In recent months the news about captive animals has seemed uniformly awful. In February two endangered Corbetti tigers were shipped from Malaysia to the San Diego Zoo in crates partially wrapped in stretch plastic. Upon arrival one was dead. Hannibal, a captive African elephant, died in March while awaiting shipment from the Los Angeles Zoo to the Mexico City Zoo. Lota the elephant was brutally handled during her move from the Milwaukee County Zoo to Hawthorn Corporation, where she is being trained for the circus. The HSUS and the World Wildlife Fund are suing the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to keep endangered pandas out of the Columbus (Ohio) Zoo. These incidents, and hundreds of others, have prompted The HSUS to make a critical reevaluation of our policy on zoos.

In 1975 The HSUS took its first policy position on zoos. At that time the board of directors concluded that The HSUS was neither for nor against zoos but pledged the organization to work against roadside menageries and other zoos that could not improve. The board pledged HSUS support for endangered-species breeding programs and educational programs of quality in zoos.

In September 1984 the board of directors noted in revising HSUS policy that animals should not be taken from the wild for public display in zoos and that zoos, to a considerable extent, cause “abuse, neglect, suffering, and death of animals.” Although the board reiterated its support for endangered-species breeding and meaningful education in zoos, it recognized that conditions in few zoos approached a satisfactory standard. The board again pledged The HSUS to “work with those zoological parks and other zoos desiring to improve and having the capability to do so” but committed us to the “eradication” of zoos that will not or cannot improve.

For The HSUS in 1992, those words, together with our experience, are key elements in a reexamination of zoos, initiated by HSUS President Paul G. Irwin, that focuses on the rhetoric and reality of zoos in America.

Zoos are supposed to be addressing several critical issues. First of these is preservation of endangered species. Zoos proclaim that they are the key to endangered species’ survival and conservation, but this claim is more illusion than reality. Of the more than 900 endangered species worldwide, only 13 have been bred in zoos for return to the wild. For most zoos the breeding of captive animals produces surplus animals to be disposed of, and is apparently
carried on more to justify the existence of the zoo than for any benefit to conservation. When major zoos, such as the National Zoo in Washington, D.C., or the Bronx Zoo in New York City, conduct professional endangered-species breeding programs for the good of the species, they do so in large, isolated enclosures with tight security, and most visitors are excluded.

Zoos also claim to conduct massive public education that leaves the public enlightened about endangered-species protection, wildlife conservation, and habitat protection. Most zoos and exhibits simply do not live up to that claim. How can a zoo claim to deliver worthwhile education when most zoological exhibits demonstrate that human beings can force any animal to live in deprived, decrepit conditions? If elephants are housed in sterile, grass-free exhibits in which they can barely walk around, does even superb educational material provided to accompany such exhibits matter?

Zoo officials are quick to claim that more people visit zoos than attend professional sporting events, but people don’t attend zoos because of the educational experience they provide. Zoos are cheap recreation, particularly for families with children. We should not confuse enjoyment of snowcones and popcorn with an enlightening educational experience for either children or adults, particularly if what is being claimed is an ecological education that teaches the value of ecosystems.

In particular contrast to the superficial educational message of primarily recreational zoos is the growing sophistication and quality of wildlife-oriented videos and specials on public television and elsewhere. One of the most gratifying developments at The HSUS, from my perspective, is how the public and our members have grown in their understanding of and sensitivity to the plight of zoo animals and the real message of most exhibits. The public is more and more troubled by the inherent conflicts in the zoo message. The HSUS shares that view. We cannot teach compassionate ecological action on behalf of animals or their habitats by imprisoning magnificent animals from foreign lands. The two don’t equate.

Moreover, the position of the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums (AAZPA) in this debate is worrisome. The AAZPA is the professional organization representing zoos and aquariums. They presumably are the best such institutions in the United States. Each time The HSUS criticizes zoos, the AAZPA cries, “Foul! Our AAZPA zoos are better than that. When you criticize zoos, you lump us in with them.” True, but animals don’t suffer in accordance with any membership category of their housing institution. They suffer a life of misery, one animal at a time. The existence of an expensive exhibit (rain forests are now “in”) cannot serve as an excuse for inadequate facilities or cruel treatment. While some zoos are better than others, all zoos in our experience have facilities and procedures that subject some animals to cruel, demeaning, or inhumane treatment. If some zoos are better than others, let them stand on the merits of their treatment of animals and the policies they enforce.

Getting zoos “do it right”—even monitoring what zoos are doing—is nearly impossible. There is a conspiracy of silence among zoos that leads directly to acceptance of lowest-common-denominator conditions. For example, The HSUS has been very concerned about the production and disposition of surplus or excess animals in zoos. Yet zoos refuse to make their published inventory of surplus animals available for our review. The large, better zoos virtually never criticize even the most despicable roadside menageries in this country, despite the fact that such roadside zoos “give all zoos a bad name.”

Zoos are living by the old caveat people who live in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones. All are potentially subject to criticism, so all had better stay silent. Their approach creates a wall of silence and acceptance that perpetuates cruel treatment and inhumane conditions and stifles improvement.

The HSUS will not walk away from zoos or zoo animals. Where cruelty exists we must be there to expose and correct it. We will help zoos contracept animals to limit surplus production. We will work with AAZPA and any others who seriously endeavor to eliminate cruelty in zoos or who use zoos to promote conservation. We reaffirm our policy on zoos but only as we recognize that most zoos cannot and will not improve significantly enough to meet the legitimate needs of animals. The need to improve is too great and the money is too little. It is not just zoo cages that are inadequate; it is the reality of today’s zoos as places where we permit animals to be incarcerated for our recreation and enjoyment.

Zoos should close if they cannot care for animals adequately, cannot breed endangered species, cannot provide meaningful education, and do not have independent, guaranteed resources to ensure future operation.

Obviously zoo closings should not be precipitous; care for animals must be guaranteed and appropriate arrangements must be made. In place of zoos, their grounds should become parks where environmental education can take place, education that does not depend on the attraction of captive, miserably maintained animals. At the national level, we should establish six to twelve regional bioparks where meaningful educational material is available and where native wildlife can be studied and appreciated in their natural habitat. These parks must be large enough to have natural populations of native animals, whose visitors can and do understand the interaction of animals and their habitats, and utilize educational material emphasizing natural ecological processes and animal appreciation and understanding. This should be the wave of the future for a more harmonious existence between wildlife and people.

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HSUS NEWS • Summer 1992