

Case 1: Catch or Release?

People obviously enjoy watching animals in captivity and have for quite some time. There is evidence of what may have been the world's first zoo five millennia ago in Egypt. The Spanish explorer Hernán Cortés found what is known as Montezuma's Zoo when he entered the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan in 1519.

According to the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA), there are over 10,000 zoos worldwide. There are over 230 major public aquariums and an untold number of smaller ones.

Over 175 million people are reported to attend zoos each year around the globe. Zoo attendance in the United States has continued to show a steady increase over the past ten years according to the AZA—a twelve percent increase over that period—and yet there has been a growing disenchantment in media reports about the way animals are confined, exhibited and cared for in captivity.

“Blackfish,” a 2013 CNN documentary about the killer whale program at SeaWorld drew more attention than any other story about animals in captivity. Killer whales, or orcas, typically grow to twenty feet in length, weigh up to fourteen tons and can travel a hundred miles a day living in the wild. But at SeaWorld they are confined to pools the size of a soccer field and only thirty feet deep.

Animal rights advocates say the fate of large predators in zoos is equally grim. The polar bear is an example of a creature that inhabits an area up to a million times the size of its typical enclosures. *Outside Magazine* contributor Tim Zimmerman said in a radio interview, “No matter how natural the tiger enclosure is, for example, it's still minuscule compared to the range a tiger in the wild would have to roam. If you want to teach people about tigers and get children excited about tigers, there may be a better way to do that.” For instance, nature programs on television and the internet show animals in their native habitat. Zoos can only show how a creature lives in captivity.

SeaWorld—as a result of unfavorable publicity generated by the “Blackfish” documentary—has seen a decline in visitors and revenue. If the same thing begins to happen to zoos, some zoological experts and zoo advocates warn about negative consequences for animals living both in captivity and in the wild. That's because SeaWorld and zoos, besides profiting from their patrons, use some of that money to rescue endangered and injured animals and to conduct research and conservation programs necessary to their preservation in the wild. According to the AZA, zoos and wildlife parks, including SeaWorld, contribute \$216 million to wildlife conservation programs.

Environmental scientists agree that the world is currently going through its sixth mass extinction event and that this time it's being caused by humans. In the peer-reviewed journal, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, researchers point to die-offs of millions of species around the world. They call it a “biological annihilation.”

In their book *The Ark and Beyond*, Ben A. Minteer, Jane Maienschein, and James P. Collins present the case that the work of zoos, aquariums and other wildlife organizations will play a role in protecting and preserving the very animals some accuse them of exploiting.

Case from the 2019 National Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl



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