

TAOS Responds to AZA

The August issue of *Communique*, official magazine of the AZA (American Zoo & Aquarium Association), featured an article entitled “What’s in a Name? Zoo vs. Sanctuary” by Michael Hutchins, PHD, Director, William Conway Chair, AZA Department of Conservation and Science. Stimulus for the article arose from the decision by the Detroit and San Francisco Zoos to send their elephants to sanctuaries. Both zoos had determined that they were unable to provide adequately for the elephants’ needs. Since elephants are among zoos’ most popular exhibits, one can assume that the decisions did not come easily and are, therefore, all the more admirable for their placing of elephant needs before those of the zoo. That the AZA would find this turn of events embarrassing is hardly surprising in light of its self-image and the problematic nature of certain zoo practices and values. And, in fact, it has reacted strongly, threatening possible loss of accreditation if the zoos move forward without AZA authorization, which isn’t likely to be given. Interestingly, a news release posted on their website discusses the AZA recommendation for these elephants without once mentioning the sanctuary option.

The elephants in question were destined for two sanctuaries accredited by The Association of Sanctuaries, PAWS in California and The Elephant Sanctuary in Tennessee. Both Pat Derby and Carol Buckley, founder/directors respectively of these organizations have written their own responses to Dr. Hutchins’ contentions, which can be found on their websites: www.pawsweb.org and www.elephants.com. They make their cases well, so I needn’t repeat them. I encourage anyone with interest in this subject to read what they have to say.

The purported purpose of the Hutchins article was “...to outline the differences and similarities—both real and perceived—that exist between AZA accredited zoos and sanctuaries, and specifically with regard to elephant care.” The article’s tone, however, manages to be both defensive and supercilious, clearly suggesting zoo superiority, so we can know that the “differences and similarities” are meant to be construed in a particular way, one that would support the AZA position on the elephants in question. One may evaluate the adequacy of this position simply by viewing, reading about, and assessing the living situations the elephants would have at these sanctuaries compared to what they would have at any accredited zoo.

As mentioned above, Derby and Buckley responded with specific detail to the Hutchins piece. My purpose in writing is to move out of detail and onto the more general level suggested by the “What’s in a name?” question. But of course, it isn’t the name that matters. Rather, the difference between zoos and sanctuaries lies most fundamentally in conceptions of their purpose and in the ethical values that underlie those conceptions.

Sanctuaries are conceived out of a sense of necessity. People see animals displaced or exploited and recognize that the options for most of those animals boil down to death, suffering, or sanctuary. So, they open a sanctuary. They don’t believe it a good thing that the animals live in captivity but there don’t seem any better alternatives considering the animals’ histories and current circumstances. And out of this sense of necessity come

sanctuaries' core values. The animals will be provided lifetime care; there will be no breeding; the sanctuary will either not be open to the public or only in limited ways; and the animals won't be used for commercial purposes. They will simply be provided a place to live out their lives as satisfactorily and naturally as possible given what they have already lost, with the emphasis always being on their needs rather than the public's or the profession's.

Zoos, on the other hand, arise from choice, and over the decades of their existence the choice has been based on changing rationales. Entertainment and recreation, education, conservation, research—take your pick. But whatever the rationale, one thing remains constant—Animals are bred and sometimes taken from the wild for exhibit (and then sometimes culled or otherwise disposed of as surplus). And in the acceptance of that central practice—animal exhibitory—zoos will always be mired in philosophical difficulty, for it assumes that animals inhabit a different moral universe from humans, one in which incarceration of creatures who should be free is acceptable simply because humans choose to do it. Furthermore, choosing captivity undercuts their own claims to believe “passionately” in the protection of Nature and their own effectiveness in asserting and implementing that claim. One simply cannot serve as a powerful influence for the protection of wildlife while at the same time choosing to hold in captivity representative members of the wild realms. Assigning them the fatuous label of “animal ambassadors” does not mitigate the central fact of imposed captivity and its underlying assumptions.

Recognizing the moral status of animals requires more than information and rationality. Empathy and imagination are equally vital. For example, Hutchins tells us that although sanctuaries provide considerably more space for elephants than zoos, and “space may be important,” scientific studies haven't yet determined just how much space is too little or just right. That may be true, but is it a sufficient defense for disregarding or minimizing space differentials between zoos and sanctuaries? Knowing that elephants range over many dozens of square miles in the wild and that their evolution undoubtedly created that behavior and the need for its expression for good reasons having to do with their welfare (along with that of their ecosystem), how much imagination does it require to fill in the blanks that science cannot? Surely these creatures are better off in large spaces than in small ones. Do we need science to ratify that? The assertion of science's deficit in this area serves as rationalization rather than rational justification for zoo practice.

Consider another example of imaginative failure. The article tells us that “some biologists have argued that family life is critical to elephant social well-being” and so sanctuaries' precluding of breeding “could be seen as diminishing their ‘welfare.’” Again, this may be true (and not just for elephants). But how do we weigh the importance of this one deficit among captive elephants compared to the immense and unfathomable (in its meaning to the animal) deficiency imposed by the life of captivity that newborns would face? What is it like for a wide-ranging creature who is queen of her realm in the wild to be deprived of that freedom and to spend her entire existence faced with endless streams of humans parading past and peering into her minuscule life space? Is motherhood even a slight compensation for the loss?

Dr. Hutchins was trained in science and he and the AZA want to believe that the problems of wildlife conservation will be largely solved by science. But the fact is that this offers a scientific solution to a nonscientific problem. The problems afflicting wildlife and Nature as a whole are problems of culture and values, and until they are confronted at that level they will not be remedied. The belief in the ethical deficiency of animals and Nature in relation to humans—the belief that they can be bent to human uses and desires whenever we deem it convenient to do so and that this occurs without ethical ramifications—lies at the root of what imperils Earth's diversity of life. Acceptance of the zoo philosophy that captivity for wildlife is okay because it may mysteriously teach conservation to zoo visitors fits hand-in-glove within the dominant cultural worldview. As such, how can it possibly change that worldview?

PAWS and The Elephant Sanctuary are obviously better equipped to provide for those elephants than any zoo in the country. And just as important, the values that they and The Association of Sanctuaries espouse are more consistent with the kind of life-affirming cultural changes that ultimately are necessary if Nature and our fellow creatures, not to mention the human spirit, are to flourish.

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