

Will the end of breeding orcas at SeaWorld change much for animals in captivity?

March 22 2016, by Nigel Rothfels, University Of Wisconsin-Milwaukee



No more breeding, but still on exhibit. Credit: Business Navigatoren, CC BY-SA

When SeaWorld announced it would [stop breeding orcas](#) and begin to phase out "theatrical performances" using the animals, the news appeared to mark a significant change in ideas about animals and captivity.

Wayne Pacelle, president of the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), and Joel Manby, CEO of SeaWorld, [promoted their new](#)

[partnership](#) in interviews. After a long history of mutual recrimination, the two organizations say they'll work together to provide needed support for wild marine creatures in distress and to improve the circumstances of currently captive orcas in the U.S. As SeaWorld's Manby put it:

It's clear to me that society is shifting. People's view to have these beautiful, majestic animals under human care – people are more and more uncomfortable with that. And no matter what side you are on this issue, it's clear that that's shifting, and we need to shift with that.

If there is indeed a shift going on, it seems to be more in the rhetoric of the animal exhibition industries than in public comfort (or discomfort) with seeing large [animals](#) in captivity.

Changing with the times...

For anyone interested in the history of exhibiting exotic animals, the news that people's expectations have changed and that zoological gardens, aquariums and circuses are responsive to those changes can't help but illicit a little cynicism.

The SeaWorld/HSUS announcement echoes news from last year that Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus decided to phase out elephant performances and retire the animals to a state-of-the-art sanctuary. In both cases, the companies were clearly facing growing public criticism damaging their bottom lines. They appear to have made business decisions to protect their brands and refocus the public's attention on what they describe as more critical core missions.

At the same time, both announcements were framed as having resulted from the recognition that the times have changed – "that society is shifting" – and that change is making circumstances better for animals in captivity. This claim reaches far beyond charismatic whales and

elephants and is deployed for all kinds of new policies and exhibits.

Later this month, for example, the London Zoo will open its "breath-taking" newest exhibit, "[Land of the Lions](#)," featuring "thrilling, immersive Indian-themed areas to explore – including a train station, crumbling temple clearing, high street and guard hut." The exhibit is described as an "interactive adventure," through which visitors will "get closer than ever before to mighty Asiatic lions."

As remarkable as this exhibit sounds, a video of the queen officially opening the exhibit shows a fairly unsurprising couple of female lions "activated" by having food dispersed in a relatively small exhibit with wire fencing.

But the times have been changing for a while

I'm not sure whether the queen felt transported to India in visiting this exhibit. What is clear, though, is that the zoo wants us to believe that this exhibit is something entirely novel. This sort of claim is very old, indeed.

Even in 1869, for example, almost 150 years ago, an editorial appeared in the *Daily News* of London describing a proposed new lion house for this same zoo. Pointing to a history of "dismal menagerie cages," the [article heralded a new vision](#) of "displaying lions and tigers, in what may be called by comparison a state of nature" and the public can look forward to seeing "lions at play, free as their own jungle home; tigers crouching, springing, gamboling, with as little restraint as the low plains of their native India."

Ever since public zoos began to be built in the 19th century, there's been a consistent rhetorical pattern behind any proposed new zoo or aquarium or exhibit.



A late 19th-century vision of a zoological park of the future. Credit: Nigel Rothfels' *Savages and Beasts: The Birth of the Modern Zoo*

The argument typically runs something like this: whereas in the past our exhibits have been disappointing, uninspiring and small, our new exhibit will finally make it seem like the animals are not in captivity. As importantly, the animals themselves will also finally be happy.

Unfortunately, almost all of these new exhibits turn out to be somehow less than was envisioned, less than was hoped...simply less.

This is *not* to say that exhibits haven't in fact gotten better. Exhibited animals are in general better cared for and healthier in all ways than they used to be.

Each generation of exhibits does tend to improve on what came before; elephant exhibits being built at the more ambitious zoos of today, like the Oregon Zoo's "[Elephant Lands](#)," for example, have typically radically improved the conditions for the animals, keepers and the visiting public. And these changes have been pushed by public concerns along with the ambitions of designers and directors to provide better circumstances for the animals.

But all that doesn't alter the fact of captivity. And that fact will, as best as I can tell, continue to undermine whatever rhetorical gestures may be made declaring a new day for animals and people.

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