

COMMENTARY

A Point of View: In Praise of the Zoo¹

Alain de Botton

The zoo is not just for children,
exotic animals can help grown-ups get some perspective on their lives.



RON SANFORD

Moose (*Alces alces*) are full of a native kind of dignity and stoicism.

Moose don't loom large in the national imagination. There are only around 100 of them on these islands, but they're a fascinating and noble kind of creature. Ugly from one point of view, rather as camels are, but full of a native kind of dignity and stoicism.

I'm mentioning moose because earlier this summer, rather unreported by the media, a baby moose was born in Whipsnade Zoo. It got called Chocolate by the Zoological Society of London, and — according to an e-mail that was sent out to all members of the zoo — it's doing very well. It's being looked after by its concerned mother Minni and its protective dad Melka. Both can now be seen in a special exhibit called Wild Wild Whipsnade. If you fancy a trip, as the same e-mail went on to explain, you might want to take in Sapo the pygmy hippo, who's recently taken his first dip in an outdoor pool.

Displacing Egos

I know David Attenborough has been doing a heroic job — not least in this slot over the last few months — trying to change this state of affairs,

but it's fair to say that before I had children I simply never thought of wild animals. The odd TV documentary excepted, they just didn't figure on my radar. My extracurricular activity tended to be culturally based, and animals — as we know — don't loom large in culture. The elegant question is always whether one has caught the new show at Tate Modern or play at the



ERIC ISSELEE

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¹ Adapted from a commentary in the BBC News Magazine (8 July 2011; <www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-14078657>).



BRANDON ALMS

Thanks to children, adults can learn to live in a world of exotic animals, and to spend time thinking about Tapirs, Meerkats, and Green and Black Poison Dart Frogs (*Dendrobates auratus*).



ERIC ISELEE



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Interest in animals often is framed in childlike terms and zoos are bathed in children's language and iconography. Animals invariably are given names designed to appeal to kids, like Moomoo the tiger and Speccie the Ring-tailed Lemur (*Lemur catta*).

Donmar Warehouse, never what one makes of the new Bactrian Camel or Burmese Python at London Zoo.

Yet thanks to my two young sons, I now live immersed in the world of exotic animals. We spend our time thinking about Malayan Tapirs and Peruvian Chinchillas, Meerkats from the Kalahari Desert, and green and black poison frogs from Costa Rica. Some of every weekend is spent impersonating these animals on the carpet, the rest on discussing their habits, favorite foods, and the gathering odds of encroachments on their habitats. But this really seems just a way of circling around something more unnam-



CAROLINA GARCIA ARANDA

Adults, much more so than children, are in serious need of a few minutes of reflection on the lives of Humboldt Penguins (*Spheniscus humboldti*) and Egyptian Tortoises (*Testudo kleinmanni*).

able and potent — a fundamental wonder at the sheer existence of creatures so weird and beautiful, so unlike us and yet strangely evocative of parts of us. Alive on our planet at the same time as we are but unreachable by our normal means. Our unknown contemporaries in a galaxy otherwise made up of gas and rock, with not a single other heartbeat within it.

I'm deeply grateful to my children for reintroducing me to wild animals, and yet — with no disloyalty to them — also a little frustrated at the way that zoos (and wider society of course) tend to frame an interest in these animals in such resolutely childlike terms. The world of zoos is bathed in children's language and iconography. The animals are invariably given names designed to appeal to kids, like Moomoo the tiger, Sparkly the Oriental Small-clawed Otter, and Speccie the Ring-tailed Lemur.

The food in the cafes is geared to young appetites and the general impression is that unless you're on a trip with someone under 14 and are eating an ice cream as well, there might be something a little wrong with you for wandering around zoo exhibits.

Animal Gods

I understand why zoos do this — kids are a captive market. The pressures on them financially are extremely grave and hippos hold the attention of five-year-olds in a way that the paintings of Ingres or Rothko just

don't, despite the truly heroic efforts of the kids' outreach programs of the National Gallery and the Tate. Yet something does seem to be lost in this focus on children, which is the enormous benefit that the average adult could and should be deriving from encounters with these animals. The typical urban stressed and harried adult is in serious need of a few minutes of reflection upon the life of a Humboldt Penguin or Egyptian Tortoise, more so than his or her child.

At heart, these animals offer us many of the same lessons as religions but without any of the doctrines or supernatural claims. They're walking, munching, biting, bellowing reminders not to take ourselves as the centres of the universe. While wandering around their enclosures they deliver heart-warming covert sermons in the wisdom of displacing our own egos. The metaphysical importance of zoos is anchored in the way that we tend to loom so absurdly large in our own imaginations. We overstate every aspect of ourselves: how long we are on the planet for, how much it matters what we achieve, how rare and unfair are our professional failures, how rife with misunderstandings are our relationships, how deep are our sorrows. Left to their own devices, our minds are hopelessly egoistic.

Getting Perspective

That's where the animals come in. They are what Emile Durkheim, that great theorist of religions, described as representatives of "the Other", something non-human which puts us in our place, stills our anxieties, reminds us we're not the only show in town, and generally urges us to make a little more room in our imaginations for things that aren't related to our own selves. Typically for the last few millennia in the West, "the Other" has meant God. A force far larger, older, and more mysterious than we are, to which we should — at selected moments in the week — acknowledge, defer, and give way.

We tend not to bother with a religious "Other" quite so much in swiftly secularizing Britain, and that's perhaps one reason why we're a little more fragile in our psyches as well. We need regular encounters with otherness so as not to loom dangerously large to ourselves. That's why people get so much out of nature or from the stars or the great deserts. To be made to feel small is, to be sure, a painful daily reality of the human playground. But to be made to feel small by something beautiful, noble, accomplished, or just weird like the greater one-horned Asian rhino is to have wisdom presented to us along with a measure of delight.

There are zoo animals like the Arabian Oryx that can induce us to surrender our egoism without in any way humiliating us. Looking at them, we can set aside our ordinary concerns and take on board — in a way we never dare to do when we are under direct fire from other humans — our own relativity. We can survey ourselves as if from a distance, no longer offended by things, perhaps newly indifferent to our eventual fate, generous towards the universe, and open-minded about its course.

Religions outside the Abrahamic tradition have always understood how much we have to learn from animals, how much the attitudes of animals are those we should emulate in ourselves, and how calming it can be to place something non-human at the centre of your culture. Buddhists in Thailand will honor the white elephant for its courage, strength, and calm nature, the very qualities they believe that the Buddha wished to see us cultivate in ourselves. Likewise, the ancient Egyptians connected their gods to animals in ways that urged humans to draw from the varied virtues of the animal kingdom.

When zoos try to explain to us what they're up to, they often fall back on describing an educational mission. They announce that they are there to teach us where animals come from, how much they eat, and how many young they typically have. This is all true and very good, but there's maybe another no less vital mission. We should learn about animals not just for their sake, but — as religions have known — also for our own.

Among other things, the point of zoos should be to give us perspective on ourselves, to push us towards an awareness — always under threat in daily life — of the diversity, mystery, scale, age, and complexity of the earth. But unlike zoos at present, perhaps we should not have to think that the point of the exercise is to give us a grounding in a scientific education. It should not in the end matter very much whether visitors have ever really mastered the differences between, say, the African and Indian elephant, the detailed explanations of which are often painfully labored over by zoo curators and yet so likely to have been forgotten by most of their audience by the time they reach the car park. We should allow ourselves to handle zoology in the interests of stirring awe rather than in the name of promoting knowledge, biology leant upon for its therapeutic, perspective-giving capacity rather than its factual value.

Even if you have no children, don't like ice creams, and are deeply allergic to hearing animals called things like Shamoo and Bibi, it may still be worth making an appointment with a gecko or Sri Lankan Sloth Bear in a zoo.



THOMAS DAM

Even if you have no children, you still might benefit from an appointment with a Leopard Gecko (*Eublepharis macularius*).



Critically endangered Lemur Tree Frogs (*Hylomantis lemur*), which are native to Central America, were successfully bred at the The Wildlife Conservation Society's Bronx Zoo.