

The Argument for Zoological Institutions

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There has long been a discussion about housing wild animal species in captive environments, but it became an international controversy in 2016 when Harambe, a captive western lowland gorilla at the Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden, was shot and killed in order to protect a child. People across the globe questioned if animals belonged in human care. However, zoological institutions are beneficial to environmental conservation for many critical reasons.

It is crucial to define “zoological institution” to understand the scope of this thesis. A zoological institution is a place that meets the Association of Zoos and Aquariums’ (AZA) standards for animal care and for supporting scientific research, conservation, and education programs. Other institutions that house animals but are not certified by the AZA are not included in this defense.

Zoological institutions are instrumental in the conservation and reintroduction of species around the world. Organizations like these serve as conduits for consolidating funds and resources, which means that a bigger impact is made. Every

year, AZA-accredited institutions donate over \$230 million to field conservation alone. In addition to funding third party efforts, many places also conduct conservation projects of their own. For example, the St. Louis Zoo houses the WildCare Institute, a conglomeration of seventeen centers located across the world that focuses on regional conservation efforts. Zoological institutions also participate in reintroduction programs—efforts to place species back in locations where they were eradicated—and rehabilitation programs. The Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden is home to several of these programs, including the manatee rehabilitation and the Mexican Grey Wolf programs, both of which are incredibly successful—so successful, in fact, that the Florida manatee was downgraded from endangered to threatened on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List in 2018. These programs preserve the genetic diversity of wild populations, which ensures that they can survive drastic changes in their environment.

Zoological institutions are also supporters of scientific research. Studying

species in the wild is difficult due to the almost endless amount of confounding variables, as well as behaviors that cannot be observed in natural environments due to a species' comfort level around humans. The research that zoological institutions conduct is therefore important to our understanding of animal physiology, behavior, and survival. For example, Zoo Atlanta partnered with the Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding to conduct a study on the mother-cub relationship in the Giant Panda species. This data would be near-impossible to gather in the wild due to reduced reproduction of the species caused by habitat loss. Zoo Atlanta's data is therefore invaluable to our understanding of giant pandas, as well as to human efforts to conserve the species. This study is just one example out of thousands that zoological institutions conduct every year, and the findings have increased our knowledge of the world and the species that live on it.

Some groups say that keeping animals in zoos is cruel and unnatural. They claim that we have no right to keep them in these institutions. However, the vast majority of zoo-dwelling animals have been born and raised in captivity; they have become habituated to humans and lack a concept of what it is like to forage or hunt for their own food, to hide from predators, or to survive harsh weather conditions. Those that live in zoos often have twice the life expectancy of their wild counterparts and have a full staff of zookeepers, nutritionists, veterinarians,

and other professionals to ensure that they lead happy and healthy lives. In fact, the AZA has rigorous standards of care that all institutions must meet to remain certified. It is hard to imagine this lifestyle as a cruel one, and thus this argument holds no merit.

Perhaps the most important function of zoological institutions is educating the public. For so many members of the general public, endangered species and conservation issues seem far away, but these institutions bring people close enough to care, which can spur action. From children's summer camps to docent volunteers to zoo tours and overnight programs, zoological organizations create countless experiences that inspire visitors to take conservation into their own hands. Individuals, as a result of these encounters with wildlife, begin to see themselves as part of the solution, and this mindset is what causes real change to occur.

Zoological institutions are crucial to environmental sustainability because of the support, funding, and research they provide to conservation efforts across the globe, as well as the education they provide to the public. Without these benefits, the natural world as we know it might not exist; as the human population continues to grow towards eight billion, it's critical to work at preserving animal populations and natural habitats. We need good zoological institutions, now more than ever.

For references, click [here](#).