

Orlando Sentinel

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THE FRONT BURNER

# Is captivity harmful to animals?

## Captive creatures liberate conservation sensibilities

By SARAH CUNNINGHAM | Guest columnist

You may have heard recently that the Western black rhinoceros is extinct. We are debatably in the middle of the sixth mass extinction of life on Earth, so expect more bad news. The last mass extinction ended the dinosaurs, and the third wiped out 96 percent of all marine species. We are the sixth.

In that context, the question of whether or not parks like SeaWorld are "good" for animals takes on a different meaning. We can ask if animals are healthier or happier in captivity, and we should. However, the more urgent question is whether those species will continue to exist at all. The answer depends on how much you and I care about the answer. That is the primary mission of the best living-animal collections around the world — to inspire people to care about other species, so that we create some collective will to change the course of history.

The good news is that it works. Worldwide more than 700 million people visit zoos and aquariums each year. In the United States, it is more people than attend all sporting events combined. Research shows that during these visits, people forge emotional connections to wildlife and learn to see themselves as part of conservation solutions. There is a growing body of evidence — building on a comprehensive report by the National Research Council — that informal science education is particularly effective when experiences are interactive and inspire positive emotions.

There are great examples of success, such as the Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch program, which changed not only the fish-buying habits of their visitors, but the menus of seafood restaurants across the country. Even the film "Blackfish" inadvertently makes the case for the power of the experiences offered by SeaWorld when the former trainers featured in the film describe how visits to the park inspired them to devote their careers to the care of marine mammals. That is the kind of dedication we need on a much larger, wider scale.

Children do learn about wildlife from television, but they also see dragons and giant robots on TV. We need children to care more about the world they live in than they do about the wizarding world or Pandora, and so we need equally powerful experiences to offer.

Happily, we don't need fancy digital technology to inspire awe and wonder in children and adults. When a male Amur tiger stands on his hind legs and towers over a group of zoo visitors, grown men gasp. Chattering teenagers are struck dumb. When those moments are paired with skillful educational messages and direct calls to take simple action steps, we know they can make a difference.

None of this is to say that the question of the welfare of animals in captivity is not important. Part of the reason debates about captive animals are so contentious is that both sides include people who care deeply about animals and about this biodiversity crisis, but who have different views on whether we should be primarily concerned with respecting animal rights or promoting welfare and conservation.

If we decide to use individual animals to benefit other members of a species, we take on the responsibility for ensuring their well being. If we can do a better job, then we should. That means looking honestly at criticism, even if it comes from hostile sources, or is accompanied by slander and distortions of truth. That's hard, but if the goal is to do good on a larger scale, then we have to be successful on the smaller scale. People only form these connections with wildlife if their personal experiences are positive — if animals are healthy and active and people smile and feel good when they see them.

So let's celebrate the successes and fix the problems, and look for more creative ways to inspire children to become not just marine mammal trainers but biologists, climate scientists and politicians who help save endangered species.

*Sarah Cunningham is an assistant professor and director of the Center for Experiential and Environmental Education at Unity College in Unity, Maine.*

**We need children to care more about the world they live in than about the wizarding world; we need equally powerful experiences to offer.**



Today's moderator



DARRYL E. OWENS  
Editorial Writer

Thursday's rally at SeaWorld by PETA and the Animal Rights Foundation of Florida demanding the release of its orcas was just the latest fallout from "Blackfish," the unflattering documentary about the marine park.

Yet, the debate over the virtues of animal captivity likely has raged since the first modern zoo — the Imperial Menagerie in Vienna, Austria — opened in 1752.

Critics of zoos and animal parks argue that captivity violates the rights of sentient creatures. Moreover, they say that confined creatures — not unlike humans — suffer emotional trauma. The real lesson zoological parks teach children, says one of today's columnists, is that confinement of animals is cool.

In contrast, supporters argue that animals are well served by often being plucked from areas where poaching and hunting are rampant. And they're fed regularly, rather than having to face starvation in their natural habitats. Humans, meanwhile, see live animals and develop compassion and a zeal for protecting them — a view held by today's other columnist.

Even advocates concede the issue's complexities and dissonance, as Pulitzer Prize-winner Thomas French, author of "Zoo Story: Life in the Garden of Captives," recently told TCPalm.com:

"A zoo isn't Africa, but it keeps them safe. The keepers struggle with their ambivalence about wishing the animals could be free in the wild and their understanding that in many cases there is no wild for them to go back to."

Read more about it

- AnimalPlanet.com offers additional perspectives on the issue. Surf to the site and search "animal captivity."
- You can read about and join the debate on the issue at debate.org. Visit the site and search "animal captivity."
- PETA.org offers its anti-captivity take on current events. Search "animal captivity."

## Learn to appreciate wildlife without keeping it confined

By PHILIP TEDESCHI | Guest columnist

It is time to change our practice of holding animals in captivity for human enjoyment, and to free ourselves of these morally flawed approaches to our relationship with other animals.

It now is indisputable that many species are highly sentient, have complex emotional lives and cognition, have the capacity to feel pain and distress and to suffer, and, conversely, experience joy, happiness and a sense of security. They have intense social relationships, intricate language and communication, and can experience trauma akin to post-traumatic stress disorder.

Research shows that the physical and psychological health of animals in captivity is highly compromised. Zoos and aquariums are without question places that allow us close proximity to a wide array of amazing beings and, in some nations, the welfare of their charges has improved exponentially. These animal parks often frame their mission as educational. And many are engaged in conservation and science, but what is the overall take-home message?

The overt lesson remains that keeping animals in cages is morally acceptable, that animals are dangerous and belong behind bars, and that humans cannot live with them peacefully — creating a distorted understanding about co-existence. Animals held in captive environments are often suffering, and are not acting or functioning in normative ways, which does not provide visitors with a true understanding of the intricacies, importance and significance of their lives and behavior.

It is hard to deny that captive animals are not being harmed by the experience of being captives or, at the very least, psychologically tormented. Unless an animal can no longer survive on its own in the wild, or if its release would significantly harm the environment or create significant public-safety concerns, it is hard to justify

its incarceration. People may come away awed by the animals themselves, possibly even entertained, but there is perhaps some level of dissonance. Subconsciously, we know it is wrong. We are watching suffering and exploitation.

However, this does not mean we should throw the baby out with the bathwater. Most people who work in Western animal parks love and care deeply about animals, nurture and protect them, and spend personal and professional time advocating for them. They have skills in captive-animal husbandry for species that are notoriously hard to care for in captivity.

Terrible things happen to animals (for example, pet trade, wildlife trade and habitat destruction) every day globally, and the need for highly skilled caretakers for these animals who cannot return to their native habitat is clear. Progressive institutions doing this are Detroit Zoo and the Bear Rescue Center in Chengdu, China.

When there is a vast menagerie of wildlife within one facility, it is nearly impossible to tell the stories of the individual animals living there. People crave emotional connections to the spectacular beings they visit and we recommend facilities specialize in one or two species. For example, when visitors leave the Chengdu Bear Rescue Center, they will remember several of the bears, know their life stories, know why they were rescued and how to prevent unfortunate circumstances from happening to other bears.

Current animal-park professionals have tremendous skills and passion, love all animals and are pivotal to creating the desperately needed shift in human attitudes toward other animals. However, until we can free them from our bondage, it is nearly impossible to shift attitudes toward sharing the Earth with them, sharing our resources and space, and giving them the respect they deserve.

*Philip Tedeschi is executive director of the Institute for Human-Animal Connection at the University of Denver. Sarah M. Bexell, director of conservation education at the Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding, contributed to this piece.*

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## The Needle

Hillary Clinton is encouraging Hispanic families to read to their kids. She's also telling Asian families to ease up on the math so the rest of us can catch up."  
— Conan O'Brien

Terrorists Cancel Sochi Bombing Plans; Cite Concerns over Mold, Lice"  
— PreventTruthDecay.com

More than anyone, Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg revolutionized the way we avoid doing work in this country."  
— Jimmy Kimmel



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