

COMMENTARIES

Ethics and Welfare in Southeast Asian Zoos

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The South East Asian Zoos Association (SEAZA), officially formed as a registered association in 1990, is the only major zoological organization connecting about 90 zoos and recreational parks in the region. The objectives of SEAZA are to strengthen in-situ conservation and management plans, to increase captive breeding through research, to improve standards of nonhuman animal welfare, to provide better recreational learning experiences for zoo visitors, to educate public about the importance of wildlife conservation, and to promote tourism in Southeast Asia (Agoramoorthy & Hsu, 2001b).

The Ethics and Welfare Committee of SEAZA established the zoo evaluation procedure in 1998 (Agoramoorthy, 2002). The aim was to assess ethics and the animal welfare situation in zoos to identify problems related to animal welfare so that constructive recommendation can be provided to improve animal welfare standards. The objective of the zoo evaluation is not to measure animal welfare scientifically but to identify, rectify, and prevent ethics and welfare-related problems in zoos. Between 1999 and 2003, evaluations of 12 member zoos in Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia were completed.

As chairperson of the Ethics and Welfare committee of SEAZA, I led the zoo evaluations with the assistance of local animal welfare, conservation, and zoo specialists. Zoos evaluated ranged from the best to the worst. I was looking primarily at the minimum welfare standards—with special emphasis on animals in distress and unsatisfactory living conditions. Whenever problems were identified, recommendations were given to the respective zoo directors for rectification. In most

zoos that I evaluated, the zoo directors were willing to comply with the recommendations and made improvements to the highlighted aspects to alleviate animal distress and suffering (Agoramoorthy, 2002). This indicates the success of the evaluation process in improving animal welfare standards in Southeast Asian zoos.

SEAZA zoo evaluations are conducted only on the invitation of respective zoos and zoo associations (Agoramoorthy & Harrison, 2002). This is unlike evaluations conducted by zoo associations in the industrialized countries, which are enforced or covert operations, often resulting in adverse effects of resentment and noncompliance. SEAZA also is the only zoo association in the world that does not discriminate against poor zoos or favor rich zoos. Opinions from zoo managers, conservationists, and animal rights activists are held in equal regard. Traditionally, these independent groups in the wildlife community seldom compromise or work together closely and, instead, often are at constant loggerheads. SEAZA's Ethics and Welfare committee is unique in that it is the only committee in any zoo or conservation organization in the world that attempts to reconcile ideological differences between these three independent groups and to harness their combined efforts in alleviating animal suffering and improving animal welfare and ethics in zoos.

EVALUATION PROCEDURES

Data on animal welfare were collected using questionnaires and data forms. Representatives from the SEAZA executive board, local animal welfare organizations, wildlife professionals, and members of the local zoo participate in the collection of data. Usually, three to six members participate in each evaluation. The reason for including local zoo staff is to understand how they would evaluate their own zoo. To evaluate animal welfare problems thoroughly, each member of the team chooses a single exhibit or species. In addition, each member records general information related to zoo management, nutrition, veterinary care, hygiene, animal handling, acquisition of animals, animal transportation, species management, disposal of surplus animals, conservation breeding programs, conservation education, research, safety, public health, funding, and responsibility.

The most potentially controversial ethical issues facing the zoos today are the acquisition of animals for captive breeding programs; the disposal of surplus animals; basic animal care and husbandry; and the use of animals for research, education, and recreation (Hutchins & Fascione, 1991). These and other issues related to basic animal care and husbandry are covered during the zoo evaluations. To assess welfare problems thoroughly, each evaluator also targets a single exhibit or species. The selection of the exhibit or species is based on the choice of the evaluators. In an ideal exhibit, animals should have access to sufficient food and drinking wa-

ter, shelter against inclement weather conditions, clean enclosure for reduction of the spread of infectious diseases, and responsible staff for care while they are in distress; finally, animals displayed should exhibit normal behavior. The exhibit for mammals should be as large as possible with adequate environmental and behavioral enrichment devices following internationally accepted minimum husbandry and welfare standards (AZA, 1997).

A few months prior to the evaluations, the forms are translated into local languages and forwarded to respective zoos. Thus, the zoo employees are familiar with the questionnaires. A meeting with the zoo's staff is held before each evaluation; after the completion of the evaluation, staffs are briefed on the results. Ninety-four questions are addressed to collect qualitative and quantitative data on ethics and welfare. The questions are organized in seven broad categories adapted after Thorpe (1969) and Spedding (1993):

1. Freedom from hunger and thirst.
2. Freedom from thermal and physical discomfort.
3. Freedom from pain, disease and injury.
4. Freedom to express normal behavior.
5. Freedom from fear and distress.
6. General management.
7. Conservation programs, finance, and responsibility.

The following evaluation points are given while recording data on each category: (a) best, (b) good, (c) average, (d) poor, and (e) worst. Statistical analyses were done using Statistical Analysis Systems software (SAS Institute, 1989), and mean values are presented as ± 1 standard deviation. The effect of zoos and evaluators are tested using analysis of variance in General Linear Model. The Duncan's Multiple Range Test was used to test the differences of mean scores.

RECENT CRITICISMS ON ZOOS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

In recent years, the animal rights and conservation communities, highlighting various problems, have criticized zoos in Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. Perhaps now known throughout the world is the Taiping zoo's gorilla fracas, the epitome of disgrace for the local zoo community and the government of Malaysia. The recent crackdown on zoos in Thailand by law-enforcing officials is unprecedented. Several armed police officers raided various zoos in the country, turning up evidence of illegal animal acquisition in Thailand zoos.

In Safari World Bangkok alone, about 114 orangutans were found, with only 44 registered legally. Safari World is not a member of the local zoo association or SEAZA but appears to have the largest orangutan collection in any single zoo in

the world today. This also is the only place where one can see orangutans dressed up in boxing gear to entertain guests. Thailand ratified the Convention of International Trade in Endangered Species of Flora and Fauna (CITES) agreement in 1984, and there certainly are legal implications to the recent crackdown. The government of Thailand would have to examine this issue carefully and make appropriate rectification. According to CITES, animals who are brought into the country illegally should be repatriated to their countries of origin. Orangutans are not native to Thailand.

CANDIDNESS OF THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN ZOO COMMUNITY

Asia Pacific is home to 58% of the world's population but covers a mere 23% of total land area (Agoramoorthy & Hsu, 2001a). Poverty is most rampant in the region's biological hotspots. With natural habitats fast vanishing, zoos play an increasingly crucial role in promoting conservation awareness in a bid to reverse the tide of destruction. Unfortunately, most zoos in our region are poor and often struggle just to meet the bottom line. Rich Western zoos should take on a more prominent role to assist and adopt zoos in Southeast Asia to alleviate animal suffering, upgrade welfare standards, and ultimately to promote ex-situ and in-situ conservation of highly endangered species.

Through the years, in the name of ex-situ conservation, several species of the rare and endangered animals from Southeast Asian countries have been siphoned to zoos in the West without much legal and bureaucratic hassle. On the contrary, policies in industrialized countries now impose unfair restrictions on the export of even common wildlife to our zoos in Southeast Asia. For our children even to see the kangaroo, a widespread species found in Australia, the existing policy dictates that mainly kangaroo meat is allowed to be exported to our region. These fascinating marsupials are regarded at times as pests and ruthlessly culled in their homeland.

Southeast Asian countries are generally hospitable and readily accept criticism. Comments from western authorities are held in particular high regard, a possible spillover of the colonization mentality. In the name of wildlife conservation and animal rights, nongovernmental organizations in the West have raised millions of dollars each year. The shortcomings of the conservation and animal welfare situations in less-developed countries often are exploited to achieve this. Ironically, most of the money raised is used to cover operational overheads such as luxuries, offices, huge staff salaries, and business-class tour-of-duty expenses instead of directly benefitting the animal welfare cause to relieve animal sufferings in zoos. SEAZA however has followed this tradition of seeing the western influence as a positive force driving the elevation of welfare standards in the region.

PROSPECTS OF ZOO EVALUATIONS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

During the evaluation of Taman Safari Indonesia in December 2003, I visited the primate exhibit and saw an old acquaintance, Charlie, the chimpanzee. I first met Charlie when he was in the Singapore Zoo 2 years ago. He was isolated in an indoor facility because he had challenged the dominant male and become an outcast of the group. I did an assessment and recommended that Charlie be transferred to another facility, as it would be psychologically damaging for social apes like the chimpanzees to be kept alone for extended periods. When I met Charlie at Taman Safari Indonesia, I was pleasantly surprised when he actually came up to greet me and started his social vocalizations and displays. This indescribable sensation of delight, of seeing the product of one's efforts, is what an animal lover—be that lover an animal rights activist, conservationist, or zoo biologist—should aspire to achieve.

To conduct zoo evaluations in the culturally sensitive Southeast Asian countries is a complex task. To present evidence of animal suffering in subminimal conditions in a polite and cordial manner without being openly offensive is not easy. However, during the course of zoo evaluations, I have been amazed at how open our Asian zoo communities are to constructive criticism on welfare and ethical standards, despite the pressing economic, social, and political hardships that they face. Unlike established zoo associations such as the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums, which oversees an assemblage of elite zoos, SEAZA is run more like a refugee camp. A number of zoos in our region operate with meager budgets; thus, they face the difficult dual challenge of maintaining animal welfare standards as well as the bottom line. Some could not even afford to pay the membership fees. The Indonesian Zoo Association has only a small volunteer staff with limited budget. Yet, they are willing to commit their efforts to upgrading ethics and welfare standards in their zoos.

I am optimistic that the first round of zoo evaluations to improve standards of ethics and welfare of all member zoos will be completed within the next few years. Zoos that do not comply with the recommendations to upgrade standards of ethics and welfare no longer will be allowed to exist as members of SEAZA. This is an essential step forward in elucidating the serious problems faced by our zoos today.

Animal rights as well as conservation groups sometimes tend to pure cynicism and armchair philosophy but do little in practical efforts to alleviate animal welfare conditions in our zoos. A report published by the by World Society for the Protection of Animals titled "Caged Cruelty" highlighted serious concerns, and its subsequent campaigns might have raised immense public awareness and raked in massive public donations (WSPA/KSBK, 2002). However, the criticisms alone may not help in relieving animal suffering. On the other hand, only a few animal welfare organizations have been willing to conduct constructive dialogue with the

zoo community and work hand in hand to improve and upgrade welfare conditions in zoos. Hence, more balanced animal rights and welfare organizations that do not practice double standards are needed if constructive progress in animal welfare is to be made in our zoos. I would hereby like to appeal not only to the animal rights and welfare groups but also to the rich and powerful zoos, zoo organizations, and the international wildlife conservation groups to work with the Southeast Asian zoo community toward relieving animal suffering and elevating standards of welfare and ethics.

During the last two decades, I personally have had the unique opportunity to work with the seemingly ideologically irreconcilable trio of zoo managers, conservationists, and animal rights activists who are the major stakeholders to the world's wildlife diversity. More often than not, the focus of each group is to pinpoint and condemn the inadequacies of the other in a process that often results in hostile conflicts in an ultimate regress in terms of alleviating animal suffering. I would like to reiterate that a more synergized approach to accomplishing the shared, yet seemingly conflicting, objectives of the various groups is needed.

The cottage industry-styled approach to tackling problems as evident in the numerous conferences, symposiums, and workshops conducted each year will not be able to make realistic advances to improve standards of animal welfare in zoos in the fast-paced, interconnected world of the new millennium. We need to implement more practical and holistic approaches to wildlife conservation and welfare with compassion, justice, and equity and reexamine philosophical approaches to decrease prejudice and increase awareness. A paradigm shift from the traditional top-down approach to the bottom-up approach may be necessary if we are to make practical advances to the alleviation of the animal suffering. I am confident that such a binding arbitration among different conservation, zoo, and animal rights interest groups would certainly accomplish much more for the welfare and ethical standards in the region and beyond.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author's animal welfare work in Southeast Asian countries is made possible with the support of SEAZA and the International Fund for Animal Welfare.

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