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Writing 122

17 March 2017

What are Zoos Good For?

There's only one place to go and see a polar bear play with a big red rubber ball, a sea lion dance in front of glass, an Asian elephant spray water on its back, and a lion stare at a child from on top of a large basking rock all in a matter of a few hours. Zoos are a place for kids and adults alike to see and learn about animals from around the globe. Some people claim zoos only use and abuse these animals to make money, but most zoos care deeply about animals and even breed endangered species for conservation projects to reintroduce into the wild. Contrary to claims of intentional neglect and exploitation, zoos are an integral part of our community because they educate the public, support conservation efforts, and care for animals with behavioral enrichment, trained personnel, and around the clock medical care..

My intense love for exotic animals started at the Oregon Zoo. As a child, my parents signed me up for summer camps across from the Portland Children's Museum nestled in the rolling forested hills of Washington Park. I went to three different camps. I was in penguin camp when I was four, tiger camp when I was six, and cougar camp when I was nine. In penguin camp, children learn to play like animals they see at the zoo. Tiger camp teaches kids about how animals are like superheroes because of their cool adaptations. Cougar camp then

teaches older kids about how animals compete for food. Older camp kids get to stay after hours to watch the

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nocturnal bats and tour the butterfly house. My experiences at the local zoo directly impacted my career choice. Ever since penguin camp, I've aspired to be a veterinarian for exotic animals, and I'm confident I will make that dream come true.

The Portland zoo here in Oregon educates millions of people a year. In fact about 80000 school kids visit the Oregon Zoo with their class each year (Heimowitz). Classes get to pick a program to learn about when they come. The Oregon Zoo also has a contract with Portland Public Schools to come and teach three times a year. They also have an overnight program called "Zoo Snooze" and the zoo teen program. Teacher programs are also available. Programs for low income and marginalized children are run through the zoo too. And new programs are constantly in development. In short, the zoo plays a huge role in educating young visitors about wild animals.

Portland children are lucky because the Oregon Zoo has also always been an excellent example when it comes to animal welfare. The very first animal enrichment conference was hosted by the Oregon Zoo in 1993 (Animal Enrichment). In fact, Wikipedia states that the Oregon Zoo is part of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, which is an organization that gives accreditation to institutions that provide care of higher quality than that required by law. Only certain institutions can gain accreditation. The Bronx Zoo, the Dallas Zoo, and the San Diego Zoo also have accreditation from the AZA (List of AZA member zoos and aquaria). Zoos have come a long way from tiled floors, steel bars, and an excess of bleach and hot water to

lavish, tailored, species-specific exhibits (Halberstadt). Some animal exhibitors go above and beyond what is required by law, but some do less. The Animal Welfare Act was passed in 1966

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and amended in 1970, 1976, 1985, 1990, 2002, 2007, 2008, and 2013. The Animal Welfare Act is the only federal law in the United States that regulates the treatment of animals. However, it only regulates care for certain animals used for research, exhibition, transport, or dealing (Animal Welfare Act). The law outlines the bare minimum for animal care. So, the Oregon Zoo goes above and beyond to show visitors happy and healthy animals.

However, not all animals do well in captivity. So, zoos aren't just focused on the animals in their charge. They play a vital role in protecting endangered species. Conservation projects breed threatened animals at the zoo in hopes to release them back into their natural habitat. The golden lion tamarin, a small primate, and the black-footed ferret have both been successfully reintroduced back into the wild thanks to zoos that dedicated themselves to breeding and raising them (Russo). The Oregon Zoo is currently working with California condors, the Oregon spotted frog, the Western pond turtle, Oregon silverspot butterflies, and Taylor's checkerspot butterflies (Heimowitz). In the past, they have worked with pikas and Columbia Basin pygmy rabbits as well. With their conservation comes research. The Oregon Zoo works with an endocrinologist to study stress hormones in their captive-raised elephants.

To keep animals happy and healthy, zoos often have enrichment plans. Enrichment is used to stimulate an animal's senses in a similar way to stimulation in the wild (Behavioral Enrichment). This means that enrichment plans are species-specific and sometimes even for individual animals. Dr. Jordan Carlton Schaul works with the Alaska Wildlife Conservation

Center, a spacious thirty-six acre semi-natural exhibit where they manage seven bears (Schaul).

Schaul says that even though the habitat is big enough, they still see repetitive behaviors. To

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combat this, they incorporate enrichment. For their Kodiak brown bear cubs, they provide a plastic pond mold turned upside down, a plastic culvert, and training crates. The culvert is used to feed the cubs by filling it with debris and then scattering their food intermittently in the tube to encourage them to seek out and dig for their food. They also scatter fresh produce and seafood. Tires are used to hide food as well. Mealworm dispensers are placed throughout the exhibit which require the bears to manipulate the dispenser to get the larvae. Schaul says that food enrichment can also come in the form of prized treats such as peanut butter, honey, and raisins. All of these actions stimulate the bear's senses and simulates their life surrounding hunting in the wild. The Oregon Zoo makes fish popsicles for their sea otters, gives their polar bears balls, created a giant version of a cat toy for their lions, and hides treats for various animals (Heimowitz). They even give their primates iPads and GoPros to document what they like to do during the day. Prey scents are also sprayed in predator enclosures and they teach their geriatric otter to shoot hoops for exercise. Obviously, zoos do everything they can to give their animals what they need to stay happy.

Although zoos have evolved over the decades to treat animals with the respect they deserve, they will always have critics. Some people argue that animals should be "put in zoos for the greater good of their species rather than profits" (Tse). Unfortunately, in some cases such as roadside zoos, animals are mainly used for profits. In most roadside zoos, visitors can pay to get a picture with a bear or tiger cub. They can even feed them. Sadly, most of these animals are

severely undernourished to keep them hungry and slow their growth. When the animals grow too big to handle, they are sent off. Often, it's hard to find a place for all the cubs to go. The

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demand for cubs creates a vicious cycle of neglect that forces sick animals into refuges and a surplus of these exotic animals. Luckily, the USDA has started to crack down on exhibitors that violate the Animal Welfare Act including roadside zoos (United States Department of Agriculture Cracks Down). It would be better if there were stricter regulations that forced these types of zoos to shut down, but until then, citizens can join or start petitions to close institutions that treat their animals despicably. Or we can also just boycott them. Without the demand for interactions with the cubs, there won't be any reason to supply them.

Another common argument is that demonstrations with animals such as feedings and training sessions in front of guests are bad for the animal's health. In short, they stress the animal to put on a show. Actually, training sessions are used to "facilitate animal care" so that a vet visit doesn't cause unnecessary stress (Russo). When a lion is told to roll onto their back in a demonstration, it simulates the action required during an ultrasound or abdominal exam. A keeper can't force an elephant to do something. These animals have to be willing to do these tasks on their own. These demonstrations have even been shown to increase visitor dwell time and increase the information visitors retain after their visits. Training and positive reinforcement have replaced cattle prods and hoses. Plus a study showed that human-socialized wild animals are not any more stressed around their caretakers than their domesticated equivalent (Vasconcellos). Basically, these demonstrations actually keep the animal less stressed while training them for future health care.

A question that often comes up is why captive animals often show repetitive or damaging behaviors in captivity but, not in the wild and if captive animals were really happy, they wouldn't

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be doing that. These repetitive behaviors are not seen in the wild because those animals would either get eaten by a predator or starve (Halberstadt). There are neurotic animals in the wild. They're just dead. Animals in the wild are just there to reproduce and survive. Captive animals have everything they need: food, water, mates, no predators, and medical care. Dr. Vint Virga, an animal behaviorist, works with zoos across the US and Europe. He treats the animals that are showing these behaviors. He treated a Barbary sheep with severe anxiety after she lost her tail, a gibbon going through the stages of grief, and a Masai giraffe with a fear of men with cameras. Most of the animals he treats wouldn't survive in the wild, but luckily, Virga can treat them. Just like humans, animals can have a mental illness. It doesn't mean they aren't in a supportive and nurturing environment. Most animals have an extended lifespan in captivity because of the medical treatment they receive. Some lifespans can double or even triple. Animals at the zoo are well taken care of. If something is wrong, they can get treatment. That's more than what's offered in the wild.

As a small child at the zoo, I learned about animal behavior, adaptations, and survival. I watched as a vulture flew right over my head during Wildlife Live shows. Orangutans and chimpanzees played on the other side of the glass just like I did with my friends. A Lorikeet drank nectar out of the tiny cup I held in my shaking fist. Zoos spend the year educating people like me and showing the community why these animals are important. They conserve

endangered species and change their enrichment and enclosures to meet all the latest research.

Portland kids are lucky to have a zoo so dedicated to education, conservation, and enrichment.

The Oregon Zoo is a shining example of extensive enrichment plans, quality education,

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wonderful community outreach programs, and large research-driven conservation projects.

Despite some of the controversy around zoos, most of today's nonprofit zoos deeply care for the

welfare of their animals. Without the Oregon Zoo, I wouldn't be on my way to vet school.

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