

Zoos: The Historical Debate

Adapted from an article on Globalanimal.org

For hundreds of years, people have flocked to zoos to see wild animals up close. But many believe that keeping an animal in a zoo is not in the best interest of the animal. Read on for both sides of this debate, told from the perspective of an animal rights activist. — Global Animal

Humans have a fascination with wild animals. Every year, millions of people go on safaris, board whale-watching cruises and watch Jeff Corwin get attacked by snakes on Animal Planet; others drive to their local zoo for a full day of animal gazing.

Millions of people visit the thousands of zoos around the world. We never seem to get tired of watching wildlife! Depending on your point of view, though, zoos are either places of education and conservation or unnecessary prisons. While some people argue that zoos play an important role in conservation of endangered animals, others say that zoos do more harm than good.

So which is it? Are zoos good or bad?

One Side of the Story: Education, Conservation, Entertainment

Zoos have improved a lot in the last 4,000 years. They are no longer filled with cages of cold cement and steel bars. These days, most zoos create friendlier environment for animals. They include moats or ditches to separate animals from people, and mini-habitats that look like the animals' natural environment.

The procedure for acquiring animals has also changed. Zoos used to capture most of their animals directly from the wild. Now, however, they get their animals through captive breeding programs and other zoos. Some breeding programs also help to restore threatened species. After 10 years of working to strengthen the population numbers of the endangered California condor, a type of vulture, the Los Angeles and San Diego zoos were able to rebuild a population of fewer than two dozen birds to around 170 birds!

Some zoos also take in abandoned animals that wouldn't otherwise have a home. Both the Baltimore Zoo and the Detroit Zoo have taken in polar bears rescued from a traveling circus, and the Bronx Zoo took in an orphaned snow leopard from Pakistan in 2007. The cub, Leo, now spends his time frolicking and chasing small animals that wander into his enclosure.

And although zoo animals aren't treated quite like guests at a four-star hotel, their care has improved a lot. Zookeepers now understand that many animals, such as monkeys, bears and elephants, need engaging activities to prevent boredom. This is why you'll often see chimps playing with toys or tigers "hunting" for a meal.

Zoos also give scientists a chance to conduct research. In 2002, zoos participated in 2,230 research and conservation projects in more than 80 countries. The information they gather helps them to develop new medicines and techniques to improve animal health.

Beyond the positive impact zoos try to have on animals, they often affect the people visiting as well. Zoos don't just entertain, they also try to educate. With a variety of programs geared toward children and adults, zoos teach people about the needs of animals and the importance of conservation.

The fact that zoos impact people in a positive way is nice, but it's not the people critics worry about — it's the animals.

Another Perspective: Wild Animals Are Meant to Be Wild

Maggie the elephant is a perfect example of why zoos are not good. For years, Maggie was forced to spend her days in a small indoor enclosure because it was too cold for her to go outside. The zoo put an elephant-sized treadmill in her cage so that she could exercise, but she refused to use it.

It can be incredibly difficult to provide for the needs of animals like elephants. If Maggie and other zoo elephants lived in the wild, they would wander as much as 30 miles a day in large groups, grazing on leaves and stopping to splash in watering holes. In a zoo, they're lucky to get a few acres and a roommate or two.

Maggie's story is just one of many. Zebras at the National Zoo in Washington D.C. starved to death because of insufficient or incorrect food, and the same zoo's red pandas died after eating rat poison.

The Animal Welfare Act in the United States sets standards for zoos here, and some conditions have improved—but some say it is still not good enough. Although natural-looking habitats are more attractive, people like David Hancocks, a zoo consultant and former zoo director, describe them as mere illusions. The animals' homes look prettier, but they really aren't any better than they were before. Indeed, many captive animals exhibit signs of severe distress: People have witnessed elephants bobbing their heads, bears pacing back and forth and wild cats obsessively grooming themselves.

Zoos may not even benefit people as much as we once thought. According to one study, many visitors don't pay much attention to the animals — they're actually talking to each other about unrelated things and spending only a few minutes at each display.

It is unclear whether zoos are good or bad for animals. As you've seen, it depends a lot on what zoo you're talking about, and what the animals are experiencing. If you could talk to animals, Leo the snow leopard would probably tell you that zoos are great; however Maggie the elephant might respond by slapping you with her trunk.

Response to: “Zoos: The Historical Debate”

This article presents some pros (positive sides) and cons (negative sides) of zoos. Use the chart below to sort the reasons and evidence that the author gives us into these categories. Be sure to find more than one text detail for each category. Then think about whether there is stronger evidence for or against zoos, and write to explain your thinking.

Pros: Why Zoos Are Good	Cons: Why Zoos Are Bad
Text Details:	Text Details:

Which side has the strongest evidence? Choose one piece of evidence and explain why it is a strong piece of evidence in this debate.
