

Zoos – for or against?

People often criticise zoos for keeping animals in unnatural conditions, where they are unhappy and exist just to attract visitors to generate profit. However, modern, well-managed zoos want to educate us about the issues like animal conservation, and to support breeding programmes all over the world. This is the story from a zoo perspective.

Chester Zoo is a conservation organisation that aims to help save endangered wildlife from extinction. It works with other organisations and people worldwide to safeguard the survival of threatened wildlife.

For example, the zoo has housed Black Rhinoceros for many years. The zoo's first Black Rhinoceros was born in 1967, and the most recent, Manyara, was born in 1998. In 1994 Chester Zoo began supporting the 'Save the Rhino' campaign, by making a three-year commitment to fund the costs of game guard protection in Garamba, Democratic Republic of the Congo. In 1999 the zoo gave a large amount of money to Kenya Wildlife Service so that twenty Black Rhinoceros could be transported to a safe wildlife reserve. The Black Rhinoceros is just one of many species that the zoo is working hard to save from extinction. The estimated number of Black Rhinoceros left in the wild is just 2700. They are still being hunted today.

As well as their conservation efforts, the zoo carries out research to improve our understanding of animal behaviour. If we understand the animals better, we can provide them with housing that meets their needs and lets them to breed successfully. The long-term goal of conservation is to encourage wild populations in their natural habitats. Planned breeding programmes provide a buffer in case animal numbers continue to drop in the wild. If this does happen, then the wild breeding populations lose their genetic diversity. This means that the population becomes too genetically similar, and they are less able to survive disease and changes in their environment. If this happened, animals from breeding programmes would be able to increase the genetic diversity.

Education is also a very important part of the zoo's work. Visitors are given information that explains why conservation is so important. The zoo tries to change people's attitudes and behaviour to support positive change worldwide. Visitors to the zoo leave with a clear impression of how their actions can affect endangered species across the world. For example, visitors are encouraged to check the 'green' credentials of any tour company they may use before booking a holiday to islands with endangered species, such as the Komodo Dragon on Komodo Island, Indonesia, and the Green Sea Turtle, whose shell is hunted to be a tourist souvenir.

There are two sides to every story. Because science touches our daily lives in very many ways, science at school aims to equip you with the skills to analyse arguments on both sides of an issue, and make up your own mind. So, zoos – for or against?