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The HSUS Recognizes A Problem

The HSUS's interest in wildlife and zoos evolved along lines parallel to those of the general public. The "Age of Environmental Awareness" had to dawn within the Humane Society before zoos were to be tackled as an issue.

From its inception, the HSUS probably received some complaints about zoos from a small percentage of its supporters. In a 1960 Annual Conference presentation made by HSUS' General Counsel Murdaugh Madden entitled, "Additional Humane Society Problems," zoos were included along with performing animal acts among the "outstanding problems of the humane movement," which limitations on time prevented from being included in the discussion. With its very limited resources and staff, The HSUS, understandably, had to work within the rather narrow range of blatant cruelties (such as those in slaughterhouses) for which there appeared to be some promise of rectification through legislation.

As evidence of the shifting focus of the Humane Society's concerns, HSUS Board Chairman Robert Chenoweth reported to The HSUS membership at the Annual Conference in 1966 that the emphasis of the previous decade upon humane slaughter had "shifted to laboratory animals." He also spoke of The HSUS's initiation into wildlife protection by joining the campaign against the non-biodegradable and cruel poison, Compound 1080:

This will be the primary action The HSUS [will take] in the wild-life area. I think it should be mentioned, however, that The HSUS does not intend to strive for prominence among the societies in the conservation field. There are many organizations whose whole program focuses largely on wildlife and its ecology. Others are concerned with redwoods or pure water. But it seems to me appropriate that

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The HSUS should concern itself with these aspects of the problem where the actions of people and government are directly related to painful consequences to wild animals.

Undoubtedly, Mr. Chenoweth must have been thinking of Defenders of Wildlife when he spoke of organizations concerned primarily with wildlife and its ecology.

Defenders of Wildlife Campaigns Against Roadside Zoos

Defenders initiated what grew to be a campaign against "roadside zoos" with the publication of an article by writer Michael Frome in the October 1963 issue of its magazine. The article, entitled "ROADSIDE ZOOS, Exploitation of Wild Animals for Advertising Purposes," was excerpted from Frome's book, Whose Woods These Are: The Story of the National Forests (1962), and had appeared in the November 1962 issue of Changing Times under the title, "America the Beautiful, Heritage or Honky-Tonk?" In his book Frome described the plight of caged bears in roadside exhibits at the entrance to the Pisgah National Forest in Western North Carolina. The book and article apparently created a great controversy, with the Governor of North Carolina receiving letters of protest--at Frome's urging--from all sections of the country. The North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, which had issued permits for the bears and then tried to place the blame on the Cherokee Indians in the area until Frome had pointed out that "bear-displaying souvenir stands invariably are operated by white Carolinians," finally acknowledged that the bears were kept in "deplorable, unsanitary and inhumane conditions" (Frome, 1963).

This little anecdote illustrates two aspects of the roadside zoo issue: public

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sentiment could be galvanized against a practice perceived as both inhumane and unaesthetic, and the regulatory agencies responsible for the enforcement of state wildlife laws were beginning to admit, however grudgingly, that captive animals suffered in these establishments. The racial overtones to this particular conflict would be echoed again with reference to zoos as the notion of animal rights which developed in the climate of environmental concerns became entwined with the concept of human rights.

Ironically, if one returns to Frome's book as the primary source (1962), one finds a reference, not to Defenders, but to The HSUS:

I discussed [the caged bears] with The Humane Society of the United States. It considers this frightening handful of gas stations, gift shops and zoo-owning North Carolinians as the worst in the country for mistreatment of wild animals.

Following the short article about Frome's book, Defenders made an appeal to its readers for information regarding the exact location of any similar roadside zoos they might encounter. They were urged to note the condition of the animals and report their findings to local humane societies and law enforcement agencies.

In the January 1964 issue of Defenders of Wildlife News Frome described the origins of roadside zoos in the early 1950's (p.3):

I became interested in roadside zoos a dozen or so years ago. A rash of them arose at the time as gambling blinds. The unsuspecting motorist who stopped with his family 'to see the snakes' shortly found himself in the backroom parting company with his funds in rolling the dice, leaded of course, or at the old fashioned shell game. The animals were devices of enticement employed by some very sharp country boys.

These "sharp country boys," Frome said, were taking advantage of "the desire of

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the traveling public to look wildlife squarely in the face and learn something of its whys and wherefores."

In spite of The HSUS's assessment that North Carolina's roadside zoos were the worst in the country, Frome declared that squalid roadside zoos existed "from coast to coast" and lamented the difficulty of bringing such a fragmented phenomenon into focus as a target for public indignation:

Nobody knows how many animals are caged and corralled at roadside tourist attractions which generously advertise themselves with such polite titles as 'reptile gardens', kiddies 'barnyard', 'prairie zoo' and the like. Nobody knows how most of these creatures are captured. Nobody rightly heeds how they are treated in captivity, or fed, how they live, how they die. Nobody really knows. The question is, does anybody care?

Frome answered his own question with a description of the movement in North Carolina against roadside zoos--thanks in part, no doubt, to his own efforts. He stated that in addition to the pathetically caged, coca-cola drinking bears:

I also found there are Carolinians who do not want their state further disgraced by the exploitation of animals in captivity or the spotlight of national attention upon them. The North Carolina Wildlife Federation, the Carolina Motor Club, the North Carolina Travel Council, and leading newspapers have strongly urged an end to the woeful mistreatment of wild creatures. 'The caging or chaining of game birds and animals as roadside tourist attraction by commercial enterprises,' the Board of the Motor Club declared in a recent resolution, 'creates traffic hazards, causes criticism by tourists for the inhumane treatment of the animals, and in some cases is dangerous to spectators.' The Board calls upon the Wildlife Resources Commission to bring about an end of this practice wherever it may exist.

As a result of the Travel Council's efforts, the Assistant Attorney General of North Carolina prepared a bill prohibiting the possession of game birds or animals

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"for the purpose of attracting viewers, visitors or customers to a commercial enterprise, whether [it is] primarily concerned with exhibition of such birds or animals, or with some other activity." The bill passed the Senate in 1963, but was defeated in the House where "bear exhibitors had greater influence." Frome suggested that the bill, with a modification to include nongame animals, would make an excellent model for other states, to be supplemented by a federal regulation "prohibiting the transportation of any animals across state lines for commercial exhibition" (p.4). He also urged that research should be undertaken to determine which states have regulations for keeping captive wildlife, which do not, and which are the most lax.

He further proposed that roadside zoos should be studied to determine how the animals are obtained, how they are sold and for how much, and how they are cared for. The public, he said, should be kept informed and urged not to patronize roadside zoos. At the end of the article, Defenders began its solicitation for funds for the roadside zoo campaign. They promised to add a member to the staff as soon as possible to coordinate "evidence and support for legislative action."

In the May-June 1964 issue of the magazine, Frome condemned roadside zoos for their negative educational influence (p.13):

For youngsters, however, the display of an animal or animals ill-treated in cramped quarters and tawdry surroundings does anything but engender respect and understanding for the natural treasures of America. I have observed children in such places--they become caught in the climate of contempt, not even of pity, at the helplessness of the caged animal. They can twit his tail, feed him popcorn, and deride his vain efforts to escape. . . .

The issue of zoos in general, and roadside zoos in particular, would come to

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revolve around the question of public education.

With this beginning, Defenders worked spasmodically over the next few years documenting the appalling conditions in roadside zoos and the gaps in state laws which never seemed to cover all of the species found in these menageries. In response to a query from Defenders in 1964, the Director of the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission stated that his Department's attempts to enforce standards "of care and housing of exhibit animals" had been thwarted by a Supreme Court decision that the Commission had no authority "where such animals were private property lawfully acquired" (Defenders, 1964a).

After this noteworthy commencement of a public awareness campaign, the subject of roadside zoos received uneven coverage in the magazine until Cecile O'Marr was hired in 1969 for the express purpose of traveling around the country to photograph roadside zoos and report on the conditions she found. Mrs. O'Marr had no background with either zoos or wildlife; she was to look at zoos as any tourist might and convey her impressions in the magazine.

The mention of roadside zoos always elicited a good financial response from Defenders' members, according to Mrs. O'Marr (personal communication). Defenders published lists of people who made contributions to its various campaigns and the roadside zoo fund always had contributors. Their ranks would swell appreciably after an expose of particularly bad conditions. O'Marr worked for Defenders until the emphasis upon roadside zoos as an issue was reduced in the mid-1970's (See: Federal Regulation of Zoos & Zoos & Other National Animal Welfare Organizations).

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The HSUS Is Urged To Consider The Plight Of Wildlife

In the late 1960's, the call of "environmentalism" grew louder and it became harder to distinguish between environmental and animal welfare issues. Rear Admiral James Shaw emphasized concern for wildlife in his remarks to the membership at The HSUS Annual Conference in 1968. He called wildlife protection "somewhat of a stepchild" in the animal welfare movement, and suggested that "if The HSUS is to be all good things to all animals, we must enlarge our vision to include every living creature of the animal kingdom, tame or wild, furred or feathered." Unannounced spot inspections of zoos had been included in the long-range plans for the Connecticut Branch of The HSUS, of which Shaw was Executive Director, since 1964 (HSUS News, September 1964).

In his "Report of the President" at the same Conference, Mel Morse claimed:

We have supporters and contributors who feel that we should devote ourselves to wildlife programs, with emphasis on the cruelties of trapping, or roadside zoos, or the importation of wildlife, or a program that would protect the endangered species.

At the same Annual Conference, author and former Miami Zoo Director Julia Allen Field (1968) spoke of the need for "a new perspective [that] would begin with planetary education, with an understanding of our universe," and for "a new education [that] would emphasize feeling and understanding above sterile facts, emphasize the interrelation of all life on earth." Field had become disenchanted with zoos, and in her condemnation of the old style of education, she condemned the attitude which led to the imprisonment of both human beings and animals:

The power structure and accepted thinking which ignored the growth

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of ghettos in the last two decades is the same that acclaims zoos as 'educational'. Our [white] society is unaware that the people of Harlem frame their resentment in these terms: 'We don't want Whitey coming up here to look at the zoo'. Out of touch with the main currents of our time, prominent men in the city, the Board of the New York Zoological Society, have planned the first windowless building for wild animals, symbolically named the World of Darkness; a place where they will be imprisoned in glass-fronted cupboards and closets, confined more closely than the occupants of Harlem. And so we see the ways one city plans to brutalize man toward other creatures as it had already brutalized him toward his fellow man.

The close identification with "imprisoned" animals and questioning of the educational value of such imprisonment would become common complaints among the opponents of zoos.

At the next HSUS Annual Conference in 1969, naturalist and conservation writer Leonard Hall described the spread of the environmental movement in America:

There is no magazine in America that doesn't have some article in almost every issue on the environmental problem. There is no newspaper that doesn't have two or three articles every day. . . . Whether it will save us or not we don't know.

Hall, also a Director of Defenders of Wildlife, urged The HSUS to become involved in the protection of wildlife and stated that it, "should certainly join the campaign on a nationwide basis to close the roadside zoos, where I think probably more cruelty to wild animals is practiced than in [sic] anywhere else in America." The continuing exposé of roadside zoos in Defenders of Wildlife Magazine was having its effect upon the humane movement.

That The HSUS membership made a distinction between roadside and "legitimate" zoos is evident in the wording of a resolution passed at the Conference. It read

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in part:

RESOLVED, that the humane movement at national, state and local levels utilize all appropriate means to stop the extermination of these [endangered] creatures and increase its efforts to preserve the natural ecologies of all wildlife; to prohibit the import, except for the establishment of breeding colonies in zoos, of endangered species. . . .

But it was author and naturalist Roger Caras, speaking at the same Conference, who described the link between the humane and environmental movements which was to determine The HSUS's future concern with wildlife and environmental issues in general and with zoos in particular:

Conservation and the humane movement are Siamese Twins. They are inseparable. . . .there is an explosion coming in the conservation movement. . . . These forces [of impending national and international catastrophe] are bringing to the foreground the absolute necessity for conservation. The humanitarian movement can gain nothing but strength from the association. . . . An era of conservation mindedness has been born and is about to explode into maturity. The humane movement can only benefit from the association, only enrich its own comprehensiveness and effectiveness, only enhance its own following, increase its strength and its power by the association in fact and in image.

His words proved to be prophetic. In the following decade, the ranks of the humane movement grew as did the ranks of the environmental movement (Scheffer, 1980, pp.27-28). In recent years the standing of The HSUS appears to have been improved on Capitol Hill with the Society's inclusion in what is termed the "environmental community."

Roger Caras had also urged The HSUS to become involved with zoos, but unlike Leonard Hall, he urged the Society to take an interest in more than just the roadside zoos. At the Annual Conference the following year, the new HSUS President,

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John Hoyt, announced an expansion of the Field Service Department to include the inspection of zoos. This same year, 1970, the Laboratory Animal Welfare Act was amended to include animals in zoos.