

ZOOS AND TOURISM

Conservation, Education, Entertainment?

Edited by Warwick Frost



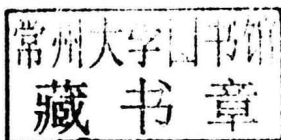
ASPECTS OF TOURISM

Series Editors: Chris Cooper (Oxford Brookes University, UK), C. Michael Hall (University of Canterbury, New Zealand) and Dallen J. Timothy (Arizona State University, USA)

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Zoos and Tourism



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Series Editors: **Chris Cooper** (*Oxford Brookes University, UK*), **C. Michael Hall** (*University of Canterbury, New Zealand*) and **Dallen J. Timothy** (*Arizona State University, USA*)

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Chapter 1

Rethinking Zoos and Tourism

WARWICK FROST

Zoos are important and popular tourist attractions. Spread around the world, they range from substantial operations in major cities, with visitation levels comparable to other top attractions, to small, regional, owner-operator ventures. Nature-based attractions constructed in artificial settings, they face the challenge of trying to balance the potentially conflicting aims of conservation, education and entertainment. The best zoos are continually developing fresh and effective techniques on visitor interpretation and animal management, the worst highlight the manipulation of animals for human gratification.

Modern zoos are dynamic institutions. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, they were seen as integral parts of a worldwide conservation movement. Advocates of national parks were often involved in zoos and vice versa. Zoos had a role in conserving and scientifically studying endangered species and this scientific interest often extended to seeing zoos as vehicles for acclimatising and introducing 'useful' exotic species (Hoage & Deiss, 1996). However, in the late 20th century, there were revolutionary changes in how zoos saw their role and the experiences they offer to visitors. This was primarily driven by major shifts in public attitudes to nature and conservation. There was widespread public concern for the protection of threatened ecosystems and species, and the sustainability of constant economic growth was questioned. These changes in society meant that zoos were increasingly viewed as anachronistic. Their ubiquitous cramped cages, with bare concrete floors, were symbolic of a bygone past that could no longer be tolerated in modern societies (Baratay & Hardouin-Fugier, 2002; Hancocks, 2001; Jamieson, 1985; Mazur, 2001; Tribe, 2004) (see Figure 1.1 and 1.2). The very future of individual zoos, and the institution in general, began to be seriously questioned. Indeed, one survey of zoo visitors found that 27% believed that zoos should be abolished (Shackley, 1996: 104).

Two examples of the pressure that modern zoos were being subjected to are worth highlighting. London Zoo, perhaps the most famous zoo in the world, seemed to plummet from grace after reaching peak attendances in the 1950s. In the 1970s, the editor of the *Ecologist* declared, 'London Zoo is a shameful establishment where wild animals [live] in totally inappropriate conditions', and a newspaper termed it the 'Beasts' Belsen' (both quoted in Hancocks, 2001: 52). In 1992, the combination of

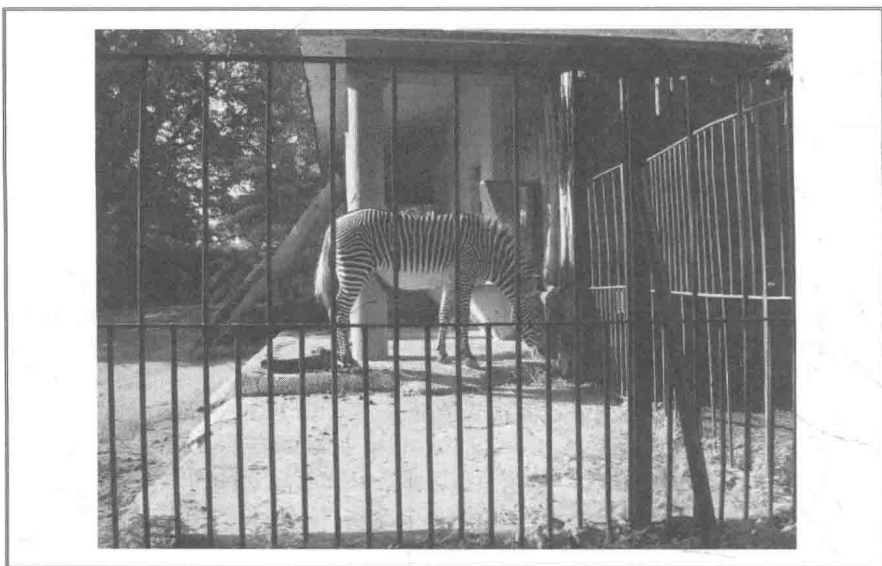


Figure 1.1 Old fashioned exhibit, but still in use. The zebra enclosure at Rome Zoo. (Photo: Warwick Frost)

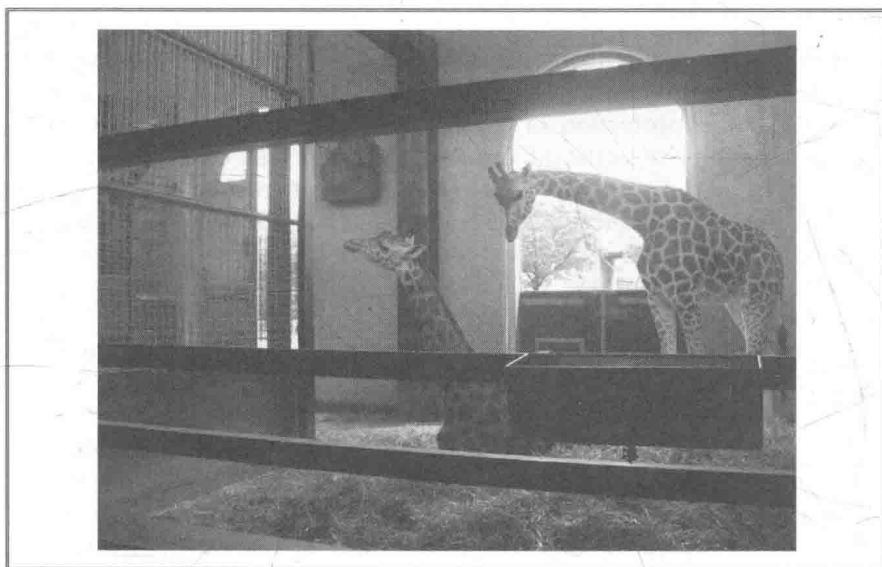


Figure 1.2 Old fashioned exhibit, but still in use. The Giraffe House at London Zoo. (Photo: Warwick Frost)

public concern and declining attendances led to the UK government withdrawing its annual grant and, for a time, it appeared that London Zoo would close (Shackley, 1996). In 1963, Melbourne's *Herald* newspaper ran an extensive campaign, highlighting the cruel and degrading conditions that animals were kept in at Melbourne Zoo. It posed the question that if the situation could not be improved, then perhaps it was time for the zoo to be closed (De Courcy, 1995).

Faced with such challenges, zoos began to radically change what they did and why they did it. Enclosures became larger and more naturalistic, with grass and plants replacing concrete, and metal bars giving way to moats and glass. Rather than simply gazing through bars, visitors were 'immersed' while walking through themed landscapes, often with freely ranging animals (Figure 1.3). The successes of the pioneers in these trends, such as Seattle's Woodland Park Zoo, were quickly copied by others (Hancocks, 2001). Through publicly embracing conservation as their key role, zoos repositioned themselves as relevant institutions within modern society (Tribe, 2004) (Figure 1.4).

Nonetheless, criticism of zoos continues. As Hancocks (2001: xv) argues, despite the changes 'we should not accept zoos as they currently are'. The recent case of Knut, the polar bear at Berlin Zoo, demonstrates this continuing conflict between animal welfare and financial impera-



Figure 1.3 Modern 'immersive' exhibit, in which visitors move through a more natural environment with free roaming animals, London Zoo. (Photo: Warwick Frost)



Figure 1.4 Display board of the roles of zoos at Rome Zoo. The emphasis is on research, conservation and education rather than entertainment or recreation. (Photo: Warwick Frost)

tives. Born in 2006, Knut was rejected by his mother and would normally have died. However, the zoo decided to raise him and he became the first polar bear to survive childhood at the zoo in 30 years. As a cute and charismatic baby animal, Knut became a zoo superstar, dramatically raising attendances and featuring heavily in the media (even gracing the cover of the glossy magazine *Vanity Fair*). However, there were also concerns about his increasingly aggressive behaviour and the long-term effects of his unnatural upbringing. An unseemly dispute over the ownership of Knut and his profits further highlighted the issues of his commodification.

Even zoos that have invested heavily in naturalistic enclosures and made commitments to conservation and environmental education campaigns, remain subject to heavy public and media scrutiny. In the 1960s, Melbourne Zoo reacted to press criticism by embarking on a major rebuilding programme based on advanced principles of display and animal husbandry. Yet, despite all its successes, recently it has once again been the subject of media complaints on two counts. The first is an increasing focus on commercial imperatives and the second is the ill-treatment of some of its 'star' animals (Dennis, 2008; Millar & Houston, 2008a, 2008b).

It is extraordinary to consider that among the wide range of entities catering for our leisure in the modern world, zoos stand alone as the only entity that is continually under critical scrutiny, to the extent of periodic and widespread calls for major changes and even their abolition. This striking situation is best understood by comparison with other leisure attractions. Museums occasionally attract claims of inappropriate displays, particularly human remains and culturally sensitive items. However, these controversies are about specific items and do not result in moves to shut or completely re-order museums. Similarly, from time to time, there are calls to ban certain works of art, but no one is running a campaign to shut down art galleries. In these cases, we are dealing with objects. Is it different if we consider living things? What about national parks? Like zoos, they seek to balance conservation with tourism and recreation. In many cases, this doesn't work too well, and there are complaints that they are being mismanaged. However, these critics don't call for the closure of national parks. This singling out of zoos is curious. Perhaps it is because zoos are widely seen as 'popular' rather than 'high' culture (Mullan & Marvin, 1987: 125).

Perhaps zoos suffer from a 'crisis of identity'; with managers, visitors and other stakeholders not sure whether zoos are protected areas for nature or visitor attractions or some sort of hybrid. The intensity, range and time span of the debate about their roles is not repeated for any other tourism operation. Of course, even attaching the descriptor of tourism to zoos may be seen as provocative. However, zoos do have a role in tourism. They operate as attractions and form part of the attributes of a destination. That this role tends to be ignored, downplayed or criticised is part of this crisis of identity.

Are zoos really tourist attractions? It could be argued that they are simply visitor attractions, mainly catering to local populations and having little economic impact on host communities. Taking such a view relegates zoos to the status of other recreational amusements, like shopping malls and cinemas (the analogy of cinemas is interesting given the ongoing campaigns to reduce Hollywood's use of live animals, see, e.g. Cheeta, 2008). From a public policy perspective (whether we like it or not), economic benefit justifies governments' support of tourism development, even if it consumes the natural environment. If zoos do not bestow an economic benefit from tourism, their case for existence becomes weaker.

Certainly, the literature often presents zoos as being mainly for local people, typically on no more than a family excursion or picnic just for the day. When visitor statistics are quoted, they seem to confirm a pattern that the majority are from the domestic market. Consider these examples. For London Zoo, 50% of visitors were from London and 87% from the UK (Tribe, 2004: 37). At Chester Zoo, 64% of visitors came from within a

radius of 50 miles (80 km) (Swarbrooke, 1995: 343). The accessibility of zoos to local markets is also demonstrated by the high levels of repeat visitation. At Chester Zoo, 84% had been previously (Swarbrooke, 1995: 343), while in another UK study it was 91% (Shackley, 1996: 103). A study at Woodland Zoo in Seattle showed that 50% of visitors only had short visits, spending just two hours or less (Mullan & Marvin, 1987: 133). Such statistics suggest a 'typical' zoo visitor who is local, regular and recreational, rather than a tourist.

However, we need to take care. There is evidence that zoos are on the tourists' itineraries and they form a large market. While 87% of visitors to London Zoo are British, it is significant that the remaining 13% are from overseas. At 130,000 per year, that is a sizeable flow of tourists, one that many attractions would dream of. Similarly, while 64% of Chester Zoo's visitors are from within a radius of 80 km, 36% are from outside that local area. In Australia, there are about 8 million visitors to zoos, of which 5 million are domestic (Tribe, 2004: 37). However, that leaves an impressive 3 million international visits.

Rather than counting visitors, an alternative approach is to consider international visitors and their activities. For Australia, the 2008/2009 International Visitor Survey recorded that 53% visited wildlife parks, zoos or aquaria. This is a similar rate to a range of other attractions, including national parks, heritage buildings or museums and art galleries (and much higher than wineries or the performing arts). Furthermore, it is much higher than the 18% of domestic tourists who visit wildlife parks, zoos and aquaria (Tourism Australia, 2009). Such data indicate that visiting zoos and aquaria is a major activity among international tourists in Australia.

While many major urban zoos pick up a steady, though incidental flow of tourists, others are more directly targeted at tourists. Some major zoos utilise rare charismatic animals, such as polar bears and pandas, to attract tourists in a way similar to the 'blockbuster' exhibitions of museums or art galleries. Others, such as San Diego Zoo, Monterey Aquarium and Steve Irwin's Australia Zoo, appeal so directly to tourist markets that they become 'destination attractions', major operations that define the image and attributes of the destination. In popular destinations, there may be a 'clustering' of zoos and wildlife attractions, as in Miami, which has four such operations close together (Shackley, 1996).

Small specialised zoos may rely heavily on tourists. This is especially so where they have a bioregional focus, providing distinctive animals from a region. Examples include Montana Grizzly Encounter in Bozeman, USA; Crocosaurus in Darwin; Alice Springs Desert Park; and a number of small operations on the main tourist routes around Hobart, which features Tasmanian Devils.

Of all the tourism-orientated, zoo-type attractions, aquaria stand out. These have long been situated in areas with high tourism flows (Ford, 2009). In recent years, this trend has accelerated, with the developers of tourism precincts seeking to include aquaria as focal points (Judd, 1999; Shackley, 1996). Aquaria are utilised in this way as they are concentrated attractions, able to be established anywhere and requiring relatively little space. They also have a natural affinity with the trend of redeveloping former wharf areas as shopping/residential/tourism complexes. Examples include the Aquarium of the Bay located at the entrance to Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco; the Sydney Aquarium in Darling Harbour; and the National Aquarium at Baltimore's Inner Harbour. The Vancouver Aquarium benefits from being in close proximity to recently developed harbour precincts, while Underwater World in Singapore is located on the resort island of Sentosa.

Zoos and aquaria cannot simply be seen as recreational attractions for local people. They also function as tourism attractions and there is a trend for that role to become increasingly important. Again, this highlights a crisis of identity. Entertainment (or recreation) – the third role of zoos – can be split between the activities and expectations of local visitors and tourists. This has implications for both the operators of zoos and aquaria and the tourism industry.

The aim of this book is to undertake a critical examination of the conflicting roles of zoos and current zoo practices through the lens of tourism studies. There have been quite a number of excellent studies of zoos and many of these have considered tourism and how that has an impact on zoos (e.g. Hancocks, 2001; Mullan & Marvin, 1987). However, these studies have not been by experts in tourism – Hancocks was a zoo designer and administrator and Mullan and Marvin are sociologists. Accordingly, their commentary on tourism has tended to be limited. By contrast, it is striking that so few research studies on zoos and aquaria have been published in the tourism literature. Mason (2000) found that there had only been a handful of studies specifically dealing with tourism and zoos. Eight years later, the introduction for the first special issue of a tourism journal on zoos argued that very little had changed (Frost & Roehl, 2008). This deficiency in the literature is even more striking if we contrast it with the hundreds of studies in other areas of nature-based tourism, such as ecotourism operators or national parks. This may be the result of zoos and aquaria being seen as mass market attractions. Taking our cue from Robert Frost, tourism researchers have tended to take the road less travelled, looking at niche and new developments. There is value in occasionally choosing to explore the road well travelled.

Taking a tourism perspective allows a fresh approach to the important debate about the role of zoos. If a major part of the problem is that zoos are too commercially focused, placing visitors above animals, then there