

# ZOOS

**Zoos started as private collections of wild animals established by kings and other rich people for their own amusement. London Zoo was one of the first public zoos, set up in the 1800s to display exotic and unusual animals collected from all corners of the British Empire. In those early days, there were no television programmes or films about wild animals, so people visited zoos to learn about them.**

Modern zoos say that they care for their animals and provide people with an enjoyable day out. They also claim to do valuable conservation work and help educate people about the plight of endangered animals.

Today, however, more and more people are beginning to question whether these justifications are credible, and whether we should continue to keep animals locked up in zoos.

## WHAT DO ZOOS TEACH US ABOUT WILD ANIMALS?

Some people say that visiting the zoo helps people to understand and respect wildlife, but it is hard to see how looking at caged animals can teach us anything about their lives in the wild. Would we visit a prison to learn how humans would behave naturally?

Recent studies of zoo animals have shown that many of the inmates are not only very unhappy, but are also mentally disturbed as a result of their captivity.



Separated from their natural habitat, and deprived of their freedom, their normal social behaviour is totally disrupted, and they become stressed and frustrated.

Anyone visiting a zoo can see strange 'stereotypic' behaviour - tigers endlessly pacing up and down; elephants rocking back and forth; bears repeatedly nodding or swaying their heads from side to side; animals biting the bars of their cages - all a result of 'zoo madness'. Some animals are even driven to self-mutilation, biting themselves or bashing their heads against the cage wall.

Zoos have birds who cannot fly, and tigers who cannot hunt. Surely you can learn more about wild animals by watching them in their natural habitat - either on TV or video - than by looking at them caged in a zoo?

## DO ZOOS HELP CONSERVE ANIMALS?

It is often claimed that zoos perform valuable conservation work by breeding endangered species, and returning them to the wild. But very few animals bred in captivity have actually been successfully reintroduced into their natural habitat.

**In 2000, a report on zoos revealed that:**

- Only 5% of species in UK zoos are officially listed as endangered.
- Less than 1% of the endangered species held in UK zoos have been reintroduced to the wild.

An earlier study found that only 2% of the world's 6,000-plus threatened or endangered species were registered in zoo breeding programmes. It is clear from these statistics that zoos actually do very little to help save the world's endangered animals.



## DO ZOOS CARE FOR THEIR ANIMALS?

Some people say that animals in zoos are well looked after and are happy and contented. But wild animals need their freedom, and don't enjoy captivity. No matter how well their keepers care for them, many suffer because they are not suited to living in a cage, tank or enclosure.

Many animals in zoos die young. The average lifespan for an elephant in a European zoo is 15 years - less than a quarter of the life expectancy of an elephant in the wild.

In the UK, millions of animals are held in more than 400 zoological collections. The Zoo Licensing Act, which came into force in 1984, was intended to enforce acceptable standards of care for these animals. Many zoos, however, still keep animals in poor conditions. The sad sight of elephants confined in small concrete pens, primates in barren enclosures, bears kept in ancient pits and birds crammed inside filthy cages can still be found in some British zoos. Smaller, 'unspectacular' species, such as meerkats, suffer just as much. Often animals such as gorillas, who naturally live in large social groups, are kept alone, while other animals who live solitary lives and have large territories, such as tigers, are forced to live in cages next to each other. Shockingly, a 2004 investigation into UK zoos found that over 30% could be operating without a zoo licence.

Zoos are businesses that need to make money. This means that animals are often bred for commercial reasons - because the public like to see new-born animals. Such breeding leads to a surplus of animals, who are then culled in order to keep numbers down. There is also concern that some zoo animals are sold to private collectors, circuses, or even research laboratories.

Zoos breed animals from a small population that lacks the genetic diversity of a wild population, often resulting in offspring with physical disorders - a typical effect of in-breeding. Equally serious is the threat of transferring potentially deadly diseases from captive-bred animals into the wild population when they are released.

It would be very difficult to reintroduce some zoo-reared animals to their natural habitat because, after generations of captivity, many have lost the necessary skills to survive. When Golden Lion tamarins were reintroduced to Brazil in the mid-'80s, having been bred in captivity, they were not used to moving amongst real trees and kept falling off the springy branches.

Ultimately, there is little point in breeding animals in zoos if their habitat is being destroyed. Tragically, once an ecosystem has gone, it cannot be replaced. Zoos simply cannot preserve all of the thousands of plant and animal species that make up complex ecosystems such as tropical rainforests. The only way to ensure the survival of endangered species is to preserve their natural habitats and to give them better protection in the wild.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO!

- **Join Youth4Animals, the Animal Aid youth group and help campaign to protect animals (visit [www.youth4animal.com](http://www.youth4animal.com))**
- **Find out more about zoos – visit [www.bornfree.org.uk](http://www.bornfree.org.uk) and [www.captiveanimals.org](http://www.captiveanimals.org)**
- **Find out about aquaria – see our factsheet**
- **Don't support zoos, safari parks or aquaria. If you do visit one, study the animals. If they look like they are unhappy or behaving unnaturally, write to the zoo to complain. Take pictures. Tell us, too. Contact Zoo Check. For a list of things to look out for see: [www.bornfree.org.uk/zoocheck/zoochosis.htm](http://www.bornfree.org.uk/zoocheck/zoochosis.htm)**

