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Unethical Confinement

Imagine being confined in a small living area while being stared at by humans, when you could be wondering in your natural habitat, without boundaries. Sadly, this is the everyday life for animals that live in zoos across the world. We place animals in small enclosures just to be viewed by humans and to give us a form of entertainment. Throughout the past years, humans have thought of zoo animals as a type of commodity. They are bought, sold and moved around constantly without caring how it could affect them. The captivity of animals has recently become a huge issue. Conservationists believe that animals should be kept in captivity because they are listed on the endangered species list and placing them in zoos gives them a better chance at survival. In my opinion, captivity isn’t a huge issue, as long as the animals receive the best of care from zookeepers and veterinarians. While certain other people believe animals should not be kept in captivity at all. However, keeping animals in exhibits comes at a cost. Captivity causes animals to suffer from stress and other mental issues. The first two solutions to this problem would be to upgrade exhibits to better replicate the animal’s natural habitat and provide more environmental enrichment. The final and most ethical solution to the captivity problem would be to restore the animal’s natural habitat so that in the future they can be released back into their original habitat.

The earliest collections of wild animals date back to 1500 B.C. and Egyptian pharaoh Thutmose. He collected exotic animals for his pleasure. His mother, Queen Hatshepsut, would order servants to go in search of wildlife. When they came back from their journey, they added cheetahs, monkeys, and giraffes to their collection. These private collections were later called menageries. The cages in menageries were made of metal bars and were not made so that animals could have a healthy life, but so that humans could get the best the possible view of the animals. Menageries throughout the United States became very popular in the late 1700’s and 1800’s (Koebner 55). The Central Park Wildlife Center started as a menagerie in 1861 and consisted of different species of animals that were donated from other private collections and carnivals because they were no longer wanted. The 1960’s was a decade of huge changes for not only the nation, but also in zoos. Conservation and the treatment of animals became the main focus during this time (Koebner 64). The zoos we see in today’s society were not created until the 1990’s. These exhibits are made with trees and ponds with the hopes of mimicking the animal’s natural habitat. It is truly amazing to see how much zoos have transformed in the past two centuries. They went from serving the needs of the people to now serving as sanctuaries and conservation centers for multiple endangered species.

The perfect example of what a zoo should look like would be The Wilds in Cumberland, Ohio. This privately owned zoo opened to the public in 1994 and has 10,000 acres of reclaimed land, which houses animals such as cheetahs, two species of rhinos, zebras, camels, African painted dogs, and many others. These animals are able to roam the property freely and are not confined to a small cage or enclosure. Visitors are allowed to visit the park and they do so by riding on a large vehicle. This gives them a chance to get closer to the animals, compared to a normal zoo and does not interfere with the lives of the animals (“The Wilds”). This is what all zoos need to look like in the near future because it is a lot healthier for the animals. However, not all animals are lucky enough to live in conservation parks, like The Wilds. In some rare and extreme cases, exotic animals are kept in very small metal cages for the enjoyment of their owner and their family. Sadly, these animals have no open space to roam freely, which can suppress natural behaviors, like roaming long distances and hunting for food. Terry Thompson owned a private collection of animals in Zanesville, Ohio. On October 18, 2011 he released the 56 wild animals onto his property and committed suicide. The end of the day was incredibly tragic because 49, out of the 56 animals, were shot and killed by police officers. Some of these animals included endangered Bengal tigers, lions, bears, along with three other species. It is not understood how someone, like Terry, could own a private collection of animals when he had been cited by police for animal neglect and abuse (Caron). Private zoos, like the ones owned by Mr. Thompson, need to be found and shut down immediately and the animals should be transferred to local zoos.

Keeping animals in captivity comes at a huge cost, their health. Captivity causes animals to suffer from stress, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), high cortisol levels, and self-mutilation. Obsessive compulsive order was thought to only be found in humans. In a study conducted by David Eilam, a professor of zoology at Tel Aviv University, the disorder was also observed in captive polar bears. The data he collected showed the polar bears making the same sequence a total of 53 times within a half hour period of time (Eilam). Even though captive animals may still be in an exhibit that mimics their natural environment, they still lack mental stimulation. A study that appeared in the U.S. National Library of Medicine National Institutes of Health revealed that cortisol levels increased when a large group of people visited the zoo. Cortisol increases both blood sugar and blood pressure when in a stressful situation and it can be deadly if not taken care of. Self-mutilation can also be a huge issue in captive animals. Behaviors such as biting themselves, over-grooming, and picking at hair are all examples of stereotypical behaviors (Good). A study was conducted by researchers using chimpanzees from six zoos across the world. Abnormal behavior was observed in every single one of the forty test subjects (Brikett). These results were quite astonishing to read. Not only can stress change the behavior in an animal, it can also cause slight changes in how an animal looks. A perfect example for this would be the killer whales at SeaWorld. In the wild, a killer whale will have a dorsal fin that is straight up and down, but in captivity, the whales will have a dorsal fin that droops to one side. This condition is called collapsed dorsal fin and happens is less than one percent of wild killer whales and is seen in one hundred percent of captive killer whales (Blackfish). Animal care staff in zoos need to better observe the behaviors of the animals and get them the immediate care they need if an uncommon behavior is observed.

One possible solution to this problem would be to upgrade the exhibits zoo animals live in. Not only does this mean making exhibits look more like their natural habitat, but it also means making their enclosures much larger. One of the main problems zoos face is the fact that they have very limited space. Every single zoo in the United States is able to fit into the city of Brooklyn, which is 88.8 square miles (Koebner 136). In order to make zoos better for animals, their exhibits need to be expanded so that the animals are able to practice normal behaviors. The suppression of behaviors is one of the reasons animals are under so much stress. Before Tilikum was sold to SeaWorld, he was kept in a pool that measured 100 feet by 50 feet. The current pool at SeaWorld is around 100 feet by 70 feet (Blackfish). The large orca was not able to swim the normal amount because his holding pool was extremely small for his large size. This is another example of how animals do not have enough room in their enclosures to carry out normal behaviors. Larger enclosures will allow the animals to explore more and escape large groups of visitors when needed. Secondly, exhibits should also be renovated to better replicate the animal’s natural habitat. Researchers at Durham University conducted a study using mandrills, a type of exotic monkey, at the Chester Zoo in England. One meter of tropical bushes were planted in between viewing windows and the exhibit (“Reducing Stress”). Dr. Jan de Ruiter, a professor at Durham University, explains "as soon as the shrubs were positioned, we noticed an immediate improvement in the welfare of the mandrills, who displayed significantly less anti-social behavior” (qtd. in “Reducing Stress”). The plants were very effective and decreased the amount of stress in the monkeys by fifty percent. The plants also represented species that would be found in Africa, which is their natural habitat (“Reducing Stress”). Small projects, like this one, are well worth completing because it has a large, positive influence the behavior of captive zoo animals. Imagine how much the lives of other captive animals could be changed just by adding trees, plants, and bushes to their enclosure. This could be the first step to happier and healthier zoo animals.

Yet another possible solution to solve mental health epidemic would be to include more environmental enrichment for the animals. Often times, zoos include a few balls and/ or barrels in the exhibit. These items are stimulating for most animals; however, they simply are not enough. When an animal is experiencing stress, they will not engage with their surrounding environment. Environmental enrichment is a very important part of an animal’s life in captivity because it is the difference between intriguing behaviors and boredom in the animals. Toys and puzzles placed within the enclosure give the animal challenges and chances for stimulation, which is severely lacking in zoo animals with stress (Caring for Wildlife 1). Activities should be challenging for the animals without causing frustration. If the animal becomes frustrated because he or she cannot solve the puzzle, more stress can occur. Enrichment must be tailored to the individual needs of the animal because different species have diverse ranges of cognitive abilities. For example, orangutans need ropes, mesh platforms, branches, and other objects that will allow them to have arboreal movements, which is the act of swinging from tree to tree (Husband et al 2). On the other hand, a predatory cat needs a feeding stick with raw meat. This allows them to chase their food, just like they would in the wild. As a result of living in an enriched environment, animals have better social lives, are able to better combat stress, and have better cognitive abilities (Caring for Wildlife 1). Environmental enrichment is crucial because it keeps the animal engaged in the environment they live in. Without enhancement, animals would develop actions that are detrimental to their health. Exposure to challenges can decrease stress levels observed in captive animals. Overall, animals have a better state of mental health when exposed to environmental enrichment, which is why more toys and puzzles should be added to exhibits.

The final, and most ethical solution to this problem, would be to restore the animal’s natural habitat so that they can eventually be returned to the wild. The past habitat of some animals in nothing like the habitat they live in today. In the past, the Amazon rainforest was lush and filled with life. Today, it has lost about seventeen percent of its forest cover as a result of deforestation. This might not seem like much, but the impact it has on the environment is insurmountable. The loss of just seventeen percent of the tropical forest is projected to cause a decrease in species by up to eighty percent (Castro). In order to release these animals into their native habitat, large scale restoration projects have to occur. Robert Ewers, an ecologist in the UK explains, “now that we know where the extinction debt is likely to be, we can go to the ground to restore habitat and take remedial actions to try to regenerate new habitats” (qtd. in Castro). In order to counter deforestation and restore habitat, more trees need to be planted. Planting more trees along with other native shrubs and grasses would allow more habitat for all species. Completing these restorations will allow captive zoo animals to be released back into the wild and will begin to fix their mental health issues. The issue will not take care of itself, it will take some time for the animals to revert back to their primitive behavior. Trees take time to grow, which is the reason these restoration projects need to be completed right away.

However, not everyone believes releasing captive animals back into their native habitat is not the best answer. Charles Clover, the environmental editor of The Daily Telegraph, states that if captive animals were released into the wild, they would fail to survive. Animals that live in zoos have been deprived of natural behaviors and are used to being fed by zookeepers. These things put the animals at a huge disadvantage in their native habitat (Clover). Furthermore, animals face the possibility of being killed by poachers. Elephants are a huge target for poachers because their tusks are used to make trinkets and jewelry (“Africa is Home”). Yes, it is agreed that there are dangers that come along with releasing any specie of animal into the wild, but reintroducing animals can improve their health along with the health of the environment. In fact, there have been some successful stories of releasing animals back into the wild. Wolves were thought to be extinct in and around Yellowstone in 1926. As a result, cottonwood trees, and other woody streamside plants, were grazed upon to the point of extinction due to overgrazing by elk. Consequently, the state of the rivers also started to decline. Wolves were reintroduced to Yellowstone National Park in 1995 as part on an experiment to see what happens when a keystone specie is taken out of an ecosystem, such as Yellowstone. After their reintroduction cottonwoods were able to thrive because the wolf population controlled the elk population. Due to the increase in native grasses, the river system was also able to recover (Stauth). It is amazing to see the transformation the park has made within the past couple of decades. If one specie can impact one area in such a large way, then in what ways can other species positively impact their environment? Renovation for reintroduction is the most ethical solution because it is the only one that allows the animal to no longer be confined to a small exhibit. These projects may take a large amount of time and money, but when it comes to the well-being of animals, it is well worth it.

Solutions for ending the suffering of zoo animals would be to include more environmental enrichment, renovate existing exhibits so they are larger and better mimic the animal’s natural habitat, and restore natural habitats so animals can be released back into the environment sometime in the future. Captivity has both pros and cons. If some species of animals were not kept in captivity, their extinction in the wild would be inevitable. However, they suffer from different mental health issues because of the small enclosures. We can no longer treat zoo animals as a commodity. Civilians need think about how captivity really impacts them. In a survey that was conducted, twenty-one percent of people said that visiting a zoo changed the way they view animals (Pevoar). The zoo visit hopefully made some people realize that captivity is in no way healthy for an animal. The captivity of animals has become a huge controversy because people are relentless and will keep protesting until the right thing is done. Zoos cannot keep animals in small enclosures much longer they need to evolve in order to keep the animals happy and healthy.

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