

What are zoos for?

By Peter Barber. Photographs by Piotr Malecki and Charlie Bibby
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Behind the rusting gates of Wrocław Zoo, ivy is claiming the walls of the ramshackle gothic administration building. Inside, the best Radosław Ratajszczak can do to keep out the Polish winter is to point a bar heater at his desk. "You can see the challenge I face," the zoo director says, gesturing at the peeling paintwork. From high on the wall, the head of a large black rhino watches Ratajszczak's every move. He hates the thing and has tried to remove it, but it's bolted through the brickwork. "I don't like dead animals," he explains.

Ratajszczak, a biologist who resembles a chain-smoking Santa, is jolly even in the face of the huge task before him. When he won his directorship two years ago, he took it upon himself to transform the worst zoo in Poland into a state-of-the-art conservation park. The mounted rhino is a reminder of the days when best practice in the acquisition of zoo animals was to shoot the mother to capture the offspring. Ratajszczak's challenges are typical of those faced by dilapidated zoos across eastern Europe as they are forced to accept European Union rules on the humane treatment of animals.



However, while zookeepers can replace metal bars with moats, and cages with warm, eco-friendly enclosures, can they really change the fundamental nature of their enterprise: the display of captive wild animals for the entertainment and edification of humans? Why do we frown on wild animals in circuses but flock – in our millions – to see them in zoos?

After a slump in the late 1970s and 1980s, the zoo as family entertainment is back. Worldwide, as many as 600 million visits are made to zoos each year, according to the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums (Waza). In Europe, they are among the most visited of all tourist sites: the Berlin Zoo, to pick probably the most successful example, is a stock-market-listed – though non-profit-making – company that aggressively merchandises star animals such as Knut, the cute baby polar bear (now reputedly a maladjusted adult).



'Tumku' the orangutan

Still, the question of what zoos are for has not gone away. Most of the animals on display in the UK's largest zoological gardens are at the very lowest risk of extinction in the wild, according to the Born Free Foundation, which campaigns to "keep wildlife in the wild". Fewer than a quarter are classified as "threatened" on the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's Red List. Yet it is species conservation that dominates zoos' branding – and the spur behind their revival seems to be that they have convinced punters that the price of a ticket buys them, not entry to a show, but a stake in the preservation of the natural world. When Born Free conducted a survey to discover what percentage of UK zoo income people thought was spent on the conservation of threatened species in the wild, most answered: about a quarter. The true figure, Born Free believes, is between 4 and 7 per cent – in other words, of the average £10.30 cost of a ticket to a British charity-registered zoo, between 41p and 72p goes to in situ conservation. Even captive

breeding programmes, Born Free estimates, account for less than 14 per cent of the 5,600-plus vertebrate species on the Red List. "The zoo model has largely remained the same, but the marketing model has had to adapt to meet changing public expectations," argues Born Free's chief executive, Will Travers.

Since 2005, Europe's zoos have been required to implement an EU directive on minimum standards of animal welfare and engage in educational and conservation work. But the provisions of the directive are vague and implementation has been variable, according to the Eurogroup for Animals, a non-profit organisation that monitors

animal welfare. The group's forthcoming 2009 report will conclude that many member states are failing on both objectives.

The group has launched legal action against Spain and Portugal and also has concerns about Italy, says Véronique Schmit, the group's executive officer for policy. It has so far held fire against two others, Bulgaria and Romania, which have only been bound by the directive since 2007 when they joined the EU. "We acknowledge that zoos will always exist," says Schmit. "But we feel that the educational role of zoos is the only way they can be justified."

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Anthony Sheridan is a retired businessman from Hertfordshire whose personal quest is to bring the zoos of Europe up to standard. His field is electronics and he has no particular expertise in animal husbandry, although he did breed Indian mongooses when he was 12, which got him a spot on the television programme *Children's Newsreel*. He has maintained a lifelong fascination with wildlife. Using his own money, Sheridan has met and quizzed the directors of more than 60 of Europe's leading zoos.



Gibbon

"I'm interested in what the rationale is for zoos now and in the future," he says. "People have moved on. They see the David Attenborough programmes and everything else, and they ask: why do we need to keep animals in zoos?" Sheridan has compiled a ranking of the best zoos in Europe on the basis of 25 factors including the animal collection itself, the quality of the enclosures, visitor numbers, overall investment, education involvement, in situ and zoo-based conservation activity, marketing and publicity. Vienna, Leipzig and Berlin are at the top with Rotterdam and Chester close behind. London Zoo does not make his top 10. Wrocław is at the bottom, but Sheridan expects it to climb up the list as the new director implements his renovation plan.

Sheridan believes that we have no choice but to keep animals in captivity, for the purposes of conservation and education. The problem is that practices at too many zoos don't match the promises. He says that to bring a typical large European zoological garden up to scratch over the period of a decade would require €100m.

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Until the Victorian era, zoos were living displays of wealth and power, confined to the private pleasure gardens of the aristocracy. Then, in 1847, the Zoological Society of London began charging the public to view its collection of exotic animals in Regent's Park. It was an immediate hit. The London Zoo captured the mood of the time. Elephant tusks had begun to grace the entrances to gentlemen's clubs along Piccadilly; feathers from exotic birds were appearing on ladies' hats.

Ashton Nichols, a professor of Liberal Arts at Dickinson College in Pennsylvania, says that the zoo was a powerful embodiment of the notion that not only had British culture been able to extend itself over the furthest reaches of the globe, but that it had "actually been able to bring the furthest reaches of the globe back to the centre of the imperial city". The founder of the Zoological Society, Stamford Raffles, was himself an officer of the East India Company, and the London Zoo became a display of living plunder. Zoos as we know them today are relics of this earlier era of globalisation, in which not just people and spices were dispersed across the planet, but the natural world.



Siberian tiger

Throwing open the gates to the zoo coincided with changing attitudes towards animals. Bull- and bear-baiting were banned in 1835; Darwinian theories of evolution were starting to be popularised. Even as thousands flocked to Regent's Park, some expressed unease at what they were

witnessing. “Why can we have Acts of parliament in favour of other extensions of good treatment to the brute creation, and not one against their tormenting imprisonment?” wrote Leigh Hunt in *A Saunter Through the West End*, published in 1861. Many of the animals were captured by wild animal merchant Carl Hagenbeck, who also supplied circus entrepreneur P.T. Barnum. Hagenbeck was later to expand his trade to indigenous people – human exhibits such as the “Hottentot Venus” and African “Bushmen” were hugely popular.

The methods used to seize the animals were merciless. In *Savages and Beasts*, a history of Hagenbeck’s business, Nigel Rothfels cites a letter from Bronx Zoo director William Hornady to Hagenbeck in 1902 urging discretion: “We must keep very still about 40 large Indian rhinoceroses being killed in capturing the four young ones ... There are now a good many cranks who are so terribly sentimental that they affect to believe that it is wrong to capture and exhibit them, even for the benefit of millions of people.”



Feeding time at the Penguin Pool

Ironically, Hagenbeck is also generally credited with revolutionising zoo design at the start of the 20th century by dispensing with bars in favour of open spaces surrounded by moats, the template for modern zoo architecture. Naturalist and author Gerald Durrell pushed this reforming ethos further. Durrell, founder of Jersey Zoo and a former animal collector, argued that a zoo’s primary purpose should be the captive breeding of endangered species, once all efforts to preserve them in the wild had failed. So how is it that, still, most animals in modern zoos are not endangered?

In Wroclaw, Ratajszczak says the problem is that, of the four basic tenets of zookeeping – conservation, research, education and recreation – only the last makes money. To fund the worthier functions of the zoo, you must get people through the gate. And what do people want to see? Charismatic mega-vertebrates like elephants and cute and cuddly mega-stars such as Knut the polar bear.

The Eurogroup for Animals believes that elephants – of which only the Asian species has a declining population – do not belong in zoos. According to the RSPCA, elephants typically live only 15 or 16 years in zoos, about half as long as even their counterparts in Burmese timber camps. Breeding rates are far lower than in the wild and illness – such as circulatory problems, foot problems and herpes – kills off 60 per cent of those that survive beyond infancy. Zoos claim that keeping elephants supports conservation, but the World Wide Fund for Nature believes that captive breeding does not contribute significantly to the preservation of the species.

So what about Knut, the polar bear that became a media phenomenon for Berlin Zoo after it was abandoned by its mother, a former circus bear called Tosca? In 2007, more than three million visitors came to the zoo, providing an estimated €5m fillip. The zoo swiftly registered the bear as a trademark and out rolled Knut fluffy toys, mugs, T-shirts and gummy bear sweets. There was even a Vanity Fair cover with celebrity ecologist Leonardo DiCaprio and BBDO Consulting briefly attached a brand value of €10m euro to the cub. Other German zoos, such as Stuttgart and Nuremberg, rushed to acquire photogenic versions of their own.



Gorilla Kingdom

But Knut, like many child stars, seems to have become a victim of his own fame. German tabloids reported that Knut had become addicted to applause, “crying” when the crowds disappeared. One German zoologist says that he has become a sociopath who will never mate. It’s perhaps not the classic Hollywood story that was envisaged by an American studio when it reportedly began negotiating with the zoo to produce an animated film based on the bear. Berlin Zoo director Bernhard Blaszkiewicz says that Knut’s alleged behavioural problems are a media invention.

But the king of the crowd-pleasers is the giant panda. All pandas are the property of the Chinese government and are leased out to zoos around the world at a list price of up to \$1m a year for a breeding pair. However, it is hard work getting these breeding pairs actually to breed (females are in heat for as little as three days every year) and when they do, China levies a “baby tax” of \$600,000. There are believed to be only 1,600 mature giant pandas left in the wild, threatened most of all by habitat destruction and a single-minded reliance on the periodic flowering of bamboo.

The Captive Animals' Protection Society argues that the renting of pandas is a misuse of zoos' scarce conservation resources.

And as if pandas didn't have enough problems, they also have to contend with the ups and downs of international politics. Chairman Mao gave America pandas Ling-Ling and Hsing-Hsing in 1972 as an act of goodwill following the visit of Richard Nixon. But pandas offered as a peace overture to Taiwan in 2006 were initially rejected as being clearly aimed at undermining the smaller nation's sovereignty. Meanwhile, Berlin Zoo's efforts to find a mate for Bao Bao after the female Yan Yan died have been rebuffed by China, allegedly in response to Angela Merkel hosting the Dalai Lama; however, Berlin zoo director Blaszkiewicz said negotiations with China for a new panda were in fact continuing.

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In 1973, the director of the Bronx Zoo, Bill Conway, delivered a lecture entitled "How to exhibit a bullfrog". It became a seminal text for forward-thinking zoo directors. Conway imagined a zoo as a "world of wild creatures" with no visible buildings, in which an animal – specifically, an endangered species – was shown in the context of its biosphere: its earth, air and water. By doing so, a zookeeper could make a bullfrog as exciting for a visitor as a chimpanzee.

But there is a counter-argument in favour of the more traditional capture and display of the rare and exotic: that this may be the only way to save them. For example, the last wild specimen of Père David's deer, native to China, is believed to have been shot in 1939. But 40 years earlier, the deer had been introduced to the private deer collections of the European aristocracy. The 11th Duke of Bedford formed a breeding herd at Woburn Abbey in England – and in 1956 the first Père David's deer were sent back to China, albeit to Beijing Zoo. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature hopes the species will one day be reintroduced into the wild.



Gorilla statue

The reality is that we face a future in which more and more of "nature" exists only in a kind of museum. A quarter of mammal species face extinction while half have declining populations, according to the IUCN Red List. But the list also shows that captive breeding can bring animals back from the brink. The Arabian oryx has been reintroduced into the wild, as has the golden lion tamarin in Brazil. The last six wild American condors were captured in 1987 for a breeding programme and growing numbers are now being released. The American bison is no longer endangered and Przewalski's wild horse, which was considered extinct in the wild, appears to be less endangered. And zoos may be the only safe haven for the Tasmanian devil, as a rare form of communicable cancer threatens to extinguish its native population within 20 years.

Captivity might be the last hope for chimpanzees, accepts primatologist Jane Goodall. "In an ideal world, it would be wonderful if all chimpanzees could live in protected areas," she says. "But the sad reality is that, so often in the wild, chimpanzees are subjected to habitat destruction, to hunting, caught in snares; human populations are expanding..."

Primates can have enriching lives in well-managed, enlightened zoos, Goodall says. The key is to provide sufficient space, stimulation, a good social group and the ability for them to make choices. "Sometimes when I'm looking at chimps in a zoo like that, and I think of some of the places I've seen in Africa, I think that probably a chimp would actually prefer that," she says. "We tend to have this idealistic view of freedom, but I don't think the chimpanzees do."

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People like Sheridan and Ratajszczak are the reason zoos exist in the first place – they have a deep need to be close to animals. Ratajszczak, who claims to have visited 407 zoos since he was a child, was the first person from communist eastern Europe to attend a zookeeper's training course in the west. The course, held by the Jersey Wildlife Preservation Society, "opened my eyes to what we have to do", he said, "that we really need to orient ourselves more to education and to captive breeding of endangered species, that the zoos need to change".

In the 1980s, the only way that Ratajszczak could get hold of editions of the Zoological Society of London's International Zoo Yearbook – the zookeeper's bible – was to trade them with Bristol Zoo for some of his Argentinian black vultures. Now he constantly shares information with other zoos, and is helping Sarajevo Zoo rebuild after the Bosnian war. It's a measure of how things have changed at Wroclaw Zoo. Within recent memory it had become a byword for animal neglect in Poland after a handler was savaged by a brown bear that had been kept for nine years in a 12 square metre space with no light. When Ratajszczak was appointed by the city council to bring the place up to scratch, he found "an accidental gathering of animals", few of them in good condition.

As we zip around the grounds in Ratajszczak's electric cart, it is clear that Wroclaw Zoo is a work in progress. In the reptile house, lethargic crocodiles bask dead-eyed in artificially lit Perspex boxes not much larger than themselves. All these will go. A cramped and dark stone enclosure from 1863 that once imprisoned birds will be converted into a display documenting how animals were kept in the bad old days. "In the middle of the last century they were showing dwarves and bearded women in circuses. That is our history. You can deny it? No," he says.

Gerald Dick, executive director of the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums, says that one of the trends that has improved zoo husbandry is the move away from cramming in as many animals as possible. Ratajszczak is in the course of rationalising his own collection: "People used to say: if you don't know what to do with an animal, give it to Wroclaw Zoo. It was filled with strange animals in strange places, like 16 red foxes." There was even an exhibition of caged domestic chickens in what is now the butterfly house.

The zoo has one of the last remaining 19th century elephant houses – a structure that, perhaps more than any other, symbolises the limitations of the Victorian zookeeping philosophy. Elephants need company and space. Ratajszczak plans to knock out the cages to open up the enclosure for his "three old ladies", each of which is more than 40 years old. One, a former circus act, was alone for nine years and was pacing unnaturally before two companions were found for her.



The new Animal Adventure children's exhibit

Some major work has already been completed. Ratajszczak has built a new primate building with access to a large island that must seem like Shangri-la to the gibbons, which had been in tiny cages for 26 years. But in the administration library are the plans for his masterstroke. It is a futuristic €40m walk-through multimedia exhibit focusing on a single African ecosystem: the plains, the forest, the water and the air. Conway would be pleased.

In terms of species conservation, though, Ratajszczak is grimly realistic. "We are losing the war," he says. "We are winning some small battles." Still, he believes there is a permanent place in the struggle for Wroclaw Zoo. "You can find zoo-like establishments in all the ancient cultures," he says. "The Egyptians, the Chinese, the Mayans ... There has always been a need for humans to be with animals."

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