

## Beyond Bars

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Finding out a polar bear at the zoo is on Prozac, the same depression medication as 28 million people in the United States, does not make the zoo seem like a fun afternoon activity for the whole family. Most animals in zoos suffer from distress due to their captivity and lack of natural lifestyle. Zoos have tried to make their establishments places of education and conservation of animals, but to a greater extent, they cause suffering to wild species that are already at risk. Zoos themselves aren't the main problem. The main problem is that animals were not brought on earth to be confined and provided with resources, they were meant to live freely, find their own resources, and fend for themselves. **Even if zoos in the U.S. are held to stricter standards, provide an education for the public, and conserve species, the reality is they are ultimately unethical, cannot meet the needs of the animals, and therefore should not exist.**

**See:**

There are two types of zoos: zoos that are larger and accredited and zoos that are smaller and unaccredited, or roadside zoos. Zoos that are accredited tend to replicate the animals' natural environment and only have them in enclosures for a portion of the day. Roadside zoos keep animals in the same or small enclosures with limited access to physical enrichment and socialization. In a 2020 article titled "Overview of Welfare Standards for Animals Used in Zoos and Exhibition," by Tala M. DiBenedetto in the Michigan State University College of Law journal, the author details the differences between "sanctuaries" and private accreditations. The dangers of the word "sanctuary" is that any establishment can call themselves a sanctuary. Real

sanctuaries rescue and rehabilitate animals and are regulated by the AWA- the Animal Welfare Act. Some larger zoos get different private accreditations. Since there are so many private accreditations and regulations varying across states, it is hard to truly know how animals are doing in these places. DiBenedetto writes, “Only a small percentage of exhibitors have obtained private accreditation, and even some of these private standards have been criticized as insufficient to adequately protect animal welfare.” The regulation of zoos and animal welfare in the United States is inconsistent and it is difficult to enforce standard regulations across the entire country. Still, animal welfare groups and researchers propose best practices for zoos and sanctuaries to adopt.

The American Humane Society believes that zoos “serve to preserve and conserve remarkable and endangered species, as well as cultivate new generations of animal advocates.” They also state zoos should be certified individually to be held to science-based standards. The Humane Certified™ program, launched by the American Humane Society, is a global project led by outside experts to ensure accurate and fair certification of zoos. Aside from animal care, zoos and aquariums play a big part in conservation by preserving biodiversity, breeding endangered species, reintroducing animals into the wild, and protecting the species. Supporting ethical standards causes zoos to contribute to the conservation and environmental protection of animals worldwide. With many species facing extinction, the American Humane Society believes it is important for zoos and aquariums to play their role in global conservation by promoting environmental research and providing a habitat that best suits each species individually. In a special 2024 issue of the international, peer-reviewed journal *Animals*, a group of guest Co-Editors authored the article, “Zoo and Aquarium Animal Welfare, Ethics, and Behavior,” and provide recommendations of improvements that can be made at zoos to improve the lives of

animals in captivity. The authors state that humans are responsible for animal needs being met. The individual needs of each species should be determined by science and research, not humans' political opinions, and "a holistic institutional approach that is proactive for addressing animal needs, as well as sufficiently reactive to address needs that may not be static, requires staff and animal training, input from multiple professionals, and ongoing assessment processes." They also affirm that over time, humans need to learn more about animal species and adapt to their necessary lifestyles in order to preserve their population, which will set higher standards for zoos in a world where wild species are going extinct.

In the video "are zoos BIG enough?" the question of whether zoos should be building bigger enclosures is addressed. The size of the animals' environment is only one part of the picture. The video also explores the question of whether some animals should even be in zoos. Most animals don't need an enclosure that looks like their habitat, they need an enclosure with a variety of activities and hiding places. Animals need the same result that their environments in the wild give them like climbing high or hiding low in the ground. Even when enclosures are enlarged, they need to have an equal amount of complexity and enrichment to entertain the animals. Zoo animals need to have enclosures that provide them with choices such as seeking privacy, playing, even ways they prefer to hold their bodies. Animals that are given their own space and choices are more likely to show themselves to visitors. Observers have the image that animals will be happy in an enclosure that looks like a natural habitat, which is wrong. Animals need an enclosure that functions in the same way their natural habitat functions. The design of the exhibit needs to match the needs of the animals individually. Zoos have developed guidelines to maintain high welfare among different species. Some animals do not adapt well to captivity which can mean sometimes there is no exhibit that can ensure the high welfare of those animals.

For example, foraging is a very important activity for tigers because it provides them with essential cognitive processes that are necessary to their well-being. It encourages decision making, learning, walking, problem solving, olfaction, and gathering information. Zoos have a very difficult time providing this key experience for tigers. Increasing the size of an enclosure is good to a point, but past a certain size, space alone doesn't have the same impact. Animals need more complex enclosures that provide a lot of opportunities for them to do different things.

**Judge:**

In a 2021 article titled "Modern Zoos Are Not Worth the Moral Cost" by environmental writer, Emma Marris, she begins the article giving a history of the modern zoo and the designs to make cages look like enclosures instead of the animals being behind bars. Next she talks about zoos becoming places for animal conservation and community education. Her article discusses research on how zoos actually contribute to the conservation of wild animals. Even though zoos have reintroduction programs, most zoo animals will spend their lives captive or are killed because they are considered "surplus." In Europe, many zoos kill their surplus animals and some even use certain animals as food for others when they can no longer afford to keep them. Marris then brings up the argument that zoos are places to educate people and help them see how important conservation is, but she counters this with strong evidence that shows most people go to zoos for their own enjoyment and entertainment. Most importantly, to answer my question, Marris gives convincing evidence that even when animals are taken care of with the highest standards, it is found that they are still unhappy being in captivity. Marris lists the compulsive and unhealthy behavior of animals in captivity such as aggression and repeated movements. She ends the article giving suggestions about what zoos can do to actually help animals to be free and happy.

Zoo supporters say that zoos are a place of conservation and help to prevent extinction, but the truth is many zoos have to kill their “surplus” animals and very few endangered species are actually reintroduced back into the wild from zoo programs, spending all of their lives in captivity. Some exceptions are the Arabian oryx, the California condor, Black-footed ferrets, red wolves, and golden lion tamarins. Even though zoos have reintroduction programs, most zoo animals will spend their lives captive or are killed because they are considered “surplus.” The killing of “surplus” animals happens a lot in Europe. For example, Marris writes, “Early in the pandemic, the Neumüster Zoo in northern Germany coolly announced an emergency plan to cope with lost revenue by feeding some animals to other animals, compressing the food chain at the zoo like an accordion, until in the worst-case scenario, only Vitus, a polar bear, would be left standing.” It is also important to note that the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA), which is one of the top accrediting organizations for zoos, allows for euthanasia of animals, and so even zoos accredited by the AZA are able to euthanize their “surplus” animals. It is also said that zoos are important because they educate people about animals, and this encourages them to care about conservation. In a 2008 study titled “Zoo experiences: conversations, connections, and concern for animals,” of 206 zoo visitors, the researchers found that only 12 percent of these people went to the zoo with the intention of learning more about animals. The majority of them said their main reason for going to the zoo was “to have an outing with friends or family.” In a 2011 study titled “The Role of Zoos in Fostering Environmental Identity” by the same researchers, they found, “there were no significant differences in survey responses before entering an exhibit compared with those obtained as visitors were exiting,” when it came to caring about animal conservation. This means that people didn’t care more about animal conservation after coming out of the Cleveland Bronx, Prospect Park and Central Park zoos.

They also eavesdropped on hundreds of visitors at the Bronx Zoo, the Brookfield Zoo, and the Cleveland Metroparks Zoo. They concluded, “In all the statements collected, no one volunteered information that would lead us to believe that they had an intention to advocate for the protection of the animal or an intention to change their own behavior.” Based on this evidence people do not go to zoos to make a change and learn, they go for fun. Animals should not be kept in captivity, risking their lives as potential “surplus” for the purpose of our entertainment.

Even when animals are provided with the best care, evidence shows they still do not seem to be happy. Animals exhibit “impulsive/compulsive behaviors,” which include self biting, mutilation, aggressiveness, regurgitation, eating feces, and even killing their own young. They also exhibit “stereotypies,” which are constant repeated movements, such as head bobbing, hair pulling, and pacing. Emma Marris cites studies where “80 percent of zoo carnivores, 64 percent of zoo chimps, and 85 percent of zoo elephants have displayed compulsive behaviors or stereotypies.” This information brings back the question from the “are zoos BIG enough?” video about if certain animals should even be in zoos at all. Elephants are one of the many unhappy animals in zoos. Due to their large size and complex cognitive ability, they are prone to mental and physical problems. A common problem for elephants is arthritis and joint pains which come from standing on hard surfaces. Along with that, all zoos elephants mentally suffer from being kept in small yards which do not compare at all to the 50 miles that free ranging elephants walk daily. Zoo animals' mental health is a large part of being held captive. Marris notes that “Many zoos use Prozac and other psychoactive drugs on at least some of their animals to deal with the mental effects of captivity.” At the Central Park Zoo, a polar bear named Gus, was given Prozac in an attempt to stop him from swimming figure-eight laps repeatedly in his small pool. If zoo animals are not showing signs of depression, they are attempting to make an escape and break

out of their enclosures. Kumang, an orangutan at the San Diego Zoo, learned how to use sticks to disrupt the current of the electrical wire surrounding her enclosure; she then was able to climb the wire without being shocked. Another fleeing ape was “at the Los Angeles Zoo, a gorilla named Evelyn escaped 7 times in 20 years.” No animal showing any signs of discomfort in captivity should be held captive or need to be medicated from psychological problems stemming from their captivity.

In Pope Francis’ 2015 encyclical letter, “On Care for Our Common Home,” he teaches that all creations have value and should be treated with care and respect, and he calls for responsible stewardship of nature, highlighting that humans must protect ecosystems and biodiversity. "We are not God. The earth was here before us and it has been given to us. ... Each organism, as a creature of God, is good and admirable in itself; the harmonious order of the world and the relationship between creatures is willed by God." If we, as people, find these teachings to be true, we should not be holding animals captive unnecessarily and causing them to suffer for our benefit. Instead, we should be supporting animals in ways we can that do not include holding them captive and do our job as humans to protect earth and its creatures. Solutions that align with Pope Francis’ letter are ones that respect God's creatures and promote healthy environments and biodiversity.

**Act:**

There could be a global agreement and plan to slowly move away from current zoos by stopping breeding programs, except for ones with endangered animals with the promise that they will be reintroduced into the wild, sending higher needs animals to refuges where they can live truly happy lives without the need to escape or be medicated, and die naturally. If zoos were to send higher needs animals to refuges, other animals could be given more care and zoos could use

the extra space to expand enclosures for smaller animals. Zoos could also incorporate gardens onto their grounds for guests and smaller wild animals to visit. Even with a couple zoos participating in this new plan, the global community and animals around the world would benefit. Other zoos would start to also incorporate this on their own grounds. Wild animal populations, especially endangered animals, would increase if zoos released them back into the wild, creating biodiversity. Some ways we can make the plan more public would be donating to animal refuges, supporting wildlife sanctuaries/refuges rather than zoos, informing others by posting on social media or writing letters to lawmakers, being aware of animal laws and news that could be participated in, and not supporting companies that put animals' lives at risk.

Zoos in the U.S being held to stricter standards does not do enough for the well being of animals that are held captive. As previously stated, captivity contributes to many problems for animals. Animals in captivity are needlessly killed as “surplus” or fed to other animals, stressed to the point of needing medication in order to act normal without violence, used for entertainment as an activity for families, and most importantly they have proven that they are not happy in captivity. Animals spend their whole lives miserable in zoos with improper care and housing. They deserve to be wild and live their natural life in protected habitats, not kept in small enclosures. As Pope Francis said, it is up to us as humans to protect and honor other creatures of God and the ecosystems we live in.

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