



Creating the Nation's first BioPark

National Zoological Park · Smithsonian Institution · Washington, D.C. 20008

Letter from the Desk of David Challinor
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In previous letters I have discussed the excitement and careful work necessary to breed animals successfully in zoos. Recently, while touring the excellent Dallas Zoo with Warren Iliff, the director and an old friend, I noticed the happy mien of the entire zoo staff, easily attributable to the birth of a baby okapi the previous night. However, just as life so often begins in zoos, it sadly often ends there, as when Smokey, our popular black bear at the National Zoo, died of liver cancer last week.

Occasions arise, however, when an animal is so diseased or so seriously injured that the odds of recovery are judged remote enough to warrant "putting the animal down." Euthanasia, even when applied to animals, is an emotional and controversial subject, and zoo administrators are particularly sensitive to this issue which they must regularly face.

Rather than give graphic examples of incidents at the zoo where euthanasia has been used, it might be more useful to explain the careful procedure that is rigorously followed whenever an animal is being considered for such an action.

First, there are the guidelines prepared by a special committee of the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquaria (AAZPA). This is the accrediting body to which all major U.S. zoos and aquaria belong, and it sets standards for its members covering such myriad issues as animal health, disposition of surplus animals, exhibiting conditions, and, in close cooperation with the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), even the sensitive subject of euthanasia.

The goal of the AAZPA and the reason for these standards and recommendations is, of course, to insure the welfare and humane treatment of the animals concerned. Thus the AAZPA's Code of Professional Ethics forbids the sale of zoo animals to inappropriate and unqualified recipients, such as roadside zoos and shooting ranches. Not only do the AAZPA guidelines set the tenor of zoo procedure, but each reputable zoo has its own more detailed course of action to follow in cases of injured, sick or suffering animals.



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At the National Zoo, for example, permission for euthanasia is normally initiated by the relevant curator, who submits a standard form through the Associate Director for Biological Programs and the head veterinarian to the Zoo Director, who gives the final authorization. Any request arising from especially unique or unusual circumstances must also have the approval of the Assistant Secretary for Research, and I assure you that when I held that office, such requests received my very careful scrutiny.

From the above information, it is clear that euthanasia is exercised as a last resort and only when the animal's condition warrants such action. Zoos are thus caught on the horns of a dilemma. If their breeding programs are successful, it is often difficult to place surplus stock. Space for nonbreeders is at a premium, as those of you who have been to Front Royal have seen. To control breeding in polygamous animals, such as zebra and some antelope species, requires segregating males not being used as herd sires. These males in turn frequently have to be kept in separate paddocks to avoid fighting between them, yet we never had to use euthanasia to reduce a surplus of nonbreeders.

The problems of trying to manage the size of animal populations will always remain whether in the wild or in zoos. The eventual solution to contentious disputes on animal policy is an understanding and informed public. To achieve this goal requires a continuous dialogue between zoos, humane societies and the public. Such an exchange seems the best way to achieve the goal of preventing animals from being inhumanely treated.

Conversations can be strained when discussing such emotional topics as euthanasia, spaying or vasectomies for mammals, but it is clearly worth the effort when conditions are calm, rather than waiting for a crisis to be highly publicized in the press. The public media may not be the most ideal vehicle for such sensitive discussions, but I think it may be one of the best ways we have of educating the public.