



An empty cage sits near the entrance of the Melbourne Zoo. Originally used as an exhibit for orangutans in 1927, this iron-barred concrete floor confinement is a graphic illustration of how animals used to live. A plaque states that the cage remains as a reminder of when animals were “objects of curiosity and displayed in cages which paid little heed to their true needs.”¹ The cage is meant to symbolize how far society has evolved in eighty years, but to those who still view zoos as concrete jungles, the evolution is far from complete.

During the late 20th century, zoo directors began to transform what was originally intended as a venue for entertainment, into a progressive initiative for animal preservation.² As human encroachment into wild habitats has increased across the globe, zoos found themselves in a position where they were able to increase awareness about animals and their eroding habitats. During the past decade, many zoos have shifted their primary initiative from preserving animals through captive breeding to preserving species and their wild habitats.³ This has been possible, as zoos have become a main disseminator of animal education and research, resulting in climbing population levels of numerous endangered species. To many, the zoo has successfully transformed itself from a place of entertainment into a cultural center that educates and enlightens on ways in which people can contribute to animal conservation.

¹ Millar, R. &. (2008, January 19). *Animal Rights and Wrongs*. Retrieved Feb 5, 2008, from The Age: <http://www.theage.com.au/news/in-depth/animal-rights-and-wrongs/2008/01/18/1200620207184.html>

² Kuehn, B. (2002, December 1). *Is it Ethical to Keep Animals in Zoos?* Retrieved Feb 6, 2008, from Journal of the American Veterinary medical Association: <http://www.avma.org/onlnews/javma/dec02/021201d.asp>

³ Kuehn, B. (2002, December 1). *Is it Ethical to Keep Animals in Zoos?* Retrieved Feb 6, 2008, from Journal of the American Veterinary medical Association: <http://www.avma.org/onlnews/javma/dec02/021201d.asp> - Throughout this paper, “zoo” referencing the general use of the term, not in a “research center” sense


Although this may seem like an admirable shift in direction, many questions still remain on the morality concerning zoos and their practices. Although nearly all animals that are in zoos are born in captivity, we still must question the ethics behind their confinement.⁴ Even though they are born in a cage and will undoubtedly exist within a manmade habitat throughout their life, do humans have the right to deny an animal its freedom? Furthermore, can we determine if animals have preferences themselves and if their preferences should be considered within society? Throughout this paper, I will take an objective stance in regards to the preferences of animals and critically look at the morals and economic equity of animal captivity.

To the economist, a viable solution or efficient situation arises in which the benefits of an action are greater than the imposed costs.⁵ In many cases, the facts readily present themselves and the analysis is unambiguously black and white. But in terms of zoos, and animals, we are confronted with a myriad of gray. There is no clear distinction as to what rights animals are truly entitled to, who can speak for animals and who cannot, and how animals should be treated. United States Law does attain that they should not be treated unjustly or cruelly, but on marginal issues such as zoo captivity or their accepted place in society, we often retreat to thoughts that humans are superior and that animals are not sentient creatures, that is, they are not self-aware and as such do not demand the rights of sentient beings.⁶

⁴ Millar, R. &. (2008, January 19). *Animal Rights and Wrongs*. Retrieved Feb 5, 2008, from The Age: <http://www.theage.com.au/news/in-depth/animal-rights-and-wrongs/2008/01/18/1200620207184.html>

⁵ Morey, E. (2008) *Moral Philosophy, aka Theories of Ethics*. Retrieved Feb 16, 2008, From 4999: <http://www.colorado.edu/economics/morey/4999Ethics/ethicsandmoralphilosophy/Moral%20Philosophy%20aka%20Theories%20of%20Ethics.pdf>

⁶ I am holding the assumption that animals of higher orders may be sentient creatures, but for the sake of argument and simplicity, am stating that all animals in zoos should receive equitable treatment.

Although some of these thoughts rely heavily on philosophical inquiries, what needs to be addressed is the question of who is benefiting from zoos. Yes, the people flocking to the zoo in herds are benefitting, the animal preservation funds that survive from donations are benefitting, yes the city where the zoo is located is benefitting, but what about the animals?  And even more so, do animal's preferences count?

Economists are ethical consequentialists; they judge situations on their outcome, not on the sequence of events to get there.⁷ What is important is the final product of a procedure and its effect on the world, not the mere intermediate stages that are irrelevant in the end. In terms of the zoo, this thought process might appear to be relatively straightforward. An economist will view the animal in their habitat, stocked full of toys, food and shelter. The economist will take into consideration the professional staff whose sole job is to research the animal for the benefit of itself and remaining populations in the wild. Within zoos, there are no predators, research can be gained that would have otherwise been impossible to attain, and the animals are cared for by zookeepers who often volunteer out of their appreciation and respect for the animal kingdom. Furthermore, people are being educated about the animals and their habitat, ultimately leading to donations and funding for habitat loss programs and other methods of species preservation.

⁷ Morey, E. (2008) *Moral Philosophy, aka Theories of Ethics*. Retrieved Feb 16, 2008, From 4999:
<http://www.colorado.edu/economics/morey/4999Ethics/ethicsandmoralphilosphy/Moral%20Philosophy%20aka%20Theories%20of%20Ethics.pdf>

Taken from this perspective, an economist would believe that animals within a zoo are, in fact, better off than those in the wild. It seems quite clear that wild animals, which do not have the luxury of seemingly endless resources, are not as well off as their captive relatives. Through on economic consequentialist's eyes, the benefits of zoos outweigh the imposed costs on the animals. Wild animals are subjected to harsh environments and variables that they are often incapable of surmounting, which ultimately lead to dwindling populations and endangerment or extinction. According to an economist, zoos can fill this void, by captive breeding, learning about the obstacles that wild animals must overcome, preserving wild habitat through public education and funding, and through reintroduction of captive animals into the wild.

From this viewpoint, it is clear why zoos remain a popular attraction for people and as a valuable resource for the animals. But are zoos viewed simply as attractions? Do these global entertainment centers cater only to their customers, all the while neglecting those who truly matter most, the animals? As many animal rights activists will point out, the answer is undeniably yes.

In 1975, Peter Singer an Australian Philosopher argued that humans should not use animals for unjust purposes. He based his thoughts on utilitarianism, a belief system that analyzes an action's consequence to determine its true worth.

That is, if the action is good, it will ultimately provide the greatest benefit to the greatest number of individuals. Singer's contribution was that in doing this analysis we should not only consider the interests of humans, but also of animals.⁸

⁸ Singer, P. (1993). *An Excerpt from Practical Ethics*. Retrieved Feb. 7, 2008, from 4999: <http://www.colorado.edu/economics/morey/4999Ethics/SingerPracticalEthics-excerpt1993.pdf>

To Singer, research on animals is morally acceptable only if the benefit to humans *and* animals outweighs the harm. Rather than surmising that an animal in captivity is benefiting based on the fact that it is being fed regularly, has access to shelter, and has no predators other than rowdy school children, animal rights activists believe that we must consider animal preferences as if they were our own. Put quite simply, do animals, like humans, prefer one thing to another not because it is useful, but because it provides more pleasure? Specifically, we can make a distinction between welfare-preferences and interest-preferences. It is commonly known that animals exhibit welfare-preferences, that is “eating the banana is in the monkey’s interest,” as it will satisfy the monkey’s hunger. But what is most debated, is if a species can rationalize that it is interested in a good simply because it provides pleasure, i.e. “the monkey is interested in the red ball as opposed to the yellow brick,” an interest-preference. It is argued that only species capable of moral reasoning (*homo-sapiens*) can have interest-preferences as this designates a situation where an evaluation is given and a rational response is executed. The basic dichotomy between welfare and interest-preferences lies in the fact that interest-preferences rely on a species desires, whereas welfare-interests are subject to a species innate need for survival. One of the foremost researches, and opponents, on this subject is H.J. McCloskey, who argues that interest-preferences have an action-guiding function, and animals cannot have this because they are not moral agents. He goes on to say that interests are things that should be of concern or ought to be of concern because they provide a kind of utility or pleasure in a species life.⁹

⁹ Tanner, J. (2007, July). *Can Animals have preference-interests?* Retrieved Feb 10, 2008, from NPR: <http://www.cfh.ufsc.br/ethic@/et61art3.pdf>

These activities can be categorized as things that are given thought because they are important, not necessarily because they are needed for survival. It is because of this reason that McCloskey declines to accept the idea that animals have preference-interests. But this is too simple of a conclusion to Peter Singer and the current theory of animal rights activists. They maintain that one must think in terms that animals do prefer “X” to “Y” and that they may enjoy one activity over another. Certain activities pleasure animals more than others, even though *that* activity may not be exercised out of pure instinctual need. This is the basic flaw in McCloskey’s argument and the reason why animal interest-preferences must not be overlooked, but rather considered when constituting the rights of animals.

In this sense it is hard to come to a definitive judgment on the morality of zoos as our conclusion resides on two sides of the same coin. On the one side of the coin, we can see the situation from those animals that are not living in captivity. From this viewpoint, it is clearly not right to hold animals captive in zoos for the amusement of humans. We do not have the right to keep them in small habitats and strip them of their natural conditions but then again, zoos have become a main source of animal awareness, education, research and funding to keep the animals in the wild safe.

On the other side of the argument, we view the situation from the perspective of the animals living in the zoo. Their preference may be that they were in the wild, enduring harsh elements and variables that might lead to their death, but this is the natural way and subjecting them to “forced” captivity may not be in their best interest. Although, if most zoo animals are born in captivity, do they still have an innate yearning for life in the wild? We must also consider that their preference may be to live inside a zoo. Here they are constantly fed and taken care of by professionals who make sure that everything should be in the animals best interest.

When taking both sides into consideration I believe that there really is no common ground that can be shared on this topic. Currently, zoos do keep animals in captivity so they can learn more about them and keep their wild counterparts safe, but is it ethical to take the rights of one animal in order to benefit the rest? What can be said about those zoos that do not keep up with AZA (Association of Zoos and Aquariums) regulations, do not provide proper care, and subject their animals to improper and inhumane conditions.

The debate over zoos and their morality has been prevalent within our society for generations. The conditions that animals used to sustain are quite different than the natural habitats that are created by today's zoos, yet the fundamental principles behind animal captivity still remain. I have shown that from an economic consequentialist's perspective, zoos do perform a benefit to both society and to the animals by catering to the majority of the animal's needs, albeit some animals may get bored in their enclosures. Zoos provide a habitat where research can be performed, education can be provided, and the sheer pleasure of a cross-species connection can be experienced. Zoos allow people to experience the joy of the animals and allow patrons to appreciate their beauty, often resulting in donations that help preserve the animals and their habitats for future generations. But this is not the only viewpoint. Animal rights activists readily agree that to hold animals captive is to deprive them of their right to be free. Although arguably doing good for the species as a whole, those animals that are in zoos are subjected to tests and research that all too often are not pleasurable and are not in *their* best interest. Animal rights activists will say that we as humans do not have the right to keep animals in captivity and should experience their beauty through film, photograph or direct interaction in *their* habitat, not ours.

Throughout this paper, I have shown that the economic view of zoos is much different than that of animal rights activists and that a situation where both parties agree is just not

viable at this time. It is quite clear that zoos will not be shutting their doors anytime soon, but what can be done is to make sure that zoos follow AZA regulations and that the animals are given the most equitable treatment available. Zoo animals are there so that we can learn more about them and contribute to the greater good of saving their species as a whole, and we must as humans give them the treatment and respect that is appropriate and just, even if their overall stance and position within human society remains a myriad of gray.

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