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Getting Educated at the Zoo

Nancy Henson

In this issue we present three papers that deal with the subject of the zoo. Although the focal concern of each paper is different and the positions of the authors range from whole-hearted support of the institution to frank skepticism, all express a belief in the potential educational value of zoos. This editorial, however, has a different premise. It is not meant to criticize the other papers, but rather to raise questions from another point of view.

"Educational value" has a fine, humanistic ring to it; as a principle it would seem inviolable. Yet when the means to this admirable end involve the kind of exploitation inherent in the exhibiting of wild animals in confinement, one begins to wonder just what sort of education is being provided, and further, whether even the most idealistic rendition of the educational benefits of zoos can silence the larger ethical questions.

The first question, what sort of education is being provided?, has no definitive answer. One cannot crawl inside the mind of every visitor to every zoo. Thus the answers tend to be prescriptive rather than descriptive (but see Ludwig, this issue), e.g.: Seeing live animals in the zoo should (will) increase one's awareness and appreciation of other life forms, enhance one's respect for wildlife, encourage an interest in and commitment to conservation and provide a vital connection with "Nature" in an ever more sterile technological society. There can be no doubt of the nobility and importance of these aims, and it would seem that a major part of the effort to upgrade the facilities and change the image of zoos has been directed toward making this type of educational experience more accessible. A person who sees an ocelot pacing in a bare, tiled cage will probably come away with a different impression of the animal than a person who sees, or tries to see, the ocelot slinking behind some vegetation in a naturalistic enclosure. Similarly, a sign outside a cage that informs the public that the animal within is a member of an endangered species adds a dimension of education that is missing from a sign whose entire message is "hooved stock."

However, too often the needs of the animals are subordinated to, or even confused with, the esthetic sensibilities of the public, and the result may be simply the erection of a country-club jail where Attica once stood. At a cost of \$2.9 million, the National Zoo in Washington, D.C. replaced small, barred cages with a new Great Ape House—glass enclosures, artificial tree trunks of concrete with branches of fiberglass, heated, easy-to-clean epoxy grit floors, and plenty of greenery in the viewing area only. Minus the gorillas and orangutans, the place looks like your average solar house in Marin County. Gorillas, unlike orangs, do not brachiate, and spend much of their time in the wild foraging among the vegetation of the tropical rainforest. For them, the "trees" seem to serve the same purpose as a mink stole thrown over the shoulders of a 1930s starlet posing for a publicity shot—they enhance the total effect. They are also much nicer for people to look at than a swinging tire.

There is no dearth of educational aids in this exhibit: display panels discussing habitat, geographical distribution, evolution, social and feeding behavior in captivity and in the wild, breeding and rearing of infants in captivity, and smaller panels with biographies of the individual inmates. However, most people come to look at the animals, to walk right up to the two-way glass and experience whatever it is they

experience when face-to-face (or face-to-back) with an animal in the zoo. And at what expense to the animal?

It is possible to display animals in settings more suited to their needs than the one described above (Hancocks, 1980). However, even if nearly optimal conditions for the achievement of educational goals could be reached, one can still question whether the value of education justifies the existence of zoos. How can respect for wildlife be instilled through an institution that exploits the object of purported respect? It is just possible that the ultimate educational message transmitted by a zoo, of whatever caliber, is that it is all right to subject animals to the often fatal stress of removal from the wild, all right to confine them, and all right to make sacrifices (the real meaning, not the scientist's euphemism) of them in the hope (or is it rationalization?) that contact with them through bars, glass, or even directly will raise the quality of life and the consciousness of human beings.

The fact that zoos exist is in itself an education. How the animals fit in, as can be seen from this editorial and the three papers to follow, is a matter of opinion.

Reference

Hancocks, D. (1980) Bringing nature into the zoo: inexpensive solutions for zoo environments, *Int J Stud Anim Prob* 1(3):170-177.

Productivity and Farm Animal Welfare

Michael W. Fox

In the search for and debate over objective indices of farm animal welfare, productivity is regarded by many animal scientists and others in the livestock industry as the most reliable measure of an animal's overall well-being and adaptability. On the surface, this would seem to be so, as productivity — in terms of growth rate, milk yield, feed-conversion and egg production — can be easily quantified. However, there are serious flaws in this assumption.

An increase in productivity may not be correlated with improved welfare or overall well-being. It may be attributable to genetic selection, higher protein intake, increased photoperiod, or a number of other husbandry and management variables.

A decrease in productivity does not necessarily correlate with a decline in welfare standards or overall well-being. Some husbandry systems are less efficient and their productivity lower because the animals are fed more roughage, for example, or are of a less productive genetic strain. A reduction in calcium or sodium or a decrease in illumination will dramatically depress egg production, while overall welfare is not jeopardized.

High productivity may actually jeopardize an animal's overall welfare, as exemplified by the so-called production-related diseases (Sainsbury & Sainsbury, 1979) of high-yielding dairy cows, as well as fast-growing pigs and broilers.

Antibiotics, growth stimulants, and other drugs may mask health- and welfare-related problems and lead to spurious correlations between welfare and production.