

Wildlife: A New Perspective

With the coming in the late 1960's of the "Age of Environmental Awareness" (Scheffer, 1980), a new view of wildlife emerged, one which had been evolving over a number of years. Wild animals, as the term "wild" connotes, were once seen as part of "nature red in tooth and claw." They had been regarded as inferior adversaries to be subdued and their lives and habitats remodelled to fit "progressive" human-conceived and human-centered schemes.

When these schemes failed to bring to their creators the peace, prosperity, and happiness promised--indeed, it seemed as though they might result in chaos-- animals, as part of seemingly smooth-functioning "natural" schemes, came to be regarded in a more benevolent light. Perhaps human harmony could be realized if the secrets of the apparent harmony of nature could be uncovered. As disillusion with the manipulative sciences which accompanied human technology grew, there grew a parallel interest in the study of nature through observation. The more it was observed, the more people came to identify with animals, and the more they wanted--partly for reasons of self-discovery--to know about them.

In his foreword to Wildlife and America, Russell Peterson (1978) describes the popular manifestation of this new view as it applied to wildlife:

For reasons beyond logic or perceived self-interest, [a growing number of citizens] seem to feel in their bones that there's something unhealthy or just plain wrong with the depletion of nature. The older, pioneering, indiscriminate enthusiasm for "progress" and for "development" has become tempered in this decade by a sceptical questioning of human activities that crowd other species into an ever shrinking corner. If this is environmentalism, it is a seat of the pants variety--one without biological rationale. . . .

Among the human activities questioned by these same "seat of the pants" environ-

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mentalists was the removal of animals from the wild to be crowded into sterile cages in zoos. The former fondness for the old museum-style zoos, described by journalist Robert Vanderpoel (1974) as "that special affection reserved for the American flag, hot apple pie, kindly grannies and kindred untouchables," gave way to a new sentiment that there was "something unhealthy or just plain wrong" with putting animals behind bars with nothing underneath them but cement or tile.

Vanderpoel was correct in claiming that "zoos have been such an accepted part of life for so long that few people have taken a hard look at the zoo as an institution." When the hard look did come, it was inspired by far-sighted individuals in the zoo world; but the resultant changes came about through the combined efforts of a variety of groups, including many animal welfare organizations. The hard look took two forms: on the one hand, there came a call for modernization of zoos, and on the other, a call for their complete elimination.