

Against Zoos

1. The Moral Presumption Against Zoos: By 'zoo', we mean a public park which keeps and displays animals primarily for the purpose of recreation and education. (Contrast this with the ancient practice of keeping animals for arena fighting or displays of power – ancestors of the modern practices of animals kept for rodeos or bullfighting.)

Jamieson begins by noting that there is a moral presumption AGAINST zoos, because it:

- (a) takes animals out of their natural habitats, and places them in alien environments,
- (b) where their liberty is severely restricted, and
- (c) they are deprived of many goods, e.g., they are prevented from:
 - gathering their own food
 - developing their own social orders
 - behaving in ways that are natural to them

(Not to mention, many zoos practice what has been dubbed "zoothanasia", the practice of killing unwanted healthy animals bred in captivity. European zoos presently "zoothanize" up to 5,000 healthy animals each year. U.S. zoos tend to favor giving their animals contraceptives to prevent unwanted animals.)

Jamieson's focus is on **liberty**. In his 1995 follow-up, 'Zoos Revisited', he writes, "an interest in liberty is central to most morally significant creatures." Zoos violate this interest by taking away an animal's liberty.

Objections: Is that right? We might challenge the claim that zoos remove liberty.

(1) In the wild, animals' freedom is limited in other ways—namely, by ecological and social pressures, including diseases or being killed by predators. Thus, overall, they're just as free in zoos (if not more so, since these pressures are taken away).

(2) Liberty presumes some degree of autonomy. But, nearly all animals are just not the sorts of things that make autonomous decisions for their own lives. They're not self-aware, or capable of forming goals for themselves, for instance. Thus, in this sense, most animals are NEVER free in the morally relevant sense.

Reply: But, some animals ARE self-aware. Furthermore, even those that arguably aren't still make many choices—e.g., regarding mates, nesting location, habitat location, and so on. Finally, if "ecological and social pressures" were enough to render an individual unfree, then it would prove too much. For then WE would also not be free in the "wild".

If the implication is that animals would be MORE free in zoos than in the wild because these pressures are removed, then this would be akin to saying that humans would be more free in prisons than on the street—which is absurd. In any case, this whole objection seems absurd. Says Jamieson: “Indeed, the very point of systems of confinement is to deprive them of freedom.” (1995)

What Morality Says: Put it this way: Any moral theory either (i) accepts that we DO have some duties to animals, or (ii) we do NOT. If (i), then clearly (a) – (c) count as moral reasons against zoos. But, even views of type-(ii) often accept that we have duties REGARDING animals, even if we do not have duties TO them. For instance, even though Kant thought that we had no duties to animals, he still thought that it was morally wrong to harm them, because it indicated that the person doing the harm had a cruel character, and even risked cultivating this cruel character to the point where the person might eventually harm other humans.

In short, the ONLY sort of view which would not count (a) – (c) as moral reasons against zoos are ones which state that our treatment of animals is “utterly without moral import” (1985). If you disagree that there is a moral presumption against zoos, then what you are “committed to is the view that everything else being equal, it is a matter of moral indifference as to whether animals are kept in captivity; we might as well flip a coin. I believe that this view is implausible.” (1995) This view Jamieson dismisses as absurd, and not even worthy of discussion.

Conclusion: Thus, to defend the permissibility of keeping animals in zoos, we are left with only one option: Namely, we must identify some benefit which OVERRIDES the prima facie wrongness of (a) – (c). (For instance, imagine someone who captures, say, a chimpanzee from the wild and keeps it in a cage WITHOUT any reason whatsoever. In this case, with no justifying reason for doing so, this behavior seems clearly wrong.)

2. Overriding Benefits: So, what ARE our reasons for keeping zoos? Some suggestions:

- (1) Amusement
- (2) Education
- (3) Advancement of Scientific Research
- (4) Preservation of Species

(1) Amusement: We enjoy seeing animals on display. It’s entertaining. In some types of zoological parks (e.g., Sea World), the animals are even trained to do stunts for our pleasure. But, is our amusement sufficient to justify the practice? Jamieson says ‘No’ and dismisses this justification without argument. [*Are you satisfied with this response?*]

(2) Education: Perhaps zoos are a valuable resource, educating the public about animals.

But, is this true? The typical zoo-goer simply walks past each display, pausing only for a brief moment to view each specimen. Furthermore, Jamieson suggests that zoo-goers are not generally more knowledgeable about animals than non-zoo-goers, and in fact may be LESS knowledgeable than, e.g., backpackers, hunters, and fishermen. What we tend to “learn” at zoos is just that this species is ‘cute’, that one is ‘strange-looking’, and this one seems to do nothing but sleep, etc. How valuable is this “knowledge”?

What is it that we actually want people to learn about animals? How they behave? If so, then viewing an animal in a small, artificial setting in captivity is not likely to convey this.

Are zoos really the best way of educating the public of the things that we think they ought to know about animals? Or are there other, better, and less harmful forums for doing this? (For instance, nature documentaries such as Planet Earth or Blue Planet.)

(3) Scientific Research: If zoos afforded us the opportunity to make advancements in scientific research, perhaps this would be of some value.

But, do they? Certainly behavioral studies seem better suited to studying animals in the wild (since the behaviors of animals in captivity are not very good indicators of the true, natural behaviors of any species). And any sort of clinical trial or study generally requires far more specimens of a species than are kept in a zoo.

In truth, not a lot of research is even conducted at zoos. Research that IS conducted is often “veterinary and reproductive” in nature (to use the words from the ‘about’ page of the National Zoo in Washington, DC). In other words, they’re researching how to keep animals healthy, how to give them longer lifespans, and how to encourage breeding, etc., while they’re **in captivity**. But, this research (a) pre-supposes that zoos are already justified, morally, and (b) is only beneficial if zoos already exist.

In any case, Jamieson notes, since most zoos do not conduct research at all (especially the small ones), most are not justified on these grounds. And, if this WERE a morally justifying reason, he says, it seems like it would only justify the existence of a handful of very good zoos.

(4) Preservation: Perhaps zoos can be a valuable tool for preserving endangered species. But, there are several concerns worth noting:

- At best, this would only justify keeping ENDANGERED species in captivity.

- Because of the populations needed to successfully save a species from extinction, we can only preserve a VERY few number of species in zoos.
- Unfortunately, this is seldom the case, and the number of endangered specimens in zoos is typically so small that they tend to become inbred.
- Reintroduction into the wild is an even MORE difficult and unlikely result. Endangered animals bred in captivity are seldom reintroduced back into the wild. And when they ARE, they often do not survive. Simply put, animals bred in captivity often don't know HOW to survive in the wild. Years of captivity even tends to alter a species so much that it becomes domesticated rather than wild. In short, a zoo's "conservation" efforts just prolong the inevitable. Typically, zoos are just the "the last stop on the way to extinction." (1995)
- Finally, even if this WAS a justifying reason, then it seems to justify large breeding facilities rather than zoos.

Note that there ARE some success stories: The California condor population was down to 22 individuals in the 1980's, but is now back up to nearly 500 (about half of these are presently living in the wild) thanks to conservation efforts led by the San Diego and Los Angeles zoos ([here](#)). Yet, this effort ultimately cost \$35 million. Was it worth it? [*Discuss.*]

'Extinct in the Wild': Many of the "saved" species exist ONLY in the artificial environment of captivity (a designation called '[extinct in the wild](#)'). Is this a good thing? What exactly IS it that we are preserving if we keep an extinct species alive only in zoos? At that point, aren't we just USING the individual animals for their DNA? Jamieson asks,

"In doing this, aren't we using animals as mere vehicles for their genes? Aren't we preserving genetic material at the expense of the animals themselves?" (1995) "Is it really better to confine a few hapless Mountain Gorillas in a zoo than to permit the species to become extinct?" (1985)

If extinction matters morally, and what we're concerned with is preventing this, then preserving extinct animals in zoos seems like too little, too late. Jamieson is perplexed by the fact that we seem to do little or nothing until such a late stage. He writes,

It is a "peculiar moral schizophrenia of a culture that drives a species to the edge of extinction and then romanticizes the remnants. Until a species is on the brink of extinction it seems to have little claim on our moral sensibility. ... If we are serious about preserving wild nature we must preserve the land, and not pretend that we can bring nature indoors." (1995)

3. Conclusion: Are the initial moral reasons against zoos overridden? Jamieson adds a final concern: The existence of zoos perpetuates “a false sense of our place in the natural order.” We are, he says, really just “one species *among* many”, but it is the nature of a zoo to imply that we are “one species *over* many”. In other words, keeping animals confined to small, artificial habitats sends the message that animals are the sorts of things to be subordinated, their wills bent to our own, for our pleasure. In short, it perpetuates the sentiment of **speciesism**, which is, he adds, both “false and dangerous”. He concludes that we morally ought to abolish zoos.

*[I sort of wonder, is there something special about seeing a living animal **with one's own eyes**—something almost spiritual in its awesomeness—which no documentary can replicate? (Similarly, no documentary can capture the awesomeness of seeing the Grand Canyon, or the California Sequoia forests firsthand.) Might seeing a living, breathing animal, moving, even making eye contact, etc., evoke empathy and understanding in a unique way? If so, then might the first-hand experiences of today's children at zoos be the means to inspiring the next generation of great conservationists, or animal rights activists? And, finally, if so, would THIS justify zoos? What do you think? (A worry: Certainly, 'inspiring conservation' would not be a great enough good to justify HUMAN zoos!)]*

For some videos on the topic, see [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).