

Zoos and Theme Parks: A Study of Animal Ethics

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### Abstract

This paper intends to inform the reader on the current situation of captive animals in the United States of America, along with the positive and negative consequences zoos and theme parks bring. The focus of the paper is to elaborate on the benefits of zoos and the consequences in an unbiased manner. Zoos can be educational institutions that are effective in teaching people about exotic fauna not normally seen in everyday life. They are also economic hubs that provide jobs and make billions for the industry. With conservation campaigns, zoos can bring salvation on extinct and endangered species in a protected environment. However, underlying issues within zoos have recently been uncovered and become topics of discussion within animal activist groups. Events of animals becoming aggressive and erratic within captive settings is a pressing topic, especially when patrons or employees are harmed. Mental and physical problems within captive animals are increasing, especially signs of “Zoochosis,” which will be explained further in the paper. There are a few solutions to captivity and those ideas will also be briefly explained in the conclusion.

*Keywords: animal captivity, zoos, animal ethics*

### Zoos and Theme Parks: A Study of Animal Ethics

The concept of captive exotic animals has been a historically prominent aspect of culture and hierarchy since the ancient Egyptians. Pharaohs kept fauna such as antelopes and coyotes captive and well fed be feasted on, while lions were tamed for symbols of power and royalty. (Bostock, 2003) Zoos and instituted policies have evolved in the past century, especially concerning the ethics of how such animals are treated. They have evolved from simple cages to re-created ecosystems and lively habitats. However, the current state of animal captivity in the United States is a prominent topic of discussion for fauna ethics. The ultimate issue of animal ethics will be addressed through the benefits of captive animals in zoos, the negative consequences it brings, and the solutions suggested by third parties. Understanding animal ethics and rights is key aspect to saving our earth's most vulnerable species, whether it be through captivity or freedom as decided by our zoologists and researchers.

#### **The Benefits of Captive Animals in Zoos**

Zoos have become an important part of American tourism culture and are frequently visited by citizens who have a keen interest in seeing the world's most exotic fauna. According to the Association of Zoos and Animals, over 195 million people visit zoos annually, contributing over 22.5 Billion US dollars to the economy. (Association of Zoos and Animals [AZA], 2018) Zoos and similar theme parks are clearly economic hubs that help boost the economy whilst also educating and entertaining tourists alike. The educational benefit of zoos is impactful, as many people are encouraged to assist in flagship conservation efforts. A study conducted in 2013 surveyed patrons of three prominent zoos in the country. Through a series of questions and ratings, the researchers found that zoo visitors typically left the parks feeling passionate and driven to aid in

conservation efforts for animals, especially “megafauna” such as tigers, elephants, giraffes, and others. This passion was labeled by the group as “conservation caring,” and illustrated the enthusiasm participants had for the exotic animals, a positive product of zoos’ efforts to educate effectively. (Sibkins & Powell, 2013) Besides promoting conservation, zoos have also contributed to saving and protecting endangered and extinct species. Zoos are safe spaces for animals to be monitored, cared for, and researched in a more or less controlled environment. An example of effective conservation efforts is the case of the black-footed ferret. In the 1980s, scientists assumed that the black-footed ferret had become a completely extinct species. However, when several were discovered in Wyoming, they were captured and placed in a federally instituted zoo. Zoologists were able to mate the ferrets, resulting in a reproduction of thousands, thus resurrecting the species and returning it to the wild. (Scholastic Inc., 2016) The ability to re-produce endangered species is especially powerful in terms of biology and sustainability, and increases American morale significantly. Precious species deserve any chance at life again, whether it be through organic and scientific methods. The entertainment value within zoos is powerful in that it generates revenue for the institutions, while also encouraging more patrons to visit. Over 12 million visitors on research tours visit zoos annually, eager to learn more about the exotic fauna. (AZA, 2018) The accessibility of zoos is much more affordable than visiting places where such animals are naturally found, such as Africa, South America, Asia, and even other parts of the states. Because zoo visitors are typically children, this usually instills a sense of educational drive and encourages young people to go into fields of biology, zoological, or veterinary studies.

### **The Consequences of Zoos**

While zoos seem like educational and entertainment hubs, there is also an argument against such institutions. The controversial topic of animal ethics has become a pressing conversation within activist groups such as the People for Ethical Treatment of Animals, the Humane Society of the United States, and others. Animal rights activists argue that zoos are insufficient in providing spacious and ecologically accurate habitats for their fauna. Zoos are supposed to follow the “five freedoms” which are freedom from hunger, thirst and malnutrition; freedom from discomfort and exposure; freedom from pain, injury and disease; freedom from fear and distress; and freedom to express normal behavior. (Mäekivi, 2018) Many institutions interpret these differently, as seen in theme parks like SeaWorld and Marine Land. The small, enclosed tanks of such establishments have led to their animals developing medical problems, and extreme erratic disorders like “zoochosis.” Zoochosis is an anxiety disorder ailing captive animals that results in self harm, aggressive behavior, and pacing. It is caused by the pressures of living in small habitats under the constant attention of humans and results in animals hurting themselves or others. (Scholastic Inc., 2016) An example of such a side effect is the aggressive behaviors of killer whales in captivity, along with their downturned dorsal fins, an illness only found in captive orcas. In 2010 Tilikum, a captive orca, was working with his trainer Dawn Brancheau when he started to attack her and drag her around the tank. Brancheau was killed after significant blood loss and trauma, causing an uproar in animal ethics. (Zimmermann, 2010) Another notable example of animal aggression in captivity is the case of Harambe at the Cincinnati Zoo in 2016. When a toddler fell into the gorilla exhibit, Harambe, a large male gorilla grabbed the child and began dragging it through the water aggressively. (CBS News, 2016) The child lived, but the zoo euthanized the gorilla, once again calling for the questioning

of animal ethics within captivity. Animals become objectified in zoos and seen more as entertainment than educational catalysts. SeaWorld's animal performances are an example of the exploitation of these creatures, as they are expected to do display unrealistic expectations. Animals become biologically compromised in zoos, especially in terms of evolutionary processes due to complete dependency. Because of lack of social interaction, animals become tied to their "roommates," and go through traumatic experiences when that mate either passes away or is taken from the exhibit. The story of a leopard facing its mate's death at an East Coast zoo is an unfortunate example. The leopard became sick and managed to chew away its tail. In the wild, the leopard would most likely have moved on from the death, but because it was trapped in the habitat alone, it could not properly process the incident. (Halberstadt, 2014) Captive animals become both mentally and physically compromised under strict captivity, inhibiting them from living tranquil and long lives.

### **Conclusionary Thoughts and Further Solutions**

In summary, zoos and theme parks have their positive and negative consequences. These institutions are fantastic for encouraging education and research, especially in youth. Conservation efforts are effective in saving species and protecting them from the poachers and threats of the wild. They encourage economic growth and see millions of visitors each year, becoming an integral part of American culture. However, zoos do pose threats to the animals and people within them. Animals, especially "megafauna," become irritable and harmful to those around them as seen by accidents in the past years that have resulted in injury or death. Animals become mentally ill, and their side effects are obvious, but also seemingly ignored. With these aspects considered there are few solutions proposed for zoos. Animal reservations, which are

large, spacious plots of land for fauna to co-exist in, are an alternative to the crowded, cramped habitats. People also suggest that zoos and theme parks be terminated as a whole, however this is an unrealistic conclusion as it would take years to rehabilitate pre-captive animals. Institutions like SeaWorld are starting to change, as they ended their orca breeding and some performance shows in select locations. (Howard, 2017) Maybe zoos should no longer keep megafauna in establishments and focus on showcasing smaller animals, as they are more naturally accustomed to living in such spaces. The question of ethics in animal captivity is not easily answered or solved, however we as patrons of our environment and earth should see the priceless value in such exotic fauna, especially those in which are endangered.

## References

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This website provided reliable facts and figures of Zoos in America. It displayed economic numbers and patron numbers. I primarily used it for addressing the current state of zoos in the states.

Bostock, S. S. (2003). *Zoos and Animal Rights*. Routledge.

This source explained in depth the history of animal captivity. It provided usable context that can be compared to more relevant issues in the topic. I primarily used it in my introduction statement.

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Mäekivi, N. (2018). Freedom in Captivity: Managing Zoo Animals According to the 'Five Freedoms'. *Biosemiotics*, 11(1), 7-25. doi:10.1007/s12304-018-9311-5

This source summarized the five freedoms of zoos, while also giving a historical account of how animal ethics within zoos have evolved. I used this source significantly for addressing both sides of the issue. I ultimately applied it to the consequences of zoos as many institutions misinterpret and twist the five freedoms.

Sholastic Inc. (n.d.). *Are Zoos Ethical?* [Brochure]. Author. Retrieved 2018, from <https://ezproxy.western.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsgao&AN=edsgcl.473845498&site=eds-live>

Provided two perspectives on the issue of animal ethics of zoos. One side argued in defense of zoos while the other disagreed. The information was used in both main parts of my paper.

Skibins, J. C., & Powell, R. B. (2013). Conservation caring: Measuring the influence of zoo visitors' connection to wildlife on pro-conservation behaviors. *Zoo Biology*, 32(5), 528-540. doi:10.1002/zoo.21086

This source provided information on how people interpret zoos in terms of conservation. It illustrates zoos' flagship efforts to promote conservation of their animals. The researchers surveyed zoo patrons to test their passion about conservation and found that it was high. I primarily used this for my section on the positive effects of animal captivity.

Zimmermann, T. (2017, July 18). The Killer in the Pool: A Story that Started a Movement.

Retrieved October 07, 2018, from <https://www.outsideonline.com/1924946/killer-pool>