



Creating the Nation's first BioPark

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

Letter from the Desk of David Challinor
October 1, 1990

Observers of wild animals often encounter old, sick or wounded individuals that have trouble keeping up with their fellows. Most of these handicapped animals will soon succumb, and the human observer must often justify his/her failure to intervene and improve such an animal's condition by rationalizing that "nature must take its course to allow the fittest to survive."

Frequently human intervention is not only impractical and/or unwise, but in some cases it can even be against the law. An example of impractical intervention happened a few years ago in the Galapagos. A young sea lion had caught its head in one of the openings of a plastic 6-pack holder. This tough material could remain intact as the sea lion grew, digging into its neck and eventually killing it. I thought long and hard about how a group of middle-aged tourists, with whom I was traveling, could capture the animal and cut the plastic. It soon became clear that such an effort would be a major undertaking, with considerable risk to the animal as well as to the would-be-rescuers. Even if a successful effort could have been mounted, it was not worth the risks involved, and from a strictly evolutionary viewpoint, the saving of this one animal and its return to the breeding population of Galapagos sea lions would have had a negligible effect on their total survival.

For animals more endangered than sea lions, however, some rescue efforts may indeed be warranted. A good example is the extraordinarily successful technique developed in Newfoundland a few years ago to free juvenile humpback whales from entanglement in the fishing nets hung in the coves of that island. The rapid increase in net fouling by whales was traced to the overfishing of offshore schools of capelin and sand eels by commercial trawlers. As the fish schools moved closer to shore, the whales followed, making them vulnerable to the plastic filament nets of the shore-based fishermen. Once the rescuers mastered the technique of keeping the young whales from panicking while being handled by humans, divers could gently approach the whales and cut off the tangled nets. This procedure had the full cooperation of the local fishermen who advised how to keep net



1889-1989

"...for the advancement of science and
the education and recreation of the people."

damage to a minimum. The confrontation between man and whale fortunately was resolved when catch limits were imposed on the two important prey species, and the whales once again moved off shore to feed.

An example of a probably unwise intervention was the highly publicized effort to free two juvenile grey whales trapped by solid ice off the north coast of Alaska when the open water lead they were following closed off. Ice breakers were summoned to open an artificial lead for them, and the two young whales evidently left the area where they had been trapped. Whether they ever made it down the Pacific Coast to winter we will never know, but from a strictly biological perspective, the wise thing would have been to leave them alone. They may have just been "too dumb" to stay with the pod of experienced adult grey whales migrating at the time. If that was the case, both should have been "pulled" from the grey whale population before becoming breeders in order to reduce the chance of the "dumb" gene being perpetuated. I realize that the option of inaction would not have been accepted by the public after the global TV exposure on the plight of these two whales; their discovery foreclosed that possibility.

Whether this publicized "rescue attempt" was wise or not is arguable, but a more extreme argument in favor of nonintervention arises when federal law actually prohibits keeping a migratory bird in one's possession. Under the Migratory Bird Treaty that the United States has with Canada and Mexico, all such birds are protected. This means that unless a person is licensed by both the state and the federal government, they cannot legally pick up a migrating warbler that has stunned itself by flying into a picture window. Picture windows are common hazards for many migrating birds, and often the stunned birds recover by themselves and fly off before being found by the family cat. Even those birds that are killed by hitting a window are technically untouchable, but salvaging dead specimens for science generally will not get you into trouble.

Natural history museums welcome the donation of such specimens, if they are fresh (you can determine this by the eyes being still full). One need only pick up the carcass, seal it in a zip lock plastic bag or wrap it in aluminum foil, record on paper the date, where it was found and your name, put it in the freezer, and when convenient, drop the specimen at the museum. As its discoverer, you will be immortalized when and if it goes into the museum's study collection by having your name recorded as "collector," along with other relevant data, on the tag attached to the specimen's leg.



All zoo animals live in sharp contrast to their wild counterparts. Any illness, wound or other trauma is promptly treated by a veterinarian. Their appearance, too, reflects this care, and well-fed specimens in shiny coats or glossy plumage are the norm. Clearly there are trade offs for both the zoo animals and the people who come to see them. Some visitors feel that zoo animals have "paid" for their good physical health by "giving up their freedom." I feel that this is not a valid argument for no animal, whether in the wild, in a zoo, or even a domestic pet, can ever be "free" as humans understand the term. To be free implies a choice of conditions even if one cannot exercise such a choice. An animal has no such option, but must survive as best it can in the circumstances in which it finds itself.

The visitors' trade off is that they are not seeing the animals under "natural" conditions; relatively few humans ever will unless they live or visit those places where the animals live. The zoo visitor, however, can observe creatures that it would otherwise be impractical or impossible to see in their natural habitats.

Zoos are not perfect environments, yet as a result of the dedicated research and devotion of zoo staffs, the animals on exhibit are responding ever more favorably to the attention given to their physical and emotional well being. By taking better care of zoo animals, we gain understanding of animal behavior and reproductive physiology. This knowledge in turn improves zoos and makes for greater citizen comprehension of the living world of which we are an integral part.

I leave you this month with a pleasant surprise: the Zoo recently received an Environmental Graphic Design Award for its new directional signage.

The next meeting of the Zoo Council will be on Friday, November 16, 1990 at 9:00 a.m. at the Zoo. There will be dinner on Thursday evening for all members and spouses at Council member Peter Andrews' house. You will be receiving an official announcement of the coming event shortly; this note is merely to alert you.