

There are big gaps in our knowledge, and thus approach, to zoo animal welfare: a case for evidence-based zoo animal management

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Abstract

There are gaps in knowledge that hinder our ability within zoos to provide good animal welfare. This does not mean that zoos cannot or do not provide good welfare, only that currently this goal is hindered. Three reasons for these gaps are identified as: (1) there is an emphasis on the identification and monitoring of indicators that represent poor welfare and it is assumed that an absence of poor welfare equates to good welfare. This assumption is overly simplistic and potentially erroneous; (2) our understanding of how housing and husbandry (H&H) affects animals is limited to a small set of variables determined mostly by our anthropogenic sensitivities. Thus, we place more value on captive environmental variables like space and companionship, ignoring other factors that may have a greater impact on welfare, like climate; (3) finally, whether intentional or not, our knowledge and efforts to improve zoo animal welfare are biased to very few taxa. Most attention has been focused on mammals, notably primates, large cats, bears, and elephants, to the exclusion of the other numerous species about which very little is known. Unfortunately, the extent to which these gaps limit our ability to provide zoo animals with good welfare is exacerbated by our over reliance on using myth and tradition to determine zoo animal management. I suggest that we can fill these gaps in our knowledge and improve our ability to provide zoo animals with good welfare through the adoption of an evidence-based zoo animal management framework. This approach uses evidence gathered from different sources as a basis for making any management decisions, as good quality evidence increases the likelihood that these decisions result in good zoo animal welfare. *Zoo Biol* 28:574-588, 2009. © 2009 Wiley-Liss, Inc.

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