

Zoos

There are around 430 zoos in Britain alone, and 10,000 worldwide. Conditions vary greatly, with the worst being nothing more than concrete prisons holding very distressed animals. The better zoos make an effort to re-create a natural environment, even though this is never completely possible.

Zoos say

Zoos attract thousands of visitors every year, allowing people to see animals that they would otherwise never encounter. A few lucky people may get to go on safari, but even then they will only see animals from a distance and possibly just for a brief moment. Also, a trip to the zoo costs a lot less than taking the whole family on safari. Of course, there are wildlife programmes on television, but they do not allow you to see the animals up close. A visit to the zoo educates and entertains people about wild animals.

Many zoos have breeding programmes to try to help endangered species. No one wants to see the panda or the tiger become extinct, and zoos offer hope for the future survival of these animals. Breeding programmes are not cheap, and allowing paying visitors in is the best way to fund them. Many researchers also visit zoos to study animal health.

Animals can be closely monitored in a zoo, where any illnesses, injuries or infections can be treated by a vet. Wild animals don't have this luxury. There is also no threat of starvation or predation in a zoo. Animals in zoos could not be safer, and they have their every need cared for.

Opponents say

When people visit zoos, they are not seeing wild animals, but captive animals whose families still live in the wild. The conditions are artificial and do not allow animals to behave in their natural way. Cheetahs cannot run at full speed and chimpanzees cannot gather fruit high up in the forest canopy, as they would in their real homes. The truth is that the natural habitats of these animals can never be re-created, no matter how hard a zoo tries. And many do not try hard at all.

Most animals housed in zoos are not endangered. In fact, in 2000, the Born Free Foundation researched 104 zoos for their Official Zoo Health Check report and found that just 5 per cent of taxa (species and subspecies) held in British zoos are listed as endangered by the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature). They also found that only 3 per cent were used in official European breeding programmes. Just 1 per cent of taxa from British zoological collections are endangered and have been reintroduced to the wild.

Animals in zoos are not free to express their natural instincts, whether that means roaming hundreds of miles, breeding with a mate of their choice or killing their own prey. They are disturbed every minute of the day by people watching them, something that would signal great danger in the wild. Animals suffer many psychological problems due to their captivity, and display stereotypic behaviour such as pacing, bar-licking, rocking and head-bobbing.

If zoos are such luxurious places for animals, with every danger spared them, why is the lifespan of captive elephants, for example, less than that of their wild counterparts? Frustration, boredom and loneliness all play a part in their misery and consequent premature death.

Zoos are a business. They buy, sell and breed animals. When they buy them, they are not always concerned about where they come from or the cruelty that has been meted out to them along the way. When they sell the animals, it may be to a zoo with atrocious conditions or a laboratory where the animals will be experimented on.

<http://www.allaboutanimals.org.uk/PT-Zoos.asp>