

Death of gorilla sparks much bigger questions around role of zoos

June 8 2016, by Rachel Stern

Plenty of debate, outrage and chatter ensued when a 17-year-old gorilla was shot and killed at the Cincinnati Zoo last month after a young boy fell into the animal's enclosure.

But the discussion has not focused on the right types of questions, according to Irus Braverman, law professor at the University at Buffalo School of Law and author of "Zooland: The Institution of Captivity." Braverman's book looks at the complexities of managing zoo animals and the role of zoos as conservation institutions, and this case, she says, sheds light on just that.

"What are animals, like gorillas, doing in zoos in the first place?" she says. "The public's take on this in the U.S. has typically been very black and white: either absolutely condemning or fully embracing zoos. But this raises important questions about whether or not zoos are horrible, or crucial. Zoo professionals claim that they are holding endangered species as ambassadors for their kind in the wild and as a way to educate the public. This instance would have been a great opportunity to raise important questions about the legitimacy of holding certain gorillas in captivity.

"These are decisions we have to make, but it is easier to just have an emotional uproar than to have a serious discussion."

Much of the conversation has swirled around who was to blame, with many accusing the boy's mother of not paying close enough attention,

and others wondering whether or not the zoo should have killed the gorilla to save the boy.

But that misses the real issues at play, Braverman says.

"The public was so quick to get angry when this gorilla was killed at the zoo, but when 1,500 of these same gorilla species are killed by poaching and disease in the wild per year the public mostly remain silent," she says. "There are implicit value judgements being made here about which animal lives matter more. We need to look at that and why that is."

This case also highlights innate issues with zoos that are not going to go away anytime soon, Braverman says.

There will always be risk when large wild animals are placed in an urban environment, she says.

"It is impossible to eliminate all human error and all accidents inside zoos," she says. "Those happen and they will happen again. So we need to stress the central question here – what is the role of the [zoo](#) in American society today? If their role is conservation, then what does the public have to say about how it wants to see zoos fulfill this role? Are all forms of captivity problematic, in the [public](#)'s view, or are we willing to accept certain forms of captivity, for certain species in certain circumstances? This case brings all of these central issues to light."

Provided by University at Buffalo

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