

English 100, Third Place; Professor, Dr. Jacqueline S. Wilson

An Open Letter to Those Who Do Not Believe in Zoos and Aquariums

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An open letter to those who do not believe in zoos and aquariums,

After the 2013 release of the film Blackfish, which pushes the agenda that killer whales do not belong in human care. Along with the death of Harambe, a Western lowland gorilla that was fatally shot dead after a three-year-old boy fell into his enclosure, has stirred controversy over the plight of animals in captivity. Following these events came a wave of people who vowed to never visit any zoological park again, claiming that places managing captive animals are inherently unethical and cruel.

Recently a friend of mine shared a photo on social media exhibiting a bear sitting on a cement floor with visitors in the background captioned “Zoo: In what way could this be considered educational?” In her own words she briefly said that zoos have no purpose in our modern day world, and only hold animals as prisoners. Not only did this friend offer a misrepresentation of modern zoos; she also lacked an understanding of the importance zoological facilities have. Centuries ago, zoos were once a place where animals merely served as a form of entertainment. However, today’s modern zoological facilities are the last line of defense for many species on the brink of extinction, serving as a vital role in education, conservation and research.

According to the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, over 18 million people visit accredited zoological institutions annually; that’s more visitors than all U.S major sport leagues’ attendance combined. Stripping people of the opportunity to learn about animals that they may never see otherwise is frightening. Allowing guests to get up close with animals helps make lasting connections that inspire people to want to make a difference. Jack Hanna, a notable animal expert once said, “You have to touch the heart to teach the mind.” He is exactly right. Connecting people to wildlife and nature in a man-made setting is imperative to get people to care about our living world.

Implying that zoological parks do not care about their animals’ well-being is shortsighted. Animals in human care have access to veterinary care, a team of nutritionists, and a team of zookeepers dedicated to their daily care. Alongside their physical needs, their mental needs are also considered. Zoo animals are given daily enrichment; this helps stimulate natural behaviors, and encourages animals to think. This can include, but is not limited to: freezing meat in ice blocks for large carnivores, scattering food, and positioning food high up to encourage tool use in great apes. On top of enrichment, providing animals with daily training sessions is also a large portion of ensuring their mental health. Training through positive reinforcement (rewarding desired behavior) allows animals to participate in their own health care, and allows for variety in their day.

Animals living in human care are ambassadors for their wild counterparts; conservation is key to their survival. Most modern day zoos and aquariums are world leaders in conservation efforts around the globe. In fact, a quick Google search can inform you that most zoos and aquariums worldwide are non-profit; the profit made on a daily basis is put directly back into animal care and conservation efforts. The Association of Zoos and Aquariums put in their highlights that \$186 million dollars was put directly into field conservation for 2015 alone, with another \$27.9 million invested in mission-based research. While zoos are involved directly with wildlife conservation, captive animals are also involved by being a part of the Species Survival Plan (SSP). The Species Survival Plan is a carefully organized system that essentially recommends two animals for breeding that would produce a genetically strong offspring. The SSP was created with the intent to hopefully be able to release highly endangered captive bred animals back into the wild successfully. According to ScientificAmerica.com, captive bred animals in zoos have been successfully returned to the wild to help boost populations, some common animals being black-footed ferrets, red wolves, and bongos. This would have not been possible without the millions of visitors, dedicated scientists, and the work of zoos worldwide.

It is also important to note that most places animals inhabit naturally are under threat due to human interaction. The vision people have of the 'wild' is greatly romanticized; we lose nearly 80,000 acres of tropical rainforest daily, we continue to break records for the hottest month on record, our sea ice is melting, and our oceans are becoming warmer, more acidic, and polluted. We are currently living in the middle of the sixth mass extinction, and we are seeing entire species expire 1,000 faster than the natural rate. We live on a planet where we are simply allowing so many amazing species to slip into a silent extinction, yet lack the initiative to make a change. According to the film Racing Extinction, we lose 200 species a day, nearly 30,000 every year. One of our closest living relatives, the orangutan, which makes up 96.4% of our DNA is currently critically endangered, ninety-six elephants are slaughtered every day for their ivory and have taken a 30% loss of their entire population in just seven years. The list of species fighting for their lives goes on and on.

Zoos and aquariums are not what they were merely 20 years ago. Zoos are not prisons, but are collaboratively working together to further improve the lives of animals in captivity and in the wild. I strongly encourage every non-zoo believer to visit their local zoo, to get involved, ask questions, and think harder because there is so much more than what meets the eye. Let us not be the generation that has to take our children to a museum to see a tiger or elephant. How would we explain that to them? The future of earth's animals depends on the decisions we make today.

Confidently yours,
Andrea Przybylski