

CAPTIVE BREEDING IN ZOOS

*Destructive
Programs in
Need of
Change*

BY DR. JOHN W. GRANDY

In recent years, The HSUS has become increasingly concerned with the practice of captive breeding of animals by zoos. At first glance, it seems that captive breeding would be a productive program, if animals are to be kept in zoos. If animals are going to be kept in zoos, they should not be taken from wild, unacclimated populations but rather from captive, self-sustaining populations. Captive-breeding programs, however, create their own set of problems—unwanted zoo animals and animal auctions that dispose of surplus zoo stock, among them. To evaluate the seriousness of such problems, The HSUS, some time back, began a comprehensive evaluation of captive-breeding programs in roadside zoos, zoological parks, and similar institutions.

First, it should be noted that there is a tremendous difference between professional captive-breeding programs, with a written policy or goal of stipulating eventual release of animals into the wild, and the indiscriminate breeding that occurs at most zoos in the United States. There is, as well, a difference between managed breeding of endangered species and the production of surplus animals, either incidentally or for commercial purposes.

The goal of the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums (AAZPA)'s Species Survival Plan (SSP) for breeding specific species in captivity with the hope of introducing them into the wild, The HSUS believes, is admirable. We believe that such professionally managed captive-breeding programs certainly have a place in modern zoos. However, we feel

strongly that the ultimate goal of these programs must *always* be the release of resulting animals into their natural habitats. We question whether this is truly a goal for most zoos or merely a carefully constructed rationalization that is little more than a public-relations ploy.

It is important to realize that, while the AAZPA's SSPs are designed to be professionally managed breeding programs, there are probably more than 1,000 different animal species in the 139 zoos accredited by the AAZPA—with only about 50 different species involved in these SSP programs. Examples of species involved in SSPs are the golden lion tamarin, snow leopard, white rhino, scimitar-horned oryx, and Bali mynah. Of the 50 species, only about 6 (depending on who is counting) have had any individuals released into their native habitats. If you include all the animals maintained and bred in the more than 1,400 menageries, zoos, and zoological parks, the small percentage of animals that are involved in the SSPs is even further diminished. The HSUS does not question the captive-breeding efforts used to save these species. However, we are deeply concerned about the often indiscriminate production of surplus exotics hidden behind the legitimate breeding of endangered species.

Captive breeding is a two-edged sword. A few zoos are doing it right and for the right reasons. Most zoos, however, whether roadside, municipal, or other, use the existence of some captive breeding of endangered or other species in a very misleading way: breeding is used to justify the existence of zoos to a public that is increasingly concerned with the ethics and propriety

of maintaining wild animals in captivity. Professionally managed captive-breeding programs do not exist at most zoos. Indeed, the majority of zoos only breed animals because managers fail to control breeding, or to provide income, or so there will be baby animals born each year. The births are often planned as a tourist attraction so that zoo visitors can see young animals in nurseries and being hand-raised by humans.

Young animals that are pulled from their mothers and hand-raised create another major problem. Such animals have no opportunity to learn parenting from their own species and are, therefore, not fit candidates for release programs. Unfortunately, most animals bred in captivity cannot and will never be released into the wild.

Most of the breeding taking place at the approximately 1,400* so-called zoos in the United States is the result of animals simply being housed together. These are unplanned births which offer nothing to conservation of wildlife. After animals grow out of the "cute" stage, they are cast off indiscriminately by large, small, and even accredited AAZPA zoos. These cast offs become candidates for disposal as surplus or for euthanasia.

Frequently, those indiscriminately bred surplus zoo animals end up in horrendous situations. They may change hands at an exotic-animal auction where they endure transport to and from the auction site in

* The 1,411 licensed and registered animal exhibitors include the 139 AAZPA facilities, roadside zoos, menageries, petting zoos, aquaria, and traveling animal shows such as circuses, etc. Numerous other unlicensed facilities exist as well. Virtually all, to one degree or another, are involved in captive breeding.



Births for popular species, including the hippopotamus, are often planned by zoos as tourist attractions so that visitors can see baby animals in display cages, such as this one, or in zoo nurseries.

JESSE COHEN/NATIONAL ZOOLOGICAL PARK



A camel tied to a livestock trailer awaits sale at the exotic-animal auction in Cape Girardeau, Missouri. Zoo cast offs that find their way to such auctions often face grim futures.

cages that can cause injuries. They are then sold to the highest bidder with no regard to the quality of care they will receive. For instance, it has been estimated that between 50-80 percent of all large animals found in roadside menageries originated in the breeding programs of major zoos. They may be sold to game ranches where they are hunted as trophies. (Surplus lions from a United States zoo recently ended up at a Texas game ranch where hunters paid \$3,500 to kill each of these animals and then take them home as trophies.) They may end up in roadside zoos, where they are neglected or abused and maintained in wretched conditions. They also may end up with private individuals who have no experience in keeping exotic animals. Frequently, these animals die or go from one miserable situation to another; from circuses to performing animal acts to shopping-center photo exhibits. Recently, a well-respected major zoo sold orangutans to a pet dealer, who bred some and sold others to a traveling circus. Animals may even end up in research institutions, utilized for experimentation.

Finally, private owners, zoos, or other institutions may offer these unwanted animals to local or national animal-protection groups. Humane societies and SPCAs have neither the monetary resources nor the facilities for exotic animals. These animals are not the responsibility of humane societies, SPCAs, or the concerned public—they are the responsibility of those who own them or those responsible for bringing them into the world. We must demand that those parties provide humane and

professional care for surplus exotic animals. It is irresponsible and unfair for entrepreneurs, breeders, or others to try to shift the responsibility for maintaining surplus zoo animals onto charitable organizations, which have many other demands upon their resources.

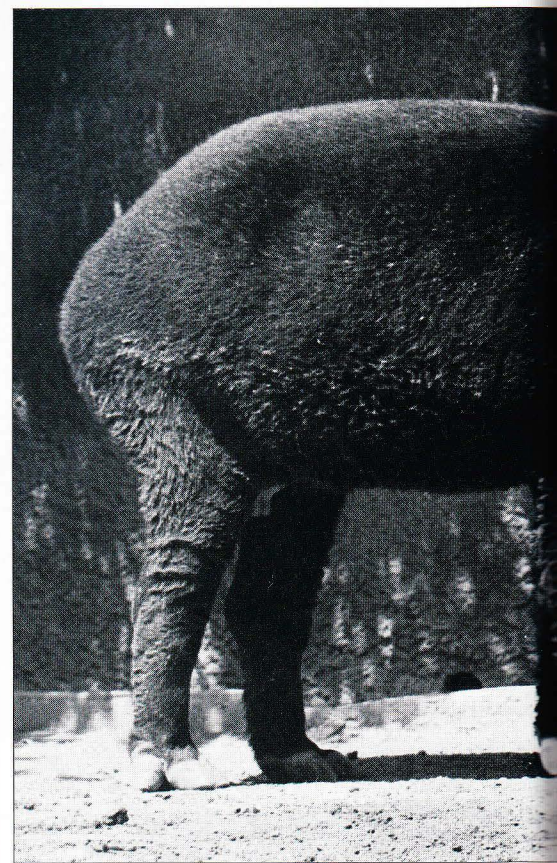
Even large zoos often claim that the most important benefit derived from keeping animals in captivity is the breeding of endangered, threatened, protected, and diminishing animal species. Zoos proudly claim that they are the “arks” of the future. They mention the reintroduction of Pere David’s deer and a few other species as evidence of their role in species preservation. Such successes are not widespread. Based on the numbers of animals needed to maintain the genetic diversity of a species and the amount of space needed to breed these animals, the potential for success of such “arks” is extremely limited. At least two American zoo directors have admitted that zoos should be honest with the public as to the potential for release of zoo and aquarium specimens back into the wild. At best, relatively few species can ever be rehabilitated through captive breeding.

There are very few places in the United States where successful professional breeding of endangered species can occur. The St. Catherine’s Survival Center, the New York Zoological Society’s breeding facility on St. Catherine’s Island, Georgia, and the National Zoological Park’s Conservation and Research Center in Front Royal, Virginia, conduct professional programs, but the amount of space they occupy is

substantial and well beyond that which most zoos can offer. Neither of these breeding facilities is open to the general public. In order for animals to develop the natural behaviors leading to successful breeding, the rearing of young, and introduction of individuals in the wild, space and seclusion are mandatory. Space and seclusion are the very elements that most zoos can never hope to provide their animals.

While we recognize that contributions to true conservation can be, and have been, made by the breeding of endangered species at places such as St. Catherine’s Survival Center and the Conservation and Research Center, we question the overall feasibility of these programs in most other places. Even if space were not a limiting factor, monetary resources would be, because a successful professional program requires space *and* money to implement short- and long-term goals. In most cases, the resources spent on captive breeding would be better spent on other, more achievable programs, such as improvement of captive animal care or conservation education.

The truth is that most zoos are commercial ventures and are not concerned with maintaining large breeding areas not open to the general public. They cannot make money from such facilities. Therefore, most zoos are not involved with, or interested in, operating them.



We feel that zoos, which entertain millions of visitors a year, would be better off if they concentrated on high-quality education programs for their visitors. Most zoos spend relatively little, if any, time and money on education, and all menageries miseducate the public. It is evident from our many years of zoo inspections that those menageries and zoos not AAZPA recognized are adding nothing to desirable captive-propagation and release programs or to education. In fact, they miseducate the public about wild animals and the important roles these animals play in their native habitats. By exhibiting their animals in small cramped cages, and, as a consequence, creating psychotic animals that demonstrate stereotypical, stress-related behaviors such as pacing, self-mutilation, and head swinging, these menageries squander the opportunity to educate the public about conservation and wildlife appreciation.

The number of animals that are unnecessarily bred and then disposed of is always hidden from the general public by zoos. The HSUS and other watchdog entities are denied access to the AAZPA's monthly listing of surplus animals, *Animal Exchange*. However, when The HSUS received a purloined copy of *Animal Exchange*, we found that, in one month, approximately 1,400 surplus animals were offered for sale from approximately 53 accredited zoos.

Assuming a generous placement rate of 50 percent each month, this figure translates into 8,400 surplus animals annually from AAZPA accredited zoos alone.

This figure is only the tip of the iceberg. The surplus animals of many of the best zoos never reach the surplus list because they are already "placed" through individual arrangements among the zoos themselves. If the miscellaneous other zoos are included in this traffic, the number of surplus animals and their suffering is overwhelming.

Because the AAZPA publication limits the number of animals that can be listed to a total of 20 a month (for both surplus and wanted) and because animals are not all placed within a month, a number of animals must wait weeks for placement. What happens to animals that are designated "surplus" while they are waiting to be sold? Often, they are relegated to living behind the scenes. A zoo that has decided that an animal has to be sold will not want to waste an important exhibit cage on it and will, therefore, keep it in a smaller, often poorly maintained, off-exhibit cage. An animal's life in such a grossly abusive cage can drag out indefinitely.

What can be done to clean up captive breeding and to ensure the welfare of zoo animals?

First, there must be open discussion and

recognition of the problems caused by captive breeding of wildlife and its surplus of animals. The AAZPA, or a similar institution, should undertake to monitor and coordinate captive breeding of animals in all member institutions. This should be done not just for captive breeding of endangered, threatened, or rare species, but for all species that have been or are becoming problems. The AAZPA should maintain a registry for each species or subspecies and record details of genetic characteristics, studs, and other useful information related to breeding. The AAZPA should tabulate requests for certain animals and facilitate contact between institutions with suitable mates. Production should be limited to that which is necessary to fulfill a legitimate, justifiable need. Member institutions should agree to limit their captive breeding to programs coordinated through and approved by the AAZPA. Such a system would not only ensure an adequate, but limited, supply of animals, but it would also systematically ensure desirable genetic interchange and would virtually eliminate removal of species from the wild. Some elements of this system are already in place for endangered species, but the pressing need is to expand the system in scope and detail for all species involved in captive breeding. Finally, in an effort to increase animal protection and the welfare of animals in zoos, the AAZPA and the better zoos should unite with The HSUS and our counterparts in Canada to demand strict standards for care of animals in zoos and the abolition of roadside menageries so common in the United States.

There is light at the end of the tunnel. The AAZPA and The HSUS are working actively together to find ways to upgrade the requirements for maintaining animals in captivity. If requirements are strengthened, then roadside menageries will either have to improve or close down. We are also working with the Chicago Zoological Park (Brookfield Zoo) and innovative research scientists to find ways to limit reproduction in captive wildlife. This holds great promise for reducing production of surplus animals.

Still, much more needs to be done. Our members can help by maintaining contact with local zoos and demanding responsible breeding programs. If a local zoo is publicly or municipally supported, encourage the local governing body to direct that captive breeding be strictly limited. Through such efforts, the horrors of roadside zoos and animal auctions can be diminished. ■

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OSKEROFF/L.A. ZOO

A newborn mountain tapir and its mother received publicity from the Los Angeles Zoo, the only zoo in the United States to exhibit this rare species at the time. The HSUS does not question captive breeding to save endangered species, but it is concerned about the indiscriminate production of exotics.