quarters that the big cats were forced to live in. They all looked so miserable and I remember wanting to let them free. Hopefully many of you have not had this experience, but it calls into question whether zoos are a good endeavor or not.

If you talk to those in support of zoos, they will tell you that zoo conditions have significantly improved over the last few decades. Gone are the cramped cement enclosures and iron bars. Instead, many zoos have opted for natural barriers such as ditches or moats (Horton). Zookeepers and veterinarians realize that mimicking the animals' natural habitat is best for their well-being and animal exhibits are spacious and well kept.

On the other hand, those against zoos, including PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), claim that animals belong in the wild and are not meant to be held captive in small spaces. Even though zoos have made improvements on living quarters, they claim it does not hold up to an animal's real habitat. The animals cannot practice normal hunting or mating activities and lack privacy.

Zoo supporters often talk about the role zoos play in saving endangered

Zoos  
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California Condor

species. With captive breeding programs, zoos have been able to capture an animal on the brink of extinction, increase their numbers through captive breeding and then release them back into the wild. The California Condor is a great example species of a successful program. Low in numbers, the Los Angeles Zoo began with a few dozen birds and through successful breeding, was able to bring those numbers to over 170 (Horton). If zoos did not implement these programs, then many species would have gone extinct.

Zoo opponents are not so optimistic about the captive breeding programs. Of the hundreds of species that zoos are trying to save from extinction, only a few are successful. Because of low populations, many newborn animals have birth defects and are not able to survive in the wild. Despite the zoos best efforts, the captive breeding programs are only a small success.

Years ago, zoos and circuses used to capture animals from the wild to display to the



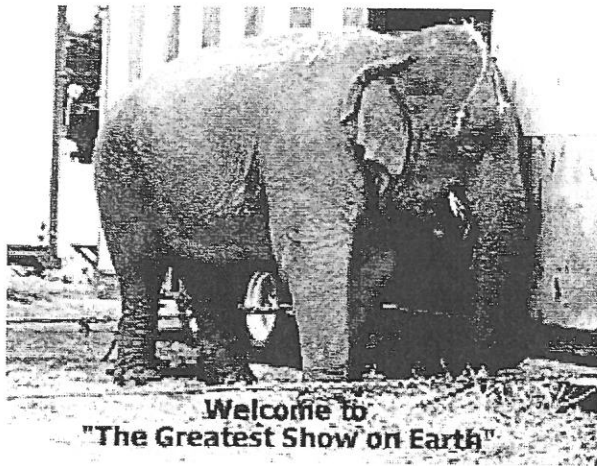
Injured baby rhino is taken in by a zoo

public. Nowadays, most zoos get their animals from captive breeding programs; animals that were born in captivity. Some animals are rescued from traveling circuses, while others are

obtained from the wild because they are injured and would not survive otherwise. Orphaned animals are also taken in.

There are however zoos that do obtain animals illegally or unethically. Endangered species are sold in the black market to small petting zoos. These types of zoos are rare and should be avoided.

Those who support zoos also claim that the care of animals in zoos has changed for the better. Zoo keepers are learning that animals need very specific diets, enrichment activities and need to run, play and hunt. Many times you will see toys, balls, tires and many other stimuli that keep animals entertained. Management and care of the animals has also improved, with caring and knowledgeable zookeepers and veterinarians caring for each animal.



"The Greatest Show on Earth"

Opponents claim that there is no way that a captive lifestyle can be the same as living in the wild. Being unable to hunt, scavenge, run, mate, or hide, many animals get bored and can enter into a state of zoochosis, or a display of repetitive, often harmful behaviors. This can be seen as an elephant pacing, a lion constantly grooming itself, or a giraffe bobbing its head. Some animals will even begin self-mutilation. Many say that larger animals such as elephants are especially prone to developing these problems, and should not be held in zoos. Some zoos also do not have good management, and animal abuse and cruelty can be evident in bad zoos.

Zoo directors say that zoos play an important role in educating the public about wild animals, the environment and conservation. They provide a hands-on experience that get people excited about animals and nature. Schools take classes on field trips to zoos. If it wasn't for zoos, most people would never see or learn about some wild animals. In order to conserve wild life, we must know about it first.

On the other hand, those against zoos say that zoos are merely for human entertainment and not much learning happens. People walking through zoos mostly talk about unrelated things and spend only a few minutes at each exhibit. If zoos teach anything, they are telling humans that animals are to be held captive to do tricks for humans.

What do I think? I believe the answer lies somewhere in the middle. Although I initially had a bad experience in zoos, I have recently had a very good experience, which leads me to believe that zoos can be good. A few years ago I had the opportunity to do an



Me at the Belize Zoo, holding Balboa the Boa Constrictor

internship at the **Belize Zoo** in Belize, Central America. Contrary to what many zoos are like in third world countries, this small zoo is very well kept, with caring zoo keepers who are concerned about the animals well being and educating the country about their wildlife. I had the chance to feed birds, deer, tapirs, jaguars, otters, snakes, and foxes. All animals in the zoo are native to the area, and are enclosed in large area with natural rainforest cover. The big attraction of the zoo is the jaguars, mostly obtained through the "Problem Jaguar Program". Around the rainforest, farmers have problems with jaguars killing their chickens and cattle for an easy meal. If the jaguar is simply relocated it will normally continue this behavior. Since these jaguars would otherwise be killed, the zoo takes them in. Some of them become friendly enough to be displayed to the public. The success of this program has saved many jaguars, give zoologists the chance to study them, and has educated the public about this endangered species.

With the experiences that I have had, I believe that *good* zoos are good for the animals and the people. I am often surprised at how little people know about animals and nature, even the ones that are in their own environment. Zoos are important in educating people about animals and getting the public into conservation and caring for the environment. I believe that with better study and education, captive breeding programs will become more successful and zoos will save many more species from extinction. Enclosures will get even better with more space, and animals will begin to experience some of their natural tendencies as they did in the wild. I hope that zoos do not go away because nature and wildlife are so overlooked in this busy, stressful and complicated world we live in. Observing and learning from animals brings us back to our roots and makes life seem more simple.