

Criticisms and Praise of The HSUS Zoo Program

A number of people have expressed their gratitude for The HSUS's assistance in publicizing the problems of a particular zoo or in persuading a municipality to make improvements. The Vice-President of the Friends of the Zoo of Arkansas stated in a letter that Sue's efforts had made a great deal of difference in the community:

I can hardly begin to tell you how much your inspections have helped our zoo. For the first time in a long time we have gotten the publicity necessary to get some changes made and have begun to realize where our priorities lie. . . . Without your help we wouldn't even be started on a better path--whether we ever get there is yet to be seen. . . . if it weren't for you and The Humane Society of the U.S., this part of the zoo world would still be living in the dark ages. . . . I will keep you posted on our progress and hope that your next inspection will be in a completely different atmosphere (HSUS Files: Little Rock Zoo).

The publicity given to zoos whose ratings have improved has seemed to improve the zoo's standing in the community. The re-rating of the Salisbury, Maryland Zoo from a class 3, to a class 2, and then to a class 1 zoo, brought not only an expression of appreciation from the City of Salisbury--Sue Pressman was presented with the Key to the City--but the zoo received the official congratulations of the House of Representatives of the Maryland State Legislature.

The recent re-rating of the Woodland Park Zoo in Seattle, Washington has apparently had a very positive effect upon both the public and municipal officials. The Director, David Hancocks, wrote:

It has been interesting to note the impacts of your decision to grant a #1 rating to us. The Seattle Times wrote a glowing editorial on this "Coup for the Zoo", so the word was certainly widespread. . . . [The Mayor] called personally to offer congratulations. I think it is difficult to locate specific benefits that have accrued since the rating change, especially since they are

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so diverse. But there is, clearly, a new attitude to the zoo. Civic pride has increased, for one thing, and Seattle's politicians are looking at us with different eyes. More funds were added to our 1980 budget at the last moment, for example, for interpretive graphics and education programs. Also, the fact that we have achieved a standard worthy of official HSUS recognition means that my plans for more keepers now have more clout, and I'm optimistic for the future. I still delight in the knowledge that we have been so honored by The Humane Society: and I still am determined to get a 1+ rating! (HSUS Files: Seattle Zoo)

News of the concrete effects of the re-rating reached Portland, Oregon, prompting zoo officials to inquire: "Due to the positive response stemming from this action, we would like to know what chance our Zoo has of receiving such a designation" (HSUS Files: Oregon Zoos).

While it is not yet known whether the re-rating of the Los Angeles Zoo produced a favorable response from the municipality, the news media responded overwhelmingly to a call for a press conference at which the improved rating for the Zoo was announced.

One of the several professional zoo planners Sue has recommended to municipalities over the years recently acknowledged her contribution to the improvement of zoo design concepts. Robert Everly, of McFadzean, Everly and Associates added to a solicitation of Sue's "critical comments" for a new project the comment:

There can be little doubt but that the efforts of people like yourself and many concerned organizations have had [sic] in changing the concepts, purposes, and operation of zoological parks. The enclosed material will indicate that after having had to do with 75 or 80 zoos, we, too, have changed our planning techniques as well as objectives. Again, I would appreciate your appraisal and suggestions for improving any future planning projects (HSUS Files).

Without doubt, one of the most significant testimonials to The HSUS's effective-

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ness is expressed in a recent letter from Robert Wagner, the Executive Director of the AAZPA, to the President of the Des Moines, Iowa Zoological Association. Explaining he felt the information requested concerning the AAZPA's Accreditation Program would not really solve the zoo's problems, Wagner said, "It occurs to me that your association needs some outside assistance, and needs such assistance quickly." He suggested:

You may wish to consider retaining the services of zoo directors (two or three) to come into your zoo and make recommendations for the operation and management of the facility. Another suggestion you should consider is requesting Ms. Sue Pressman of The Humane Society of the United States to inspect your facility and make recommendations (HSUS Files: AAZPA).

When interviewed, Wagner acknowledged that The HSUS has been relatively effective overall in its dealings with zoos and helpful to a number of them. He stated his belief that while some zoo people think Sue is "great" and some think she is "awful," AAZPA members generally feel that she understands "what they are up against." He personally acknowledged that Sue has done an "excellent job" generally. He also believes that, with the exception of The HSUS, other animal welfare organizations have merely used zoos to raise funds. He stated that those members of the zoo profession who have "kept up" with humane organizations know the difference between The HSUS's approach and that of the "protectionists for profit"; those who have not kept up are likely to believe that all humane groups are alike.

Wagner did, however, have some criticisms of The HSUS's actions in the case of the Birmingham, Alabama Zoo. He believes HSUS made a serious mistake in not filing cruelty charges against the zoo's veterinarian. He implied the Society did

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not have the nerve to file the charges because it would have been more "risky" (since it would have involved malpractice) than simply charging the zoo director. Wagner said he had no argument with the charges that were filed, but indicated he found it distressing "The HSUS had a chance to do something right and blew it."

The current President of AAZPA Dr. Don Farst (Director of the Gladys Porter Zoo in Brownsville, Texas) stated in a recent letter to Phyllis Moore, the AAZPA Humane Association Liaison:

I would agree with you that The HSUS is the only active humane association watch-dogging the care of animals in zoos but some of the others take uninformed pot shots at us from time to time. I feel that if you work closely with Sue Pressman that she can represent us to the other humane associations and they look to her as the recognized expert in the field (HSUS Files: AAZPA).

Most of the members of the zoo profession interviewed in the course of preparing this report (See: Appendix C) seemed to share the opinion that The HSUS alone among all the humane organizations claiming national status is recognized as having an active Zoo Program; that the program has had some positive effects upon zoos; and that Sue and The HSUS, having been feared and mistrusted initially by a number of AAZPA members, over the years, have come to be regarded generally as "fair" and "reasonable." That neither The HSUS nor Sue is universally praised by zoo people is probably the best indicator of the Zoo Program's success and certainly attests to the diversity of both the attitudes and the specific programs and policies which can be found in American zoos.

Dr. Philip Ogilvie, the former Director of several major zoos (See: Appendix C), believes that no other humane organization has taken the same "direct" approach

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with zoos as The HSUS. He cited the Fund for Animals for being so extreme as to "make Sue look reasonable." Unlike some others who have charged Sue and The HSUS with using zoos as a means of seeking publicity, Ogilvie claims that Sue has avoided publicity in some cases where she could have easily gotten it in order to allow time for changes to be made. He feels her direct contact with zoo directors has been important and she has made them aware of how they were being perceived by the public. He further believes she has supported the progressive moves made by the AAZPA while opposing the regressive ones. Ogilvie avows that Sue's efforts "cannot be overestimated."

In spite of his complimentary remarks, Ogilvie believes The HSUS has not yet done enough to tell the public what to look for in zoos. He feels that the public education campaign still has far to go. He also implied The HSUS should be even harder on the substandard zoos that it has been up to now.

Nicole Duplaix, The Director of TRAFFIC (U.S.A.), the independent group set up by the World Wildlife Fund and others (including the New York Zoological Society) to monitor the trade in wildlife and wildlife products, believes that humane societies have brought important pressure to bear upon zoos to make them "pull up their socks." But she has found that many humane organization representatives do not always understand what they are looking at in the zoo: not everything they see is inhumane, she says, and there are some bad things in zoos they do not see. Because Sue has a background in zoos, according to Duplaix, she is able to interpret correctly what she sees in a zoo and distinguish between conditions which are truly inhumane and those only apparently so.

Dr. Ted Reed, Director of the National Zoo, recently expressed to a number of his

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colleagues his feeling that Sue had handled herself very well in the difficult and controversial case involving the Birmingham, Alabama Zoo. Dr. Reed feels that generally Sue has been very responsible, but acknowledges she has been very irritating to some people in the zoo world.

Tim Anderson, Director of the Boston Zoological Society, feels that Sue's effectiveness is due to her understanding of the management problems of zoos.

An interesting appraisal of HSUS efforts came from Mr. Walter Kilroy, Vice President of the Massachusetts SPCA. Mr. Kilroy serves on the Board of the Boston Zoological Society and volunteered the information that he had "indeed heard members of the zoo profession acknowledge the influence of The HSUS on attitudes and practices in their field." He said that while he could not specifically recall the origin of all such comments since they had generally been made during informal discussions, he did recall that Mr. Russell Silva, formerly Executive Director of the Boston Zoological Society, had "expressed the opinion that it was efforts then underway by The HSUS that had caused the zoo profession to take a very close and serious look at its shortcomings and failings." According to Mr. Kilroy, Mr. Silva had gone on to assert that "the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums' Accreditation Program was rather directly attributable to the zoo inspection activities of The HSUS." Mr. Kilroy also expressed his own view that, "The HSUS has had, to be sure, a positive influence and [he is sure] there are those within the field who have not only welcomed this influence, but who have made use of it to secure needed changes in their own facilities." He also stated that "there are those who dismiss the role of The HSUS as misguided and meaningless. In all probability, with few if indeed any exceptions, these are individuals who

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feel criticized and threatened by The HSUS's Zoo Reform Program."

Earl Baysinger of the Department of the Interior (See: Appendix C) believes that aside from The HSUS--which is perceived as having a large grass roots constituency--the Animal Welfare Institute's Christine Stevens, and a few other individuals, there is no one to whom the government can turn for "the other side of the issue," meaning, a view other than AAZPA's, of USDI's regulation of the importation of wild animals. Baysinger does not believe there really is any "industry self-regulation" where zoos are concerned. He thinks the government is assuming that zoos are "good guys" and giving them the benefit of the doubt. He says that the "bolts are being loosened" on the Endangered Species Act--referring to the lessening of ESA restrictions to allow zoos to move their captive-born endangered species with Captive Self-Sustaining Population (CSSP) permits--and consequently there is a need for public interest groups to monitor the ESA and other similar legislation closely to make sure that it is not weakened even more. He also feels there is a need for someone to continue to keep an eye on the zoo's consumption of wildlife and The HSUS is in a good position to fill that need.

The HSUS and its Zoo Program are broadly criticized in a book entitled, Living Trophies: A Shocking Look at Conditions in America's Zoos, written by Peter Batten, former Director of the San José, California Zoo. The book, published in 1976, purports to expose extensive cruelty, neglect, and incompetence in more than 100 major zoos. Ultimately, however, Living Trophies is an obviously biased work, as reflective of Mr. Batten's personal prejudices and grudges as of reality. He does make some accurate and defensible criticisms of the inadequacies to be found in many zoos, but the verifiable statements are so entwined with sweeping, unsupported

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assertions; half-truths; snide, non sequiturs; outright contradictions; and apparent fabrications that the casual reader cannot easily disentangle the accurate statements from the specious ones.

Batten's conclusions are reported to be the results of a tour he and a research assistant made between January and May of 1974 after he became concerned that a small group of animals he sent to the Gladys Porter Zoo in Brownsville, Texas were not being properly cared for. Batten is as vague about the fate of these animals as he is about so many of the charges of cruelty and incompetence he makes in the book, assuming apparently that the reader should simply take his word for it that the animals suffered needlessly from "poor husbandry" (p.ix).

Batten's sweeping, unsupported statements cover everything from the "disgracefully high" mortality rate in zoos (p.2) to the curious assertion that "few U.S. zoos" have commercial blenders to liquify foods for certain species of animals (p.138). The book is pitifully documented for a work which makes such broad claims to expert knowledge of everything from captive propagation, to knowledge of animal behavior, to exhibit design. He implies that much of his information was gleaned from (disgruntled) keepers, "often at the risk of their jobs" (p.2). His list of 49 references includes 23 publications from zoos (guidebooks, folders, brochures, newsletters, and directors' reports) and 10 special reports or bulletins from humane organizations (5 from The HSUS, 1 from the Golden State Humane Society, and 4 from United Action for Animals). By comparison, Hediger's Man and Animal in the Zoo, which also criticizes the deficiencies in zoos, cites 176 references including numerous scientific studies of various species of animals in the wild and many aspects of the captive environment.

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Batten's criticisms of The HSUS Zoo Program are selectively documented or not documented at all. He makes no attempt to describe the program in detail, explain The HSUS rating system, or to justify with evidence his contention that Sue Pressman's visits to zoos are "followed by demands for change that often involve needless major investments or are impossible to meet" (p.175). He also claims that "Mrs. Pressman's statements with regard to zoos are not always accurate and sometimes reveal a dearth of professionalism," (p.175) but gives no examples. His assertion that she was "formerly an apprentice keeper in Boston's old zoo" (p.174) is patently false, as is his claim that John Hoyt-- who denies the assertion flatly--"expressed surprise that [Batten] should wish to donate the research material" accumulated from his tour of zoos (p.178).

Batten makes snide references to The HSUS's "well-paid staff," "plush offices," and "lavish budget" for programs, implying that The HSUS's interest in zoos is largely self-interest. Although Batten contends that other organizations "with far less working capital have been saying for years that zoo animals are badly kept, but were far less concerned with personal publicity," he neglects to recognize their altruistic efforts by mentioning their names (p.176). He also fails to explain how these organizations, lacking an effective public awareness campaign, managed to get their message across to the public.

The one specific example he gives of The HSUS's poor judgment concerns the relocation of a bear from a riding stable in Ohio to Orphans of the Wild in Buellton, California. Batten does not mention that the bear was crippled and would not have been able to survive in the same naturalistic surroundings into which other bears had been relocated by The HSUS. He implies that The HSUS typically moved caged

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animals from one bad situation to another.

Although both of The HSUS Special Reports on Zoos are cited in his reference list, Batten uses a quote out of context from a 1974 article in the Philadelphia Enquirer to support his contention that Sue Pressman expressed unqualified support for drive-through wild animal parks. He then cites the 1975 Special Report as evidence that The HSUS came late to an awareness of the shortcomings of these parks. He ignores the extensive criticisms of drive-through parks in general and the West Palm Beach, Florida Lion Country Safari in particular which appeared in the 1972 Special Report on Zoos.

A minute examination of the book's other unsupported assertions, inconsistencies, half-truths, and misstatements would fill a volume almost the size of Living Trophies itself. Many of these are discussed elsewhere in this paper.

Evidently Batten's shortcomings as a writer were apparent to the general public. Zoo people claim his book had no effect upon their profession other than to annoy the few members who bothered to read it (Wagner, King, Conway, Graham, Personal Communications). William Conway believes that Batten's lack of knowledge is evident to anyone with even a slight understanding of zoos or animal behavior. Possibly the America public was unwilling to believe that zoos, although definitely in need of improvement, were as uniformly atrocious as Batten claims (Graham, Personal Communication).

In any case, Living Trophies produced no serious wave of criticism or questioning of The HSUS by its constituents. The only readership the book seems to have is among those who oppose zoos altogether. The Society for Animal Rights has purchased

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the remaining copies from the publisher and is making them available to its members at a special reduced price. SAR is using the book to support its contention that all zoos should be "phased out" (SAR Report, February 1980). That the book should be used for this purpose is ironic since Batten opposes phasing out zoos, claiming: "Phasing out zoos would not eliminate [zoo animals,] problems. . . . it is better to accept the fact that zoos are here [and] take steps to improve them and protect zoo animals from additional human ignorance or neglect. ."(p.184). Anyone who attempts to criticize zoos armed only with Living Trophies is likely to find himself easily disarmed by the first knowledgeable zoo person he meets.

Among the individuals interviewed in the course of preparing this paper only two were more critical than complimentary of The HSUS or its Zoo Program. Their criticisms are somewhat surprising because, among the many diverse members of the zoo profession, their apparent philosophy concerning zoos and animal welfare in general seems most closely and consistently akin to that of The HSUS. One of these critics is William Conway, the undisputed leader in articulating the ethical obligations of the zoo profession. For years Conway (1973, 1977, 1979; see also Hahn, 1967; Hediger, 1969; and Campbell, 1978) has been pointing out the major shortcomings of zoos and how they might be rectified. Conway's commitment to professional standards of operation and devotion to worldwide conservation and the preservation of endangered wildlife are widely acclaimed.

While acknowledging that The HSUS has been of some help in alleviating the suffering of animals in bad zoos, Mr. Conway contends that The HSUS's efforts have been "beside the point." He does state that The HSUS has taken a more responsible position with respect to zoos than such organizations as United Action for Animals,

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the Society for Animal Rights, and Friends of Animals, but he believes that, generally speaking, humane groups (and The HSUS is included by implication) have hurt the fundraising efforts of zoos, making it difficult for them to make necessary improvements. He believes that major reforms in zoos will only come about from within the profession as "good examples" are created; but without funds these good examples will not come into being.

Conway contends that The HSUS should have insisted that "American zoos be the best in the world," but by dwelling only upon bad conditions in zoos, failing to recognize the good work many zoos are doing, and conveying an attitude of mere "tolerance" towards zoos generally, The HSUS has impeded the efforts of zoos to foster a strong national commitment to the preservation of wildlife. Such a commitment is vital, he contends, to stop the wanton destruction of both wild animals and their habitat. He believes The HSUS does not recognize that the human-caused extinction of animals is the "greatest cruelty of all." He considers humane societies to be short-sighted, stating that, as long as they are more concerned with whether "an individual animal dies well than whether a species lives at all," they will never be of any help to wildlife.

While acknowledging that Sue and The HSUS have been helpful in certain instances (with the Central Park Zoo and the preparation of the AAZPA Surplus Committee Report, for example), he charges that The HSUS has used zoos primarily as a "fundraising gimmick" (See: Conclusions and Recommendations/The Zoo Program's Potential for Funding).

If Mr. Conway is correct in his charge that The HSUS's approach to zoos has hurt

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their ability to raise funds then the Zoo Program would have been counterproductive at the least. The modernization of exhibits and hiring of professional staff which Sue Pressman has consistently urged upon inferior zoos has generally required a commitment to more rather than less money. There are numerous indications in The HSUS Zoo Files of municipalities which have loosened their purse strings after The HSUS drew attention to the zoos' inadequacies. However, to insure that the "good examples" rather than the bad are copied, Sue has frequently warned of the danger of pouring money into a zoo without careful planning first.

Conway's criticisms of The HSUS seem to stem from what he perceives as an ambivalence toward the concept of zoos. In spite of the official statement of policy which declares that The HSUS "acknowledges the value of some zoos in this country by reason of their achieved excellence," and the recognition of the "potential" of others to achieve that same excellence, other statements have indicated a more negative view of zoos. The statement in the cover letter which accompanied the 1975 Special Report on Zoo Reform to the effect that "The HSUS believes there is little justification for perpetuation of zoos in most instances" doubtlessly contributed considerably to Conway's belief that The HSUS is, beneath the surface, "anti-zoo," and worse, that The HSUS's interest in zoos is really self-interest. Conway suggests that if The HSUS truly recognizes the valuable contribution good zoos make to American culture, it should clarify its position and make more public statements in support of this acknowledged contribution. Where zoos are concerned, Conway says, The HSUS should either "fish or cut bait."

Neither Wayne King nor Robert Wagner agrees with Conway's assertion that humane organizations have hurt the fundraising abilities of zoos, nor do they agree that

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improvements in zoos will come about only from efforts made within the profession. King does contend, however, that while Sue has praised the work of good zoos as an individual The HSUS, as an organization, has not.

Sue has made such public statements as: "We are basically a pro-zoo organization. They are institutions necessary for the survival of wildlife" (Anable, 1975); and "there are lots of things we're for, and one of them is good zoos. We think the zoo is a most important institution" (Livingston, 1974, p.234). She has even gone so far as to state that "we've gone from saying, 'zoos are ethically bad--let's make them better,' to wondering if we wouldn't be worse off without them" (Van Slambrouck, 1978). These statements are more consistent with HSUS's official policy statement than the statements made in some HSUS publications.

These perceived inconsistencies in The HSUS's stance regarding zoos have undoubtedly led some members of the zoo profession to feel The HSUS cannot be trusted, and have done some measure of harm to the organization's credibility (See: Conclusions and Recommendations).

The other very outspoken critic of The HSUS among those interviewed was Stefan Graham, the Director of the Baltimore Zoo and former Director of the Salisbury, Maryland Zoo. Graham's criticisms were different from Conway's in that his disillusionment seems to stem from his belief that the Society has not been sufficiently aggressive in its efforts to reform zoos. Like Conway, he has been very outspoken about animal welfare issues and the ethical obligations of the zoo profession and has presented several papers at AAZPA conferences (1973, 1978 & 1978a) on these subjects. Additionally, he has the distinction of being the only director of a

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zoo (the Salisbury, Maryland Zoo) to be upgraded by The HSUS from a class 3 institution to a class 1.

Since that time, when, he acknowledges, The HSUS and Sue were very helpful to him in improving the zoo's image in the community, he says he has tried on several occasions to get help from The HSUS regarding a number of other animal welfare problems, but his efforts have been largely to no avail. He perceives The HSUS as too large, "too spread out," and "totally emasculated." He believes the organization is trying to do too many things and as a result is not doing any of them particularly well.

Without providing specific details, Graham asserts that if The HSUS is going to conduct a zoo program, "it ought to do it right." He implies the Society should pursue a course of taking more legal action against substandard zoos, and states he feels The HSUS is "afraid of losing its holdings." He adds that The HSUS has missed an opportunity to "make a strong statement for its cause." This comment appears to be levelled at the organization in general rather than at the Zoo Program specifically.

Graham contends The HSUS and Sue are mistrusted by zoo people generally, for which he appears to blame the Society's image rather than any of Sue's actions in particular. He believes zoos do not consider The HSUS a genuine threat, but he adds that some of them probably perceive The HSUS as a "potential" threat. He thinks the AAZPA considers Sue to be its "token humane representative" and a "thorn" in its side.

While making these disparaging remarks about The HSUS, Graham also adds that he

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does not know of any other humane organizations which have been "visible" in the zoo world. Even though The HSUS has not been of help to him recently, he says, "there is nowhere else to go" for help with animal welfare problems.

He believes that AAZPA will work with The HSUS "when The HSUS is right," and that The HSUS and the Association should work together more closely.