

Mounting Criticism of Zoos

A significant call for the reform of zoos had been sounded in 1968 in an article in Life magazine by author and zoologist Desmond Morris entitled, "Must We Have Zoos? Yes But. . . ." Morris's article followed an exposé of the cruelties of the wildlife trade and inadequate conditions in zoos entitled, "The Shame Of The Naked Cage." Morris, the Curator of Mammals at the London Zoo, was, according to Life, "the world's best known zoologist," after his book, The Naked Ape, became a best-seller in 1967.

It is not known what effect this article had upon zoos, but it is not unreasonable to speculate that its effect upon the general public was considerable. It certainly contributed to the concern about zoos growing within the ranks of the humane movement. The HSUS, through Frank McMahon, had been consulted by staff writers from Life who were preparing "The Shame of the Naked Cage" which accompanied Morris's article (HSUS News, January-February 1969). However, it was Christine Stevens who had the two articles entered into the record during the hearings on the Animal Welfare Act. She introduced them again into the record in 1974 during the hearings on bills to provide federal assistance to zoos and aquariums.

Morris began by describing a growing opposition to the continuation of zoos. He called for zoos to reform in order to survive into the next century. The principal argument he put forth for the continuation of zoos is one which is still hotly debated among the proponents and opponents of zoos (See: Zoos: Pro and Con). Morris contended that zoos provide needed contact between human beings and animals for which films and books are not adequate substitutes. He declared: "If zoos disappear, I fear that our vast urban populations will become so physically remote from animal life, they will cease to care about it" (p.78). With wildlife vanishing

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at an alarming rate, more rather than less concern, he contended, was needed to save it.

Having made this pronouncement, he proceeded to describe what amounted to a newly recognized animal welfare problem: the psychological cruelty of the "naked" cage in the traditional museum-style zoo exhibit. He explained that animals can generally be classified as "specialists" or "opportunists." The needs of specialists, "animals which have put all their evolutionary effort into the perfection of one survival trick," are few and can easily be met in captivity. By contrast, opportunists, with which human beings--the most highly evolved specialists of all--most readily identify and thus demand to see in zoos, need outlets for their exploratory urges (pp.78-80).

In the highly simplified environment of the zoo cage, the opportunists' attempts to find outlets for their need for activity often result in aberrant behavior such as stereotypical locomotion, coprophagy, hypersexuality, hyperaggression, or begging for food. In addition to the false impression such behavior conveys to the zoo visitor about the animals' true nature, it constitutes, Morris implied, a kind of suffering. He declared: "There is something biologically immoral about keeping animals in enclosures where their behavior patterns, which took millions of years to evolve, can find no expression" (p.83).

But Morris was not charging zoos with deliberate cruelty. He was charging them with not keeping pace with results of the field research being done on wild animals, and of not applying that information concerning the behavioral needs of animals to their zoo exhibits. More than anything else they were charged with failing to

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evolve at a proper pace.

He cited the tendency to keep too many species "in order to attract enough visitors to pay for the upkeep" as the "major flaw in zoo thinking" (p.83). He warned of the day when "zoos will nauseate our society" as people become increasingly knowledgeable about the normal behavior of animals through their exposure to books, television, and films. He described the result of this recent commercial success of the field work of zoologists and naturalists: "We understand the animals' true problems better and find the old zoo cages more worrying than stimulating, more depressing than exciting" (p.83).

Morris was known for his observations of human as well as animal behavior, and he went on to describe in the article the emergence of two classes of zoo-watchers, a distinction which proved to be of great significance in the humane movement's approach to zoos in the following decade:

The emotional, anthropomorphic approach of the 'bleeding hearts' sees the animals as pathetic, imprisoned humanoids. The increasingly educated and knowledgeable eyes of the new zoo public will see something equally depressing, but this time for the right reasons (p.84).

In describing the future course of zoos, Morris acquainted the general public with objectives which had long been discussed and debated by the leading members of the zoo world. Morris spoke of the need for more captive breeding to reduce the drain on wild populations and perpetuate endangered species. He also called for the intensive study of all zoo animals to contribute to man's total knowledge of them, and for exhibits that are educational for zoo-goers. To be educational, of course, they had to allow the animals to behave normally. To accomplish these

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ends, zoos would have to specialize and keep larger numbers of fewer species. Because people are more mobile and have more leisure time, he declared, they will travel the distances necessary to see these specialized collections. He spoke of the need for more courageous visionaries in the zoo world to commence the necessary revolution. He described exciting prospects for the future and summed up with a call to arms:

The list is endless, the prospects enthralling. Zoos have a choice. They can change drastically and flourish and grow in importance each year, as the truly wild places of the world shrink and decay. Or they can continue along as the scruffy little animal slums they all too often are, and find themselves outlawed and condemned. There are good zoos, even now, but most of even the best zoos are still weighed down by their old fashioned buildings. Their often enlightened officials still carry the burden of the legacy of their well-meaning but ignorant predecessors. They would like to sweep the past away and start again, but it is not easy. Revolutions seldom are (p.86).

Morris was not unique in the zoo world in pointing out the shortcomings of the traditional zoo which had proliferated since the Nineteenth Century (since the mid-19th Century in the case of the American zoo). The eminent Swiss Zoo Director Heini Hediger had been observing and documenting aberrant behavior in zoo animals since the 1930's, as had others (Meyer-Holzapfl, 1968), and had also spoken of the need to improve the "quality" of the captive animal's environment in his book Wild Animals in Captivity, first published in English in 1950, and subsequently in paperback in America in 1964. Hediger had also described the responsibility of zoo professionals to cooperate and communicate more, to collect and exchange information on their animals and, most important, to teach people "a new attitude towards animals" (1964, p.176).

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Others in the zoo world (Van Den Bergh, 1962; Osborn, 1962) had spoken of the need for zoos to improve their methods of exhibiting animals to facilitate both public education and captive breeding, but these pronouncements had not reached a popular audience. The year before Morris's article was published, a popular book on major zoos of the world had appeared (Hahn, 1967) which documented that at least some zoo people were discussing the deficiencies in their institutions among themselves. Although in Animal Gardens mention is made of the need to eliminate bad zoos and make exhibits more suited to the animals' needs, the tone is less urgent and less threatening than Morris's.

Morris's approach to zoo problems was different from that of other people working in zoos in that he took his case to the general public. If zoo professionals alone had been responsible for the fate of their zoos, doubtless many zoos would have more closely approximated the ideals Morris described. But they were not, and the public had to be made aware of the various individuals, practices, and notions which were preventing most American zoos in the late 1960's from keeping pace with the increased understanding of the needs of wild animals and the public's new-found sympathy for their plight in captivity. With zoo people talking primarily to one another about their problems, the public would only be made aware of the zoos' difficulties by "outsiders."