

Zoos

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<https://ypte.org.uk/factsheets/zoos/facilities-in-zoos#section>

The Zoo Facility

A zoo is defined as a permanent place where wild species are kept for exhibition to the public.

In theory all zoos should provide the following:

- Food and water
- A suitable environment
- Health-care
- An opportunity to express most normal behavior
- Protection from fear and distress

If any zoo does not come up to the required standards of housing, environment, care and feeding, and perhaps even 'philosophy' one could question why it is allowed to operate at all.

The standard of facilities is, in most zoos, governed by the amount of space available, the size of the collection, costs, and income. This is especially an issue in less developed countries where the zoos may have noble conservation intentions, but limited income. All zoos now face huge feeding bills each year. Maintenance and heating add further outgoings, as do staff salaries and veterinary care. The admission fee to most zoos is expensive, but reflects their running costs. It has been suggested that the best zoos in the country should receive a government grant each year to help zoos develop their two main aims of a) study, research and breeding of endangered species and b) education.

Even in the past 30 years zoos have much improved their facilities and the quality of life of their residents. It is not usually the case in the UK to see an animal pacing up and down its cage out of frustration and boredom, needing to release some energy. The aim of any good zoo should be to recreate the habitat from which the animal came as accurately as possible, with enough space to move around and enough stimulation so that they can behave naturally. Monkey cages should have plenty of branches for them to swing from and bird cages should have enough room so that they can fly. Some zoos hide the lion's or tiger's food so that they have to use their senses to explore and find it. This burns up some of their energy and means that they don't get used to set feeding times which they would not have in the wild.

The amount of space in any zoo is limited and can rarely compare to a creature's range in the wild. A lion's territory can span 100 square miles or more. Therefore, in a zoo they get much less exercise and can put on weight. They also lack the freedom and stimulus of living and surviving in the wild. No matter

how good a zoo is, it is no substitute for the real thing. Some people think that this is justification enough to not agree with zoos at all.

In captivity animals can, on the whole, experience a longer life with vets on hand to give medical attention, a plentiful and guaranteed supply of food and no threats from predators or normal hazards of living. But this in itself is unnatural for these animals and life spent in a small area can only be a bad thing. A lion can expect to live 10 to 14 years in the wild, but over 20 in captivity.

Leaving animals in the wild is the ideal solution where they can express natural behavior and live as part of the bigger eco-system. The sad truth is that the loss of habitats for animals in the wild and the predicted rarity of so many species mean that zoos may be the final refuge for many creatures and the last hope of conserving their species.

Zoos and Conservation

A good zoo can be of tremendous value to the cause of conservation and education, although there are those that believe that animals should not be kept in captivity at all.

Years ago zoos existed purely as what could be described as 'freak shows', there for the entertainment of the public, while the animals were often badly cared for and kept in poor conditions. Nowadays, the Victorian idea of a caged collection for people simply to look at is rather dated, although zoos like this still exist in some parts of the world, keeping the animals in tiny cages, exploiting their collections solely for the purpose of making money and 'amusing' the public. However, in Britain the majority of zoos are actively involved in research, breeding and reintroduction programs which may well help to prevent the extinction of some rare species in the wild.

The World Association of Zoos and Aquariums (WAZA) has over 200 members. Its strategy “provides a common philosophy for zoos and aquariums across the globe and defines the standards and policies that are necessary to achieve their goals in conservation.” WAZA's mission is “to guide, encourage and support the zoos, aquariums, and like-minded organizations of the world in animal care and welfare, environmental education and global conservation.” They are at the forefront of environmental campaigning and ran a petition in the run up to the Copenhagen Climate Change Summit (December 2009) calling on governments to set targets of atmospheric carbon dioxide levels below 350 parts per million in order to prevent a mass extinction of animals.

The Zoological Society of London (ZSL) runs conservation projects in Britain and in over 80 countries around the world, working with local communities to conserve their environment and promote the sustainable use of resources. ZSL's mission is “to promote and achieve the conservation of animals and their habitats, through a broad range of activities.” These activities include projects assessing the wild population of animals and encouraging biodiversity. Their Wildlife Wood Project works alongside timber

companies in Ghana and Cameroon to manage the areas where endangered wildlife may go, since animals do not always stay within the boundaries of national parks. ZSL runs breeding programs and reintroduces animals back into the wild. One of their projects is the “EDGE of Existence” program, EDGE meaning “Evolutionarily Distinct and Globally Endangered.” Their scientific research is used to inform and influence conservation policy among politicians and world leaders. Their EDGE coral reef campaign highlights the threat to this precious eco-system which could be lost by 2065, should atmospheric CO2 levels continue to rise.

Should animals be kept in captivity when they could live in the wild?

There are three justifications for keeping animals in captivity; these are conservation, breeding and education.

Zoos within WAZA receive around 600 million visitors every year, providing a great opportunity to educate the general public about wildlife and environmental issues. London and Whipsnade zoos alone welcome 1.7 million visitors a year including many school groups.

Breeding programs between zoos ensure that a population can grow and some of its members possibly reintroduced to the wild. They are an insurance policy should numbers become critically low in the wild, and many of these schemes have been successful. Zoos must collaborate to ensure that the genetic variety is maintained and avoid inbreeding. Critics of zoos argue that in many cases animals are still kept for show without any intention of releasing them and that we cannot learn anything about the behavior of wild animals when they are being kept in captivity.

Dolphins are highly social and intelligent animals and the ocean provides a very challenging and ever changing and stimulating environment for them, which is by no means replicated in a small pool with chlorinated water. The Born Free Foundation, argues that these are stressful conditions for the dolphins and the aquariums should be closed down. They believe that keeping animals in captivity cannot be justified from an animal welfare or a species protection point of view. They are especially critical of zoos which do not breed endangered species and do not protect wildlife in situ, in the wild, and do not have programs to release them into the wild. There are zoos such as London Zoo which do all of these things and share the Born Free Foundation’s aims of protecting animals in their natural habitats through educating and working with local communities. However, the Born Free Foundation has been working towards its campaign called “Zoo Check” to phase out zoos, marine parks and animal circuses altogether.