

How to save zoos? Focus on education, conservation

August 9 2017, by Albrecht Schulte-Hostedde



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One of my earlier memories from my childhood is visiting the Frankfurt zoo in Germany. I watched several elephants in an indoor enclosure, and while they were huge and fascinating, it also saddened me to see such

magnificent animals in captivity. I also remember having straw thrown in my face by one of those elephants, although my parents dispute this.

Now, with my own children, we visit the Toronto Zoo with all of its [animals](#) in more naturalistic enclosures, and the many educational and conservation programs and displays. It's a different world.

For many, zoos are central to some of their favourite memories as children. Seeing lions, tigers and elephants and other less familiar animals, never mind smelling them, can be a wonderful experience.

But the role of zoos in society has led to serious discussion about whether zoos should even exist. A strike earlier this year by workers at the Toronto Zoo had many musing about whether the zoo should re-open at all. The Toronto Star [reported that social media and emails](#) they received argued "zoos are outdated, inhumane attractions that should be closed outright, or converted to animal sanctuaries."

That's a widespread sentiment, manifested in part by the existence of organizations such as [Zoocheck](#), which acts to "promote and protect the interests and well-being of wild animals," including those held in captivity.

Zoos a thing of the past?

Some of the negative perceptions of zoos may be the result of their past. The modern zoo is based on a history of colonialism in which exotic animals from faraway lands were brought back for public amusement. A particularly ugly aspect of this history occurred when Indigenous people from colonized countries were also brought to Europe and the United States for [display](#) at human zoos, even as late as the 1950s.

While the ethical questions surrounding zoos today are not as

controversial, they are no less important.

The social contract that zoos have with society has changed. Due largely to animal welfare concerns, the general public now has a predominately negative view toward the display of animals solely for entertainment, and the traditional zoo as a menagerie is no longer considered acceptable.

The modern zoo must become more than a source of entertainment, and must embrace conservation, research and education as part of its mandate. For example, in its most recent [strategic plan](#), the Toronto Zoo has stated one of its goals is to become a zoo-based "conservation centre of excellence."

Increasingly, zoos must also now be accredited. For example, in Canada, [CAZA](#) (Canada's Accredited Zoos and Aquariums) has an accreditation program that ensures animal welfare and promotes conservation research and outreach with the public.

Similar organizations exist globally, including in the United States (where the [AZA](#) has taken a global lead in zoo accreditation requirements) and Europe ([EAZA](#)). While there is room for criticism about how these organizations manage their programs, it's clear that accredited zoos are the standard to which the modern zoo must be held.

Modern zoos are institutions that reflect complicated and sometimes conflicting values related to entertainment, conservation and animal welfare. Modern zoos in many ways represents a paradox – they're organizations with a mandate to support conservation and education of the public regarding wild animals and nature that also manage captive wildlife. It's this paradox that fuels much of the criticism of zoos.



A lion at the Toronto Zoo.

In the United States, where arguably this transition from menagerie to conservation organization is most advanced, zoos such as the San Diego Zoo and the National Zoo in Washington, D.C., have rebranded themselves (e.g. [San Diego Zoo Global](#)), highlighting their contributions to conservation, research and the training of conservation professionals.

In Canada, the Toronto Zoo, the Calgary Zoo and the Vancouver Aquarium probably have the most developed research and conservation programs. But they fall short relative to their American counterparts in terms of the scope of these activities, in part because of the huge disparity in financial support.

Nonetheless, there's no doubt that zoos make significant contributions to conservation.

Endangered species saved

Captive breeding programs and the accompanying reintroductions have saved many endangered species from extinction. Currently, captive breeding by Canadian zoos is a significant component of the conservation programs for a number of species, mostly of those native to Canada (e.g. the Vancouver Island marmot, the Eastern loggerhead shrike, wood turtle, burrowing owl, and black-footed ferret).

These programs often stand between the extinction and the survival of these species. In addition, the people who work for conservation and education in the zoos are passionate and skilled.

But there remain untapped opportunities for zoos to enhance their work in conservation and research. Zoos should be pressured by the general public to ensure that the conservation and education mandate of the modern zoo is upheld.

Determining the efficacy of conservation and education efforts by zoos is important and will give confidence to the general public that zoos are fulfilling the evolving social contract with society.

Do zoos actually do good?

For example, how do we know that education programs at zoos actually work?

[The research of my colleague Dr. Chantal Barriault](#) (Director of the Science Communication graduate program at Laurentian University)

indicates that the general public doesn't learn as much as we would like or expect.

The efficacy of [conservation programs](#) should also be examined. How successful are the captive breeding and reintroduction programs? Are there ways to improve these conservation outcomes? As zoos evolve into conservation organizations, in Canada and globally, it is critical that appropriately trained conservation professionals support these efforts.

While the zoo community has tremendous veterinary expertise related to the care and captivity of animals, there is an opportunity for professionals trained in evolution, population genetics and other conservation-oriented disciplines to support zoo [conservation](#).

Clearly, zoos are already asking these questions of themselves. The public should encourage more of this self-examination so that zoos evolve into more valuable institutions.

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