

# Are Zoos Ethical?

**T**he idea of the zoo goes way back: Archaeologists have discovered evidence of a zoo belonging to the pharaohs in ancient Egypt, and Chinese emperors around 1000 B.C. are known to have kept large animals in cages. But it wasn't until the early 19th century that public zoos began appearing, in European cities like Paris and London. The first American zoo opened in Philadelphia in 1874.

Today, there are more than 200 zoos in the United States. Last May, a 3-year-old boy fell into the gorilla enclosure at the Cincinnati Zoo, prompting authorities to shoot and kill a 17-year-old lowland gorilla named Harambe. The incident shocked Americans and rekindled a long-standing debate about the ethics of zoos and aquariums and keeping animals in captivity.

## **Zoos** By the Numbers

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**10,000**

ESTIMATED NUMBER  
of zoos worldwide.

SOURCE: NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

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**700  
million**

ESTIMATED NUMBER  
of people who visit zoos  
and aquariums worldwide  
annually.

SOURCE: WORLD ASSOCIATION  
OF ZOOS AND AQUARIUMS

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**\$186  
million**

AMOUNT of money spent  
in 2015 on conservation by  
institutions belonging to  
the Association of Zoos  
and Aquariums.

SOURCE: ASSOCIATION OF ZOOS AND AQUARIUMS



**A gorilla behind glass**  
at the Bronx Zoo in New York City

**YES** In a world where some of our favorite animals—including lions, cheetahs, frogs, elephants, and others—are at risk of vanishing forever like the dinosaurs, zoos are a safe haven from **poaching**, habitat loss, climate change, and disease.

Zoos provide protected space for animals where we can study them and work to minimize the threats—with the ultimate goal of returning endangered species to wild spaces.

**Conservation** is the primary function of zoos. Consider the case of the black-footed ferret: In the United States, habitat loss and disease had wiped the animals out, and people thought the species was extinct. After a few dozen wild ferrets were discovered in 1981, zoos brought the animals into human care in 1985. They worked with the federal government to learn about and breed the animals, and have been returning ferrets to the wild. Today, 1,000 black-footed ferrets live in the wild—all because zoos prevented their extinction.

Zoos are returning other species to their native habitats too: the scimitar-horned oryx (similar to an antelope),

Przewalski's horses (an endangered species of wild horse), a kind of monkey called the golden lion tamarin, and California condors, just to name a few. U.S. zoos and aquariums spend about \$160 million a year to save species. Zoos allow scientists to get up close to the animals to learn

about their behavior, reproduction, and genetics—all of which are key to helping save them. Scientists don't have this kind of access in the wild.

Zoos also inspire visitors to take action in their own lives to help conserve wildlife. More than 180 million people visit American zoos each year, giving them the

opportunity to connect with and learn about animals.

If animals can't live safely in their wild homes, we want to make sure they thrive in human care, and we want to partner with other researchers, governments, businesses, and nonprofits to tackle conservation comprehensively. Saving species is an evolving and ongoing commitment. That's why zoos are not only ethical—they're critical. •

**—DENNIS KELLY, Director  
Smithsonian's National Zoo, Washington, D.C.**

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**NO** Zoos are first and foremost about entertainment, and the stars of the show are unwilling participants: caged animals. In zoos, animals are typically denied everything that makes their lives meaningful, and virtually every aspect of their existence is controlled and manipulated to maximize visitor satisfaction.

Zoos cannot possibly replicate wild animals' habitats. American law requires only that animals in zoos be provided with enough space for them to stand up, lie down, turn around, and take a few steps. Animals that would normally roam or fly over vast territories are forced to exist in a world measured in square feet.

Zoos provide animals with few opportunities to engage in natural behavior and little mental stimulation. In these artificial, restricted conditions, animals may have a mental breakdown and develop "zoochosis"—a form of psychosis that can cause them to sway or pace continually, chew on their own limbs until they bleed, or pull out their own fur or

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feathers. Some zoos dispense antidepressants and other drugs to curb such abnormal and self-destructive behavior.

And even though zoos claim to provide educational opportunities, most visitors spend only a short time at each display and afterward typically report, when asked, that they've learned nothing from the exhibits. Scientists, meanwhile, struggle to learn anything about natural behavior from animals that are forced to live in an unnatural setting.

As for conservation, zoos tend to favor exotic or popular animals—that draw crowds—rather than threatened or endangered local wildlife. Most animals housed in zoos are not endangered, and those that are will likely never be released into their rightful habitat. Most zoos' research is geared toward finding ways to breed and maintain more animals.

Forcing animals to live in cramped cages from birth until death just so that people can be distracted and amused for a few hours is ethically indefensible. •

**—MARTA HOLMBERG**

**People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA)**