

- *How does the writer of this text use humour, as well as other strategies, to engage the reader in his opinion about zoos?*

## Zoos are prisons for animals – no one needs to see a depressed penguin in the flesh

*In an age when David Attenborough can virtually take us inside an elephant's bottom, is there any or conservational value to keeping animals in captivity?*

That a zoo in Cumbria is having its licence revoked as a result of nearly 500 animals dying there over a two-year period comes as no shock – but it still slightly surprises me that anybody thinks that we should have zoos at all. The animals always look miserable in captivity. If you don't believe me, visit a farm park. It's as likely as not that you will see a goat, pleading with its eyes to be euthanised, while a sign on the enclosure says: "Gerry the goat is quite the character – he often plays a game in which he looks like he has been crying for many, many hours!"

A lot of zoos play the conservation angle, which is a rationale that has been reverse engineered. That's not really why zoos exist. Zoos exist so that we can wander round with our children and say: "No, don't bang the glass, Timothy, he's getting agitated," before going home to post on Facebook about the educational day that we have had.

The argument that zoos have educational merit might have once seemed convincing, but there is less reason to see animals in captivity than ever before. David Attenborough's Planet Earth shows you all the animals you could ask for in their natural habitat, with added drama and narrative arcs. We are surely only a few series away from filming inside the animals, with Attenborough using his dulcet tones to give the origin story of an elephant turd. Why, then, do we need to see them in prison?

On holiday recently, I was persuaded by my family to visit a marine theme park that bombards you with messages of preserving marine life. We spent the afternoon seeing

seals and penguins that looked to be in varying stages of depression before taking in the dolphin show, which meant watching a two-minute video about saving dolphins, and a 10-minute demonstration of how the park has managed to enslave them and get them to perform tricks. I wondered about the message behind getting the dolphins to pull some kids around in a boat almost as much as I wondered why my own children hadn't been offered that experience.

There are counter-arguments, of course. After a visit to the Sea Life centre in Brighton, my eldest son took a passionate interest in marine life that has stayed with him, and I wouldn't be surprised if animal conservation went on to be one of his primary concerns. This is almost certainly as a direct result of our visit, but it's also first-world privilege in micro form: "We must have some animals in cages for little Stephen to look at, otherwise how will he learn?"

I have no doubts that the people working in zoos, safari parks and conservation centres all really care about the animals. But there is a pretty strong argument that there is a negative effect on conservation awareness, given that children take away the message that "endangered species" are probably OK because they have seen them in the zoo. Plus, zoos and conservation spaces are impossible to effectively regulate. Have a look online and see the number of cases of animals being killed because of lack of space, horses being painted to look like zebras, animals in aquariums showing clear signs of distress.

Still, I was struck by my own hypocrisy when I was looking to get a family pet. The idea that I don't want animals to be imprisoned, but that I quite fancy having a prisoner of my own doesn't sit comfortably. This might sound extreme and no doubt cat owners will tell me that their cats are free to go wherever they want but always return.

I'm also starting to consider setting my children free.

- *By Romesh Ranganathan, published in The Guardian (2015)*