

# Issue Overview: Should we have zoos?

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Newborn lion and tiger cubs are seen at Qingdao Zoo in China. Zoos have been at the center of debates about conservation and animal ethics. Photo: Feature China/Barcroft Media via Getty Images.

The Panamanian golden frog is endangered. The frogs are a national symbol in the Central American country of Panama. Their picture is on everything from tickets to T-shirts.

Hundreds of them live at zoos in the United States. However, they have probably been extinct in the wild since 2007. Many died after the spread of a disease.

Zoos in the United States have been breeding the golden frogs for years. They planned to return the frogs to their native forests in western Panama. However, disease and loss of trees in their forest homes leave little chance that the frogs could make it. Should the zoos continue to breed them anyway?



The question is part of a larger conversation about zoos and aquariums. It's a topic that has gained attention lately. New questions arose when Harambe the gorilla was shot after a boy fell into his exhibit. Are zoos and aquariums a good thing? Should we still have them?

## **What Is Conservation?**

Conservation is work to protect and save plants and animals. It is often discussed in conjunction with biodiversity. Biodiversity is about maintaining a wide variety of plants and animals. The variety is important for keeping entire ecosystems, like the Amazon rainforest or arctic tundra, healthy.

There are two types of conservation. In-situ conservation aims to protect animals in their natural homes. An example is creating an area in Africa to help elephants. Supporters of in-situ conservation believe that it is the best way to ensure biodiversity. That's because animals adapt based on where they live. Keeping animals in these places is the best way to continue their natural progress, supporters say.

The other type of conservation is ex-situ conservation. The golden frog project is an example. These efforts support animals somewhere outside their natural home. Many people support this kind of conservation because it provides study opportunities and can raise awareness about biodiversity.

Zoos play a part in both types of conservation. Keeping the animals is ex-situ conservation, but many zoos also support in-situ work. The Wildlife Conservation Society, or WCS, is based at the Bronx Zoo in New York City. The WCS also has programs in nearly 50 countries to protect some of the world's most at-risk animals.

## **What Are The Main Arguments Supporting Zoos?**

Zoos encourage conservation through education. Many zoos have programs to teach the public. The San Diego Zoo offers tours, camps, classes and sleepovers, for example.

The Association of Zoos and Aquariums, or AZA, says these efforts are important to learning. When visitors connect to nature, they think about problems and see a role they can play, the AZA says. More than 180 million visitors to AZA-accredited zoos benefit from these educational programs each year. That includes more than 50 million students.

Supporters of zoos say they are a way for people to learn. Visitors also can experience a sense of wonder. Seeing a lion or elephant up close could get someone started in conservation.

Zoos continue the genetic diversity of animals. Zoos have breeding programs managed by the AZA. For endangered animals like chimpanzees, the AZA has species survival plans. The plans include breeding and transferring animals among zoos. Each plan lays out goals for a healthy population.

Animals born in zoos are rarely returned to their natural homes. There have been a few successful cases, though. One was the return of the red wolf in the southeastern United States after it had nearly gone extinct. A species survival plan was used to bring the wolf back. Its breeding program started with only 14 animals.

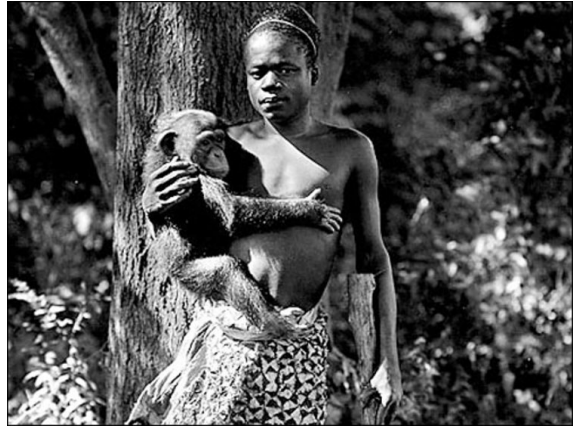
Supporters think most zoos treat animals well. Many zoos now make exhibits that look more natural for the animals. Humans have kept wild animals all throughout history, and that is not going to change, some say. If animals are going to be kept, a good zoo is the best place for them. Over the last 20 years, many zoos have made improvements. They have changed concrete and metal cages into enclosures with more activities for the animals. Additions include trees and ropes for climbing.

Many zoos rescue animals from abuse or other bad treatment. In 2002, U.S. officials took six polar bears from a Mexican circus in Puerto Rico. The bears had not been treated or fed well. They were forced to do tricks in the circus. After being moved to zoos in the U.S., the bears recovered. Their names are Alaska, Royal, Willy, Masha, Boris and Kenny. They got to live in open spaces with large water tanks.

## What Are The Main Arguments Against Zoos?



Zoos use animals for human entertainment. Many people believe that zoos use animals only for people's enjoyment. They also believe the history of zoos is one of abuse. In the 19th century, when zoos first became popular, many had exhibits that displayed not just animals from a certain region but people as well. The people on display were there against their will. This happened in the United States even after slavery ended. This does not happen anymore, though.



Zoo animals suffer. The Captive Animals' Protection Society (CAPS) is based in the United Kingdom. It thinks all wild animals in captivity suffer. Their needs cannot be met in unnatural homes, the group says. Although conditions in zoos have improved, zoos around the world are all different. There is no single worldwide group that makes rules for zoos. While the U.S. has the AZA, many countries have no such group.

Even places that have good rules or laws may not follow them well. Liz Tyson leads CAPS. She said laws to protect zoo animals have not worked well. She said that the current situation is unacceptable.

Many people believe it is wrong to keep a wild animal in captivity no matter how nice its home is. Some say that any living thing should have rights like people have. Holding wild animals takes away their rights, they say.

Money is taken away from where it is needed, some say. They question spending money to build zoo exhibits. They say it is less helpful for overall conservation efforts. Zoos can spend more than \$1 million a year on one exhibit. Some would argue that building an elephant exhibit in the U.S. or another country is a bad idea. They say the money would go further helping elephants in Africa.

## Conclusion

It doesn't seem as if zoos are going away anytime soon. Even if people agreed that we shouldn't have zoos anymore, most zoo animals would not survive in the wild.

The conversation about them will surely continue, though. Changes have happened in many zoos because of it. Also, there has been more attention on wildlife parks where animals are protected and people can visit.

There's no denying the joy of seeing an animal up close. However, it is also sad to see a wild animal where it doesn't quite belong. Perhaps writer Thomas French put it best. He talked about being inside a zoo, for the animals and for the people who love those animals. "There's a lot of joy, and there's a lot of loss."