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Animals Need to be Animals

When in their natural habitat, animals are majestic. They're able to roam free, live without the additional stresses that are often put on them by humans, and participate in the daily activities that their species have been doing since the beginning of their time. When in captivity, animals are prevented from experiencing these things that have been engraved in their DNA. A captive environment forces animals to conform to what humans want them to be, not to mention the mental and physical changes that partner with that. Dr. Robin Ganzert, you have stated in an article in Time Magazine that zoos are not prisons, but rather they improve the lives of animals (Ganzert). I agree with you when you state that "Modern zoos and aquariums serve as bases for observation and research" (Ganzert). This is definitely true, but it can also be considered a shallow comment in a subject where the severity of its depth hasn't even been identified yet. You note in your article that "to be sure, there are bad actors" in regards to the aquariums, zoos, and roadside shows that are not fully equipped to raise these animals or don't abide by all the rules in regard to the upkeep of their establishment (Ganzert). It is important to take a better, more in depth look into animal captivity as we ask ourselves how much of this is ethical, which would lead us to see how harmful captivity really is.

While your article was published in 2016, I write this letter to you in 2020 to shed even more light on this subject and expose why captivation of animals is so dangerous

and harmful. In a recent documentary series, “Tiger King”, the issue of the domestication and captivation of big cats (such as tigers, lions, snow leopards, etc.), in the United States specifically, is exposed. This documentary has received all the talk ever since it was released not too long ago as it unveils the nasty truths about tiger captivation. Stated in the film and according to The Guardian, “There are more tigers in American gardens than there are left in the wild” (Hannaford). Smaller zoos hold in their hands the lives of sometimes hundreds of exotic pets when they are not equipped to handle them. Not only does this have the potential to harm humans who work around them, but it is also unethical for 6 big cats to live in a small enclosure, when in reality, they need hundreds of acres to roam free. It is evident in this film that smaller zoos across the United States view these tigers as a business deal, getting rid of them as soon as they’re considered useless in the eyes of their owners. Their meals consist of expired meats from Walmart, and when that runs dry or the deliveries don’t contain enough food, these big cats are forced to ration and fight for the food. The big brain behind the Greater Wynnewood Exotic Animal Park in “Tiger King”, Joe Exotic, realizes that the only way to profit off of these tigers is by cub petting, so he breeds these tigers in a very immoral way, pulling the cubs away from their mothers as soon as they’re born by using a metal stick to drag them out through a hole in a metal gate. While professional zoos and aquariums are “using robust and sophisticated breeding programs” and “facilitate countless initiatives to propagate species and preserve genetic biodiversity, and then reintroduce critically endangered or extinct species into the wild”,

there are a lot that use methods like Joe Exotic which leads to a lot of problems down the road in terms of the health of the animals (Ganzert).

It's very obvious that owners like Joe Exotic are prime examples of who you call "bad actors", which is not far from the truth at all (Ganzert). Owners like Joe Exotic believe that what they are doing is completely morally sound, and see the matter in a totally different way. Whether you are for or against animal captivity and the implementation of zoos and aquariums, it is easy to assume that people like this should be more educated on what effects this has on an animals health and the impact it has on the species as a whole. Although, the fact of the matter is that there's way too much of this going on undocumented and unethically in the United States and not enough action is being taken in order to help slow it down to an eventual stop. In recent years, activists against the owning of these big cats have attempted to pass the "Big Cat Public Safety Act", which would "address two of the biggest sources of abuse of big cats by ending owning big cats as pets and stopping exploitative roadside zoos from offering cub petting and photo ops" ("Big"). This would essentially run these roadside shows and smaller zoos out of business and help protect these big cats stuck in captivity. If organizations were to take active steps in this direction, the bad actors could soon be eliminated from the equation. This is solid evidence that people around the world acknowledge that captivity is not beneficial to animals in the long run; in fact, the cons seem to outweigh the pros when looking at situations such as this one.

To effectively create an overall healthier relationship between humankind and the plentiful species of different animals, it is essential that we start to see animal mental

health as equivalent to a human's. Holding animals in captive environments is harmful to their overall wellbeing and is often overlooked because they indeed aren't humans. Animals are intelligent and sensitive creatures, able to make choices and decipher between what is right and wrong while learning how to survive out in the wild. This is impossible to do in an enclosure, where their meals are handed to them and the land that they pace on a daily basis is all too familiar. In order to approach animals from a more ethical standpoint, it requires making changes such as shutting down malfunctioning breeding programs and setting aside human interests. Just in the past decade, there have been far too many violent incidents between humans and animals that all stem back to the start of their captivity. One very popularized example of this is Harambe, the gorilla that was shot and killed at the Cincinnati Zoo after a little boy fell into his enclosure.

Dr. Ganzert, in your article you mention Harambe and note that it was indeed a very dangerous situation that sparked a lot of disagreement when it comes to modern-day zoos. Something that has failed to be mentioned and hasn't gained much publicity are the enclosures themselves. A lot of people question how it was easy enough for a young child to successfully enter a gorilla's enclosure without anyone noticing. The Dodo addresses this by saying that "Zoos opted for more natural, immersive exhibits that would help the animal live more like they would in the wild" (Schweig). While this is certainly a great step in the right direction, it poses a threat for the safety of both humans and animals. While it is not necessary that the positive changes that have been made be reversed, it's also essential that the designers of

these enclosures find a better way to make the habitat as natural as possible without the fear of a life being lost. The Dodo also states that “Even the best designs for animal enclosures often can't guarantee everyone's safety when there's a will to get inside” (Schweig). This goes to show that progress isn't done being made in regards to the safety evaluation of enclosures for all types of animals within these big corporations, not just limited to gorillas.

It is so easy to see that you, Dr. Ganzert, are very well educated when it comes to animals and you want what's best for them in the long run. You serve as the president and CEO of American Humane, “the country's first national humane organization and the first to serve animals, whenever and wherever they are in need of rescue, shelter, or protection” (“Robin”). Along with this, you state in your article with Time Magazine that “The Humane Conservation program will be the first third-party certification devoted solely to verifying that animals living in these institutions are healthy, positively social, active, safe, and living with proper light, sound, air, and heat levels” (Ganzert). This among the many other things you have accomplished helps build up your extremely impressive background when it comes to animal rights, and demonstrates in a very obvious way that you have a strong desire to do everything in your power to ensure that these massive zoos and aquariums are as beneficial to the animals as possible.

With this being said, and while you do have some very strong viewpoints, it is also very important to note the opposing side of the argument and the new information that has come up in the past four years since your article was published. As of right now, the world is experiencing a pandemic. For the first time in a long time, humans are

practicing quarantine and are feeling first-hand what it feels like to be in isolation and the effects this has on mental health. You, too, are most likely experiencing this and can sympathize, but what the world is feeling in these fleeting moments is what these animals in captivity have been experiencing their whole lives. The good news for us is that we can expect an end to this. We can look forward to a day where we can step outside of our homes freely, a day where we can interact with more of our own kind. Unlike us, these animals don't get that anticipation. They don't get a day where they can walk aimlessly around with animals that are just like them. Instead, they get to look forward to a life of endless isolation, oftentimes in enclosures that are not suitable for their lifestyle no matter how many new and improved designs are put forth. You hold a very strong and bold presence within the animal rights world, and if you were to acknowledge some of these opposing points, more education could be spread around the world in order to increase awareness on this highly debated topic. With the amount of information humans have on the intelligence level of these animals and their capability to *feel* depression, isolation, and instability, the issue of animal captivity and the question of ethicality is absolutely not something that should be taken lightly.

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