Title: Zoos

Author(s): Susann Cokal

Source: ***St. James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture.*** Ed. Sara Pendergast and Tom Pendergast. Vol. 5. Detroit: St. James Press, 2000. p230-233.

Document Type: Article

**Full Text:** COPYRIGHT 2000 Gale Group, COPYRIGHT 2005 Gale, Cengage Learning

Page 230

**Zoos**

Collecting and displaying live animals, often from exotic locales and faraway continents, has been part of human life for at least 4,500 years. Originally featured in royal or imperial parks and pleasure gardens, upon the rise of bourgeois culture such animal collections opened to the public and became known as zoological gardens, or zoos, where visitors could contemplate "the wild" and its relationship to human civilization. By the end of the twentieth century a zoo visit had become one of the rituals of modern life, particularly during childhood; according to a study by the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums, 98 percent of all American and Canadian adults had been to a zoo by 1987, and one-third of them had paid a visit in the last year. Around the same time, the legitimacy of collecting and displaying animals became hotly debated, with some people arguing that putting animals in any kind of cage or enclosure was inhumane, and others pointing out that zoos and captive breeding programs offered many species their only hope of survival. In any event, by the turn of the millennium modern zoos seemed to be focusing (somewhat desperately) on animal welfare and conservation, combined with human education, rather than on entertaining visitors at the expense of inmates.

Human Mastery, Animal Functionality, and Living Conditions

Zoos have traditionally been dispersal points for information about the relationship between humanity and nature—information deliberately shaped by the owners and/or caretakers of the animals, whose decisions have in turn been guided (at least in the last hundred years) by what research shows the zoogoers want to see. In any collection, the animals have been essentially packaged, made into products filtered by human minds and placed in surroundings that say something about the beauty of Creation, the dominance of humankind over nature, or the need for environmental economy and sensitivity. Whether enclosed in cages or moated "environments," the collected creatures usually seem to do no work (unlike farm animals), earning their keep simply by *being* and being looked at—only passively conveying their controllers' subliminal messages to viewers.

For most of the zoo's history, this perceived limited utilitarian function resulted in cramped quarters, poor diets, depression, and early death for the animals. In an era when animals' value was measured by the physical work they did or the food they produced, perhaps it was reasoned that if the animals served a merely decorative function—as most zoo owners and visitors seemed to have felt they did—they were not entitled to comfortable environments and interesting daily activities. In the twentieth century, studies proved again and again that for most animals a caged life was a short and unhappy one.

To begin with, for many species (including *Homo sapiens*), a stare is received as a threat. Bored and depressed animals might fill the hours with repetitive behaviors known as stereotypy: masturbating to a danger point, pacing their paws raw, or—like many chained elephants—swaying endlessly from side to side. Some chimpanzees developed bulimia, and scientists documented psychosis in a baboon kept on Cyprus. While some people were concerned about these conditions over the years, few took it upon themselves to do much more than decry them; the zoos were not there for the animals but for the people who might have emotional reactions to them.

Symbols of Power

Over the years, animal collections and their subliminal significance evolved from the huge local-antelope assemblages in Sakkarah, Egypt, through signs of imperial power in ancient China and Rome, to the living museums of the current century. In ancient times, a large collection of exotics made a fine testament to royal or imperial power, demonstrating a warrior's ability to bring natural (and, by extension, human) populations under control.

Egyptian, Greek, and Persian rulers were avid collectors, and the Hebrew Bible attributes a substantial menagerie to King Solomon in the tenth century b.c.e. In the early Common Era, Roman emperors kept lions, tigers, crocodiles, elephants, and other impressive animals; the public could view these exotics in between triumphal imperial processions and spectacular gladiatorial exhibitions in which the animals were, by and large, massacred—occasionally by the thousand. Medieval European nobles and monarchs assembled private menageries that then testified to the owners' social position; they often exchanged exotic animals as gifts and tokens of esteem. Lions and leopards were considered particularly valuable; indeed, from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century, Europeans were more interested in the animals of Africa and the Far East than in those of the New World. Meanwhile, European voyagers were discovering the same passion for exotic animals in other cultures: In the thirteenth century, Marco Polo marveled at Chinese emperor Kublai Khan's extensive menagerie, including leopards, tigers, elephants, and hunting birds, while in 1519 Hernando Cortés reported that Aztec emperor Montezuma employed hundreds of gardeners and animal keepers for his collections (three hundred worked in the aviaries alone).

Public Fascination and Entertainment

As cities developed in the modernizing world, zoos became increasingly attractive and accessible to the public. Humankind was moving away from daily contact with nature, and even locally occurring animals were exoticized by urban living. Commoners—most of whom had no opportunity to travel to distant locales—were just as interested in exotic collections as their rulers were. Ancient Greeks paid to see certain bird collections, and starting in 1252 the subjects of Henry III of England could visit his menagerie in the Tower of London for a small fee. In the Renaissance, some enterprising men toured menageries around smaller towns and villages. With the Industrial Revolution and its attendant notions of educating and "re-creating" the worker, zoos (like other large urban parks) became truly widespread and available to the masses. A stroll through a zoological garden, it was believed, was an opportunity for relaxation, play (visitors were usually encouraged to feed the animals), and useful contemplation of the wild and exotic.

Zoos were never more popular than in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Philadelphia Zoo, the first to be founded (though not the first to be opened) in the U.S., welcomed its first visitors in 1874; that year 200,000 people paid 10 or 25 cents, depending on age, to see 282 exotics. In an era when a bear cub could cost only $10, the Central Park and Lincoln Park Zoos weren't far behind; the National Zoo opened in 1889, closely associated with the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History. In fact, although there was some emphasis on educating and enriching the common mind, such a relationship between living and taxidermied museums was not uncommon; many zoos were founded as a response to taxidermists' and scientists' clamoring for live models. In the early 1800s, the nascent Zoological Society of London declared its intention to bring together animals "from every part of the globe, to be applied either to some useful purpose, or as objects of scientific research, not of vulgar admiration."

Yet vulgar admiration could be said to have carried the day; trained by television and amusement parks, the majority of twentieth-century zoogoers went for cotton candy and sea lion stunt shows, elephant feedings and monorail rides. Education—about habitat destruction, the human value of the rainforest, the life cycle of the koala bear—was largely incidental, though it did eventually become the adminstrators' battle cry.

Naturalism and Education

These days, to visit a typical modern zoological garden is to step into an exotic realm, from the African village-style gateway to the far reaches of the polar bear environment and the ubiquitous jungle-themed trading posts and snack bars. But immersion in an exotic environment had rarely been part of the experience before. Until well into the twentieth century, stacks of cages and gloomy indoor display areas (some of them located in the upper stories of warehouses) were considered acceptable; after all, the public was coming to see the animals, not how the animals lived in the wild. The London Zoo, for example, was famous for housing its collection in buildings that would be considered stylish for human inhabitants—but those buildings were not necessarily the most healthful or comfortable for the exotic species.

Plants were not part of a typical exhibit until France's Louis XIV established what is considered the first real zoological *garden,* at Versailles. His design was revolutionary in that it displayed animals (222 species) and plants together (rather than animals in cages and plants outside). In 1907, German maverick Carl Hagenbeck opened the first barless zoo, whose enclosures incorporated plant life along with animals. Yet, until the end of the twentieth century, indoor barracks and outdoor cages were the norm, and an effort toward naturalism might mean someone had painted an iceberg on the wall of the polar bear exhibit. To avoid harmful drafts, animals were often denied any form of fresh air; historian Emily Hahn has written that in 1902, the cats, monkeys, and parrots in London's Regent's Park zoo were even kept from oxygen. To keep an animal alive under these conditions was nearly miraculous—and, again, made another neat statement about the powers of its possessor.

In 1993 Stephen St. C. Bostock, author of a book on zoos and animal rights, pointed out that zoo animals weren't really prisoners, largely because they showed no consciousness of imprisonment; but nonetheless their status was debated, with the result that many of the conditions in which they lived underwent radical change. Former administrator Thomas French, for example, referred to his old zoo as a “Garden of Captives” in 2010. The newly documented stereotypy led zookeepers to try sometimes radical treatments. A few animals were given the antidepressant Prozac, with surprisingly positive results; however, the cost of dosing a multi-ton elephant was prohibitive, and in any case drugs were usually a last resort. It was generally considered more desirable to enrich animals' lives through stimulating activities, such as searching for food, and more naturalistic environments. Landscape architects and contractors with truckloads of faux rock moved in and remade one zoo after another with cinematic realism.

The more dangerous and exotic an animal was perceived to be, the more popular it was, and hence the more money and attention was lavished on its environment. Lions, tigers, giant pandas, koala bears, and gorillas were among the first to benefit from new-generation treatment. In the 1980s, according to a *Newsweek* estimate, 143 American zoos spent a billion dollars on enriching their animals' lives. Much of that sum went toward creating new naturalistic environments with record-setting price tags, such as Zoo Atlanta's $4.5 million rainforest and the Bronx Zoo's $9.5 million Jungleworld. Most spending was on a more modest scale, but administrators discovered that the animals tended to be happier in their new environments—or at least, the animal lovers were happier thinking about the creatures in them.

Even these attempts at creating natural environments might disappoint their inhabitants. A heap of gunite boulders, for example, probably doesn't feel like the real thing to a lion-tailed macaque. Moreover, only the parts of an exhibit visible to viewers were likely to be redesigned; the night cages, where the animals sleep, generally didn't change. One administrator declared an intention to "mold an exhibit that would provide zoo guests with an experience as natural as possible"; accordingly, most redesigns still kept the zoogoer, rather than the inhabitant, in mind. Studies did in fact show that zoogoers (all TV-trained by this point) tended to think animals displayed in natural environments were more active and attractive, those in cages more passive and less interesting. But all that planning and work was, in the end, lavished on a fleeting experience: The 1987 AAZPA study found that most visitors stayed at an exhibit for only one to three minutes.

Conservation and Cryogenics: The Future of the Zoo

Hand in hand with redesign came an interest in conservation, most of it dependent on highly developed technologies. In fact, zoos already had a long history as breeding-grounds for scientific discovery and research: In the eighteenth century, visits to the Swedish royal menagerie inspired Carl von Linné (Linnaeus) to develop the latinate system of binomial nomenclature by which animals and plants have been classified ever since, and post-Industrial Revolution zoos were considered valuable resources for natural historians and taxidermists.

In the mid-twentieth century, as human concern for the environment mounted, zoo animals took on a new function, as agents of global salvation. By means of captive breeding programs, including cryogenically frozen eggs and sperm, zoos set out to become latter-day arks, saving species from what many people saw as inevitable extinction due to expanding industrialism and consequent environmental catastrophe. There was also a concern with preserving not just an animal's body, but its natural behaviors (including mating, predation, foraging, and leisure activities) as well. These new interests, like the surge in redesign, were perhaps the indirect result of the technology used in TV's nature programs and cinema's special effects: Zoos had to become more "authentic," too.

This emphasis on conservation was seen by some as ironic, given the depredations that had taken place as industrial-era zoos were first stocked. Until the Endangered Species Act was passed in 1973, famous animal suppliers such as Frank Buck regularly ventured into the wild to slaughter adult animals and bring the babies back alive. But by the turn of the millennium there seemed to be little doubt that preservation of individuals and conservation of species, as well as enrichment of captive lives, were high priorities.

Accredited zoos joined a worldwide breeding network; under the SSPs, or Species Survival Plans, sperm and eggs were frozen, live animals shipped from one end of the globe to the other in order to mate. Some embryos of rare animals, such as zebras, were gestated inside more common species, such as domestic horses. Yet even with their best efforts and most sophisticated technology, zoo administrators estimated that they could save only about 900 of the 2,000 vertebrate species expected to go extinct by the year 2000. The current success rate is impossible to determine—but most admit that, for example, the African elephant will almost certainly be extinct by the year 2020, with just a few elderly specimens languishing in zoos that cannot provide the conditions in which they might reproduce successfully.

With the cryogenic zoo, humankind has become more than ever the race that had mastered all others. Even as most zoological gardens attempt to educate visitors about the beauty and importance of wild animals and plants, other workers behind the scenes are manipulating nature with their test tubes and psychotropic medications. Zoos are thus a combination of television-era entertainment, lite news, and science fiction.

It must be emphasized that most of those scientists and keepers—and many fee-paying visitors—are indeed motivated by high ideals such as respect for other species, rather than the appetite for self-aggrandizement that marked the owners of older zoos.

But the desire to rescue those species nonetheless may be said to stem from the old impulse to control nature and make use of it as something both antithetical and complementary to human civilization. In *New Worlds, New Animals,* Michael H. Robinson, onetime director of the Smithsonian Institution's National Zoological Park, placed the drive to collect living things and "alter [… ] them for our benefit" at the origin of civilization. As the twenty-first century advances, the contemporary zoo, like its predecessors, is a living (though increasingly frozen) embodiment of that drive.

—Susann Cokal

**FURTHER READING:**

“African Elephants Face Extinction by 2020, Conservationists Warn.” *The Telegraph, UK,* August 4, 2008. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/earthnews/3348683/African-elephants-face-extinction-by-2020-conservationists-warn.html>. Retrieved December 12, 2011.

Bartlett, A. D. *Wild Animals in Captivity.* London, Chapman and Hall, 1899.

Bostock, Stephen St. C. *Zoos and Animal Rights: The Ethics of Keeping Animals.* New York, Routledge, 1993.

Croke, Vicki. *The Modern Ark.* New York, Avon, 1997.

French, Thomas. *Zoo Story: Life in the Garden of Captives*. New York, Hyperion, 2010.

Hahn, Emily. *Animal Gardens.* New York, Doubleday, 1967.

Hancocks, David. *A Different Nature: The Paradoxical World of Zoos and Their Uncertain Future*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002.

Hanson, Elizabeth. *Animal Attractions: Nature on Display in American Zoos*. Princeton University Press, 2004.

Hoage, R. J., and William A. Deiss, editors. *New Worlds, New Animals.* Baltimore, Johns Hopkins, 1996.

Livingston, Bernard. *Zoo Animals, People, Places.* New York, Arbor House, 1974.

Ritvo, Harriet. *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1989. [*note: I think I included this in my first bibliography long ago; it’s where I got most information about nineteenth-century zoos, but it seems to have been dropped somehow, so I’m reinstating.]*

Lord Zuckerman, editor. *Great Zoos of the World: Their Origins and Significance.* Boulder, Colorado, Westview Press, 1980.

**Source Citation**

Cokal, Susann. "Zoos." *St. James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture*. Ed. Sara Pendergast and Tom Pendergast. Vol. 5. Detroit: St. James Press, 2000. 230-233. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Web. 11 Dec. 2011.

Document URL

http://go.galegroup.com.proxy.library.vcu.edu/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CCX3409002760&v=2.1&u=viva\_vcu&it=r&p=GVRL&sw=w

**Gale Document Number:** GALE|CX3409002760