

The Humane Society Institute for Science and Policy  
**Animal Studies Repository**

1981

# People at Zoos: A Sociological Approach

Edward G. Ludwig  
*State University College*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://animalstudiesrepository.org/acwp\\_zoae](http://animalstudiesrepository.org/acwp_zoae)



Part of the [Animal Studies Commons](#), and the [Other Anthropology Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Ludwig, E.G. (1981). People at zoos: A sociological approach. *International Journal for the Study of Animal Problems*, 2(6), 310-316.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Humane Society Institute for Science and Policy. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of the Animal Studies Repository. For more information, please contact [eyahner@humanesociety.org](mailto:eyahner@humanesociety.org).

# People at Zoos: A Sociological Approach

Edward G. Ludwig

*This is a participant observation study of animal/human relationships at zoos. Both zoo personnel and zoo visitors were observed intensively over a period of four months and less intensively for two years. While young zoo employees tended to be naturalistic, ecologicistic and scientific in their value orientation toward animals, these attitudes were often frustrated by the day to day routines of the job involving hosing and feeding, and the realities of limitations placed upon zoos by strained budgets and antiquated buildings. The public tended to be an additional source of frustration due to their apparent lack of sensitivity and desire to be amused rather than educated.*

## *Methods*

Zoos are but one context within which humans relate to animals. This study deals with that context alone and is based primarily on the observations that I made at one medium-sized zoo. Observations began during the spring of 1978 and continued over a period of two years. I continue to serve as a zoo volunteer, but have ceased taking precise notes. I have visited many other zoos of varying types and sizes since this study began, but observations of them were much briefer and less structured.

At the outset I formally joined the docent organization operating at the zoo chosen for detailed study. This is a group of public-spirited volunteers who donate their time for the benefit of the zoo and the zoo public. I completed the ten week course for new docents and qualified to serve as a guide for groups of people, mostly school children, visiting the zoo. Approximately 40 such tours of approximately one and one-half hour length were conducted, most during the late spring and summer of 1978. About thirty additional hours were spent posing as a regular zoo visitor for direct observation of the public. Permission was also received from the zoo director to spend the working day with the zoo employees. Contact of this nature was made with twenty of the twenty-six employees involved with animals including keepers, curators, the veterinary staff, and the director. Most encounters lasted between one and three hours, while some were carried over several days. Over eighty hours were spent directly with zoo employees.

No actual notes were taken while conducting the zoo tours, while observing the public or while working along with the zoo employees. Lunch hours were taken in my car at which time field notes were compiled for later use. Similar recordings were made at the end of the day.

With the exception of the zoo director, none of the employees I accompanied on the job were formally interviewed. Information was gained from general conversation throughout the day after I had been introduced as a college professor interested in zoos. These conversations were carried on as I tagged along on their

---

*Dr. Ludwig is Professor of Sociology at State University College, Fredonia, New York 14063. This is the edited version of a paper originally presented at the annual meeting of the Eastern Sociological Society, New York, NY, 16-18 March 1979.*

rounds, sometimes helping them lug hay, pull a hose, and the like. Most were very eager to discuss what the job was like, how they felt about zoos, what animals were giving them trouble, and generally to teach me the ropes. The quotes which follow are not totally accurate but are taken from my notes recorded from memory. It was my conviction that any actual notetaking during conversations would have seriously damaged the rapport which I was able to establish.

The first part of this paper will deal with impressions reached from conversations and interaction with the zoo employees. The second part will be based on the experiences with the school children and observations of the general public. The third part will deal more generally with the zoo context itself.

## Zoo Employees

### Value orientations

One of my primary interests was to determine the particular value orientations of zoo employees with respect to animals. For this purpose, I utilized the typology created by Dr. Stephen Kellert in his studies of attitudes toward animals (Kellert, 1976, 1980). (See Table 1).

Efforts were made to place expressions of attitudes elicited in conversations with the employees into Kellert's categories, but this proved difficult due to problems of overlapping. It was even more difficult to assign any particular employee to one or another category with a few exceptions. Contrary to expectations, one employee did appear to be predominantly *negativistic*, yet he had worked at the zoo as a keeper for many years. There is some question, however, whether his deprecating of the animals expressed so much his desire to avoid animals as a general desire to avoid work. He referred to the elephants as "the biggest asses in the place."

Another employee appeared to fit rather well in the *dominionistic* category. He enjoyed talking about techniques for moving or capturing animals and his overall principle was that "you can't trust the bitches."

**TABLE 1—Attitudes Toward Animals**

Naturalistic	Interest and affection for wildlife and the outdoors
Ecologicistic	Concern with the environment as a system, with wildlife species and with natural habitats
Humanistic	Interest and affection for individual animals, principally pets
Moralistic	Concern about the right and wrong treatment of animals, with strong opposition to exploitation and cruelty involving animals
Scientistic	Curiosity about the physical attributes and functioning of animals
Aesthetic	Interest in the artistic and symbolic characteristics of animals
Utilitarian	Concern with the practical and material value of animals
Dominionistic	Concern with mastering and controlling animals
Negativistic	Interest in avoiding animals, due to indifference, fear, dislike or superstition

While many employees expressed affection for animals they had come to know well and worked with over a period of time, only two appeared to be truly *humanistic* from the standpoint of their disapproval of putting sick animals away and the desire of one to nurse a paralyzed rodent for which there was no hope.

The curators fit rather well in the *scientistic* category in their concern for knowledge about breeding, illnesses and behavior problems but this was coupled with strong *ecologicistic* sentiments. One expressed the desire not to have to open the gates to the public every morning, wishing instead that he could "close 'em for good." No one exhibited strong *aesthetic* sentiments except in the context of *naturalistic* ones.

### *Value conflicts*

It seemed logical to expect that zoo people in general would tend to be strongly *naturalistic*, *ecologicistic* and *scientistic*. Our expectations were only partially borne out. Whatever the person's orientation prior to employment at the zoo, the fact of employment creates a set of conflicts and contradictions in values in most employees which appear to be inherent in the very nature and function of zoos.

It would appear that most of the younger employees (five or six of those observed) were initially attracted to the zoo because of their *naturalistic* and/or *scientistic* orientation to animals. This type of individual often has had at least some college training in biology, wildlife management, or related area. It very soon becomes apparent to them that the typical zoo at the present time, which depends almost entirely on public approval and visitor demand, can devote little of its efforts to scientific advancement and wildlife preservation in any real sense. Moreover, the new employee soon discovers that most of his or her time is taken up with housekeeping duties—shoveling manure, hosing out cages, removing uneaten food, and so on. It is not that they resent this type of work. As one young keeper put it, "At least I am around the critters, and I like that." But it does not seem to be balanced with any sense of satisfaction that their efforts have any value beyond the very brief amusement of a mostly unappreciative public. In short, they discover that zoos are for people, not for animals. This raises a series of nagging questions and self-doubts which they must grapple with, often on a recurrent basis:

1. Am I learning anything? Is my own knowledge advancing? Where do I go from here?
2. Is the body of knowledge about animals growing and advancing because of zoos? Because of this zoo?
3. Does the public learn anything of value from zoos?
4. How does the keeping of this animal in this cage, which at best is a poor representation of its natural environment, have any bearing on the issues of wildlife management and preservation?

The resolution of these issues is indeed a difficult one given the typical situation in most zoos of strained budgets, antiquated, obsolete buildings, and an apathetic, uneducated public. A number of possible solutions is likely to cross these employees' minds, such as returning to school or seeking another job related to animals, yet the most common response, certainly for those who remain, is to pin their hopes on the future, to perceive themselves as part of a larger picture in which they are able to help further the trend toward more science/conservation-oriented zoos

through education and creation of public awareness. Their perceptions of the public, however, do little to feed that hope. The keeper who views the public each day develops a general impression that the public has only a mild interest in the animals. The general deportment of visitors suggests that they want to be amused rather than educated, and their attention span with respect to any one animal is greatly limited. Reference to the public by zoo employees vary from "They're here for a good time, that's all." to "They couldn't care less." to "They don't learn a darn thing." Some of those whose hopes for the future are dimmed by what they perceive to be an unappreciative public appear to personalize their relationship with the animals and express in Kellert's terminology a much more *humanistic* and *moralistic* orientation. They may go so far as to reject the moral legitimacy of zoos but remain "for the sake of the animals." This is similar to the behavior of employees who remain in other types of institutions whose major purpose they question, such as nursing homes, prisons, and some special schools, on the basis that these institutions would be "that much worse" without their presence.

Clearly not all zoo employees are troubled by these value conflicts. Indeed, most of the older employees do not express these concerns. A few might be classified in Kellert's terms as *utilitarian*. They are likely to place greater importance on the legitimacy of the recreation and amusement function of zoos. For example, one of the older employees expressed his displeasure with the more recent ban on feeding the animals: "People had a great time feeding the animals and more of them came." These employees were much less likely to find fault with the antiquated aspects of the physical set-up except insofar as it made their jobs of controlling the animals more difficult.

The age-old conflict between educated youth and experienced older employees was very evident at the zoo under study. Older employees perceived younger ones to be much too idealistic, and some seemed bent on discouraging younger employees from doing anything beyond the routine tasks of hosing and feeding. Both old and young employees believed in some sort of mystique about communicating and dealing with animals. The older employees were likely to attribute it to years of experience. Younger employees were more likely to identify it as a frame of mind or an ability innate to some people. As one of them put it, "You have to be born with it. You have to have confidence and you have to like animals. But that's not enough. Some people might like animals but they make animals nervous." Most all employees are convinced that they have a "way" with animals as good or better than most everyone else, or at the least, the capacity to develop such a relationship.

We had suspected that different keepers would express a decided preference for one or more animals over others. Moreover, we suspected that there would be greater status associated with the care and responsibility of some animals than with other animals. There was little evidence to support either of our expectations. There did not appear to be any more or less prestige associated with working with elephants, for example, than that associated with working with birds or the large cats. Preference for certain animals over others was more likely to be based on such matters as whether the job was inside or outside, required more or less walking, was more or less demanding of one's time, and the like. I suspect that this apparent lack of preference regarding animals per se stems primarily from the fact that regardless of the animals in one's charge, the job is basically the same: shoveling, hosing, and general housekeeping with no real involvement in activities of an ecological nature.

It became clear that the value orientation of zoo employees with respect to

animals is overshadowed by a myriad of other considerations. The most dedicated animal caretaker revealed at least some ambivalence in his or her approach to animals. The interest in and affection for animals is seasoned by the perception of the animal as a threat: 1) the threat of physical harm, 2) the threat of escape and ultimate blame, 3) problems of control and maintenance of routine, 4) the dependence on the animal as the indirect source of income and job security. Coupling this with legitimate concerns over rate of pay, work schedule, chances of promotion, job security, and the like, it becomes obvious that the employees of the zoo experience the same kinds of frustrations and attacks upon self-esteem as employees in a host of other occupations. Their situation is not unlike the school teacher who finds that behavioral problems occupy more time than teaching, the nurse who spends more time in housekeeping or clerical duties than with patients, or the engineer who seldom gets to use advanced mathematics. The possible examples are endless. But the fact that zoo employees find themselves in a nonessential industry, indeed one that at budget time is sometimes thought by some to be expendable, makes these frustrations doubly difficult.

### *The Public*

Observations made in both formal (guided tours) and informal settings suggest that the zoo employees' perceptions of the public are fairly accurate. For most people, most animals are not interesting enough to command more than fleeting attention. Indeed, most animals are likely to be viewed in passing unless the animal does something to bring the spectator to a halt. People will usually stop, at least momentarily, for 1) animals that beg, 2) animals that are feeding, 3) baby animals, 4) animals that make sounds, or 5) animals that are mimicking human behavior. They will pay little or no attention to animals that are resting, sleeping, or hiding; in fact, they may well find such inactivity annoying. Irritation and annoyance are most likely to be the reactions to animals that eliminate or regurgitate and/or manifest stereotyped behavior such as incessant pacing. Elimination, regurgitation, odors, or exposure of genitals, aside from being annoying, can also be the source of humor and joking for visitors in groups. Any appreciation for the hooved animals seems to be offset by the discomfort they cause by virtue of their larger compounds and the additional walking this entails. Animals are likely to be referred to as cute, funny-looking, lazy, dirty, weird, strange. Only on occasion does one hear any such comments as, "My isn't that a magnificent animal." Such comments are most likely to be made of the giraffe or polar bear. The most common types of questions are: 1) What is that thing? 2) Why does the elephant have a hole in his ear? 3) Why does the lioness have her tongue out? 4) Why does the gorilla throw up (followed by "Oh my God, he is eating it.")? 5) Why isn't the rhinoceros (the kangaroo, the camel) out? 6) Why is the reptile house closed?

For persons with a strong naturalistic orientation, such as some of the keepers (and in this respect, I must confess my own bias), it is easy to develop very strong negative feelings about the public. There is a strong feeling among a good number of zoo staff that many visitors demean the animals and rob them of the respect they deserve. Indeed, a group of people goading the elderly chimp into spitting against the glass and then squealing in delight over the animal's actions, is not a very pretty picture. As one of the keepers put it, "It's people like that, that turn this place into a zoo."

Yet most of the public are not this way. In fact, I suspect that the type just described is a decided minority. They happen to be the ones who are most vocal and visible. Most of the public do not reveal their feelings one way or the other. Hence, statements about them are little more than conjecture. Yet I received the decided impression that many of them, particularly adults without children, felt somewhat embarrassed by the whole affair. Those with children seem less so because in a sense the children give them reason for being there. This aura of embarrassment struck me as similar to that which people experience in the presence of a retarded child or disabled person. It reveals a confusion over what an appropriate response should be. This seems to be particularly the case with animals that look back at the viewer and because of their size look particularly out of place in their (often cage-type) compounds. To carry my conjecture further, I suspect these people do not come back very often. When was your last trip to a zoo?

Guided tours of school children can be quite different, as the emphasis can be placed on education rather than simple amusement. The experience, however, can also be quite disillusioning for the docents when the school children are very likely to view the day as a day off from school. Docents, in general, appear to be highly naturalistic in their orientation. Their fondness for animals, much like that of the keepers, make them more vulnerable to the insensitivities of the public. They come armed with interesting facts and anecdotes about the animals from special classes they have faithfully attended, only to find that they may be talking to themselves and cannot be heard above the babble of voices of children wanting to rush to the next stop, eat their lunch, or head for the special children's petting zoo.

How successful guided tours can be as an educational experience depends to a considerable extent on the preparation in school prior to the event and on the adult supervision that accompanies the class. The recitation of facts and figures can be fatal in attempting to hold the attention of third and fourth graders. On the other hand, contrasting the behavior of animals in the wild as opposed to captivity, and discussing some of the problems in zoos, such as stereotyped behavior, human imprinting, and the like, can successfully hold their attention and create the atmosphere of respect for and understanding of animals that could make for a more intelligent public of the future.

### *The Zoo Context*

The dictionary definition refers to a zoo as a collection of living animals usually for public display. Yet the word is most often used in a context that has no reference to animals whatsoever. Frequently it is used to refer to gatherings of people that are disorderly, chaotic and poorly organized. It is not uncommon for mental institutions, schools, and the like to be called zoos, and when zoo keepers refer to the primate house as being turned into a zoo, their reference is not to the animals but to the people. The most serious shortcoming that zoos must overcome is their history, which conjures up such an image and creates expectations which have long been obsolete. Yet for many these expectations remain. People wish to see active animals, performing animals, roaring animals. They wish to see animals in their wild state but under "unwild" conditions. The fact is, of course, they cannot have it both ways, at least with respect to most animals. The armadillo remains, disappointingly, curled up in a ball because the floor of the cage is steel, and he cannot dig his way underground. The orangutan wears his feeding dish on his head, not to entertain his

public, but because he has nothing else to do. The gorilla regurgitates and eats his vomit, not because he lacks the decency and sense of a human, but probably because feeding in the wild is an all day affair.

Larger zoos and so-called safari parks have attempted to solve some of these problems, but there is no way to display animals in their wild state. The necessity of separating prey and predator, and the fact of artificial feeding, leave little more than illusion. The large herbivores are the easiest to accommodate in a natural state, but these lack the appeal of the so-called wilder animals. Ironically, the one event that comes closest to life in the wild, the feeding of snakes with live prey, often takes place behind locked doors so as not to offend the public.

Our purpose is not to discuss the ethics of keeping animals in a captive state, but rather to point up the dilemma that zoos must face, a dilemma which insures that many visitors to the zoo will leave far from satisfied by the experience. It might be that zoos could be most successful in carrying out their educational mission if they focused on the problem itself, if people were made aware of what the problem of captivity entails, and what that means in terms of wildlife management as civilization impinges more and more upon the diminishing natural areas of the world.

It could well be that certain animals should simply not be displayed in most zoos any longer. Perhaps the empty cage with explanation would be a much greater learning experience than the display of animals in an unnatural state. Perhaps children's zoos should be limited to domesticated animals, and the distinction between them and wild animals be made more apparent.

Perhaps there ought to be a growing emphasis on support of efforts in science and conservation as ends in themselves rather than the implied need to tie them in with amusement/recreation functions of zoos.

### Summary

This is a highly impressionistic and in many ways subjective paper based upon rather limited observations of the human/animal relationship within the context of zoos. It has stressed the value conflicts and dilemmas that arise from the very nature of zoos. Most will agree that zoos can no longer justify themselves on the basis of the amusement function alone, yet neither the attitude of the public nor the set-up of most zoos permit them to be the educational institutions that more legitimately justify them.

Not long ago a sign was put up by some unknown person outside the gorilla cage at the zoo under study calling attention to the high level of intelligence among apes and questioning the adequacy of the facilities for such an intelligent animal. How much better an educational experience it might have been for the public if such a sign or perhaps one somewhat more appropriate had been placed there by the zoo itself.

### References

- Kellert, S.R. (1976) Perceptions of animals in American society, *Trans 41st N Amer Wildl Mgmt and Nat Res Conf.* Wildlife Management Institute, Washington, DC, pp. 533.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1980) American attitudes toward and knowledge of animals: An update, *Int J Stud Anim Prob* 1(2):87-119.