

# Silent zoo tours can generate new perspectives on animals, study suggests

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Visiting zoos in silence can generate a range of novel experiences, helping people to connect to animals in a more intimate way and giving visits more gravitas, according to new research.

Experts ran special silent events at Paignton and Bristol zoos as part of a wider project on the auditory culture of zoos.

Visitors were better able to focus, concentrate and even meditate on specific [animals](#) and their behavior, which sometimes fostered feelings of intimacy with and attachment to particular zoo animals.

The research, published in *TRACE: Journal for Human-Animal Studies*, was conducted by Professor Tom Rice, Dr. Alexander Badman-King, Professor Sam Hurn and from the University of Exeter and Dr. Adam Reed, from the University of St Andrews.

Professor Rice said, "Participants found keeping silent could be experienced as a privation (in that they weren't speaking to other humans), but also a privilege, because it was so unusual and sometimes lent their zoo visiting unexpected seriousness and gravitas. Silence helped them pay more attention, meaning that they got things out of their visits that they might not have ordinarily."

Participants in the visits, held in 2019, were allowed to choose their own paths around the zoo and move at their own pace but were not allowed to talk to others. The participants took part in focus groups after the event to discuss their experiences.

The silence appeared to affect the pace of the visits. James and Clare found that they "went round slower" and "took more time" to think and to concentrate. Some participants observed that not speaking seemed to generate periods of physical stillness, too.

The combination of silence, slowness and stillness produced feelings of "stress relief" and "tranquility," as well as "peacefulness" in some participants. Melanie said, "I found it a massive privilege. I felt so honored to be sharing the animals' space, and it didn't feel like a zoo," while Bridget said, "It is great stress relief."

Professor Rice said, "Many participants reported that they felt their

silence had affected the behavior of the zoo animals they observed. For instance, some said that the animals seemed comfortable with their presence, and that they were more ready to come close to them than to noisier visitors. Silence was considered by some visitors to establish points of connection between themselves and some animals."

Laura, like other younger participants, described how not being allowed to communicate using a [mobile phone](#) meant she was able to invest more of her attention in the zoo. She said, "I think it was quite nice having it silent, because, if it was quiet and I could still communicate, I would end up sending pictures to people, and then I wouldn't be paying attention as much. I think [social media](#) really influences what you see and it is really distracting. So, I think it was really good just switching my phone off completely and not associating with anyone."

The study suggests that silent visits can help visitors to develop new perspectives on zoos and their animals and can also help researchers to imagine future possibilities for the auditory culture of zoos.

**More information:** Tom Rice et al, A desirable privation: Exploring silence as a mode of zoo visiting, *TRACE :. Journal for Human-Animal Studies* (2023). [DOI: 10.23984/fjhas.116665](https://doi.org/10.23984/fjhas.116665)

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