

A Passionate Call to Leave Animals Alone and Zoos Behind

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1 Zoos have a long history. As early as 2500 B.C., Egyptian aristocrats created menageries, and in 1520, the Aztec Emperor Montezuma II maintained one of the earliest animal collections in the Western Hemisphere.

2 The first modern zoo opened in Paris in 1793, and today about 175 million people visit zoos worldwide every year.

3 But despite their history, as well as arguments from conservationists and educators that they're necessary, Outside Magazine contributor Tim Zimmermann says that it's time that zoos permanently close their gates. He argues that zoos are bad for animals and don't do much good for people, either.

4 “What we definitely know is that many animals suffer in zoos—there are high mortality rates, there are injuries, and there’s depression,” says Zimmermann. “The science and research also shows that wide ranging animals—the animals that are most popular for people to see, like tigers, bears, and polar bears—are the animals that do worst in the zoos. Put all that together, and it’s increasingly difficult to justify zoos as a place to keep animals for our personal observation.”

5 While many argue that zoos present a safe way for people to view wildlife, Zimmermann says that there are plenty of other ways to see and learn about animals in the modern age—everything from your own backyard to YouTube videos and televised nature specials.

6 Additionally, Zimmermann says it’s unclear what people actually learn from visiting zoos. “Zoos are intended to educate and promote conservation, but most of the studies done by the zoo industry on this topic really ask people whether they thought they learned something rather than whether they actually learned something,” he says.

7 Zimmermann isn’t launching an all out attack on zoos—he concedes that many have made an effort to improve the enclosures and conditions of facilities that house animals. But he says the fact is that certain animals simply do not do well in zoos, and many facilities even employ anti-depressants to curb the unhappiness felt by animals.

8 “No matter how natural the tiger enclosure is, for example, it’s still minuscule compared to the range a tiger in the wild would have to roam,” he says. “I think that you just run up against the hard fact that if you want to teach people about tigers and get children excited about tigers, there may be a better way to do that.”

9 Though many argue that zoos serve a purpose in terms of conservation, Zimmermann's research has found that that's just not the case.

10 "No matter what the zoo industry says about conservation, that's not really its primary mission right now," he says. "Less than 1 percent of the species kept in zoos are actually part of serious conservation [efforts]. I think much more could be done by targeting specific species that really do need conservation."

11 Zoos don't just lead to unhappy animals, Zimmermann says. They can actually harm more effective measures of conservation in the long run.

12 "There have been studies done on how people think about conservation and the future of species in the wild," he says. "That sort of research shows that seeing animals in zoos cared for by humans, and hearing about a zoo's conservation plans, reintroduction plans, and breeding plans sometimes tends to make people think that animals are doing better in the wild."

13 Though some say that the ability to view a live animal up close increases an interest in science and zoology among children and young people, Zimmermann says that museums with taxidermied animals are equally effective in piquing that interest.

14 With that in mind, Zimmermann argues that there should be a shift from urban zoos to sanctuary-style habitats and parks that provide animals with more room to roam and more authentic lifestyles. Additionally, he says there is immense value to seeing an animal live in its natural habitat.

15 "There's an idea that somehow it's a right for everyone to see the animals they want to see, when they want to see them," he says. "I tend to feel like it's a privilege to see animals live and it's a privilege to see them in nature. Not everyone can spend the money to go to Africa, but certainly everyone gets outside."

16 He continues: "I believe that the encounters that you have with whatever wildlife is in the natural environment that you spend time in are the natural encounters that are really important. Those are the sorts of encounters people should look for, rather than the more unnatural encounters in zoos in which the animals aren't necessarily doing very well or even living natural lives."

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