

THE DANISH WAY

A reflective look at breeding and euthanasia in the modern zoo

In 2014 a giraffe was euthanized in Copenhagen Zoo. While standard procedure in Denmark, an international outcry and a zoo ethics and animal welfare debate followed. Several more cases, including lions in Odense Zoo and brown bears in Aalborg Zoo have caused similar uproar abroad. The debate on whether or not to use euthanasia for population management purposes is one of the most important discussions regarding the modern zoo, and while cultural gaps make it difficult, this paper is meant as a perspective on the discussion as seen from the eyes of a Danish zookeeper.



LIONS FEEDING ON GIRAFFE IN COPENHAGEN ZOO
(PHOTO: FRANK RØNSHOLT)

Marius the giraffe was a young male (two years old) living in Copenhagen Zoo. He had been rejected from the group by the resident bull and was now living alone. The breeding coordinator in charge of the giraffe EEP could find no home for him, and his genes were deemed not valuable. He was euthanized quickly and humanely, and visitors to the zoo were allowed to view the subsequent dissection at an educational presentation with the zoo's veterinarian staff. After the presentation pieces of the meat were fed to the carnivores living in the zoo.



LIONS EATING A ZEBRA IN ODENSE ZOO
(PHOTO: SIGNE ANDERSEN)

What happened to the giraffe known as Marius was nothing new or out of the ordinary. Zoos in Denmark have been performing educational dissections and been managing their animal populations in this way for decades. The policy of breeding and euthanasia is a common and openly accepted practice in Scandinavian zoos and occurs frequently with all kinds of animals. In the last couple of years species used for educational dissections have included giraffes, lions, antelopes, bears, camels, penguins, sharks, snakes and more. The most important arguments in favor of this practice are:

- **Lifespan:** The Nordic animal welfare perspective focuses on quality over quantity, and the lifespan of an animal cannot be used as an indicator of welfare. Simply because an animal has lived a long life does not mean that it has lived a good life. A high-quality life of two years is preferable to a sub-standard quality life of twenty years. A quick and humane euthanasia is considered a viable option, if a high-quality life cannot be ensured.
- **Contraception:** Contraception in exotic animals is poorly tested and not fully understood. Unwanted and often seen side effects include hormonal disturbances, physical ailments (such as weight gain) and reduced fertility later on. The research done on contraceptives in animals is very limited. Even in humans, contraceptives can come with unwanted side effects, but with animals, unlike humans, we don't have any way of communicating these and adjusting accordingly. For some animal species

putting them on contraceptives or even simply keeping them from breeding for a number of years, can halt their reproductive system in such a way that they cannot ever breed again. For animals with small founder populations (such as the Visayan warty pig), removing individuals from the breeding program because their offspring cannot be housed at the moment can have serious consequences for the conservation efforts of the entire species.

- **Enrichment:** Another reason for population management by euthanasia is that euthanasia, however ironic it may sound, also leads to higher individual welfare. Breeding behavior is one of the most important aspects of an animal's life and denying them this rules out one of the best environmental enrichment options we can provide for them. There is no enrichment devised by keepers that can compare to the 24/7-hour job of raising offspring. No tire swings, kongs or puzzle feeders can emulate constant stimulus given to an individual or social grouping of animals when there are young ones in the group. After an eventual euthanasia even in death the animals provide enrichment when used in feedings for carnivores as new taste and texture sensations.
- **Education:** Dissections of animals such as frogs and rats are common practice in many schools around the world, as important tools to teach biology and anatomy. In a zoo setting these lessons can be given to a wide audience, showing the anatomy in context to the living animals at the zoo. Animals can be dissected individually or even next to each other to create a theme, such as in the case where a lion and sable antelope were used as examples of carnivore and herbivore anatomy.

One of the core philosophies behind this breed and euthanasia policy is that all animals on an ethical level have the same intrinsic worth. It is striking how certain animals, such as tigers, giraffes, bears and lions, cause international outcry when euthanized and used for educational purposes, while nothing is said regarding the



TAPIR BEING USED FOR AN EDUCATIONAL PRESENTATION IN ODENSE ZOO
(PHOTO: KÅRE JENSEN)

dissections and feedings using boas, emus, camels and pigs. If we want true and meaningful conservation we must educate our visitors on how habitats and environments work and how they require a whole range of biodiversity to stay healthy. If we only teach our guests to care for the cute and cuddly ones we represent a false and distorted image of how the natural world works. While there is nothing wrong with using flagship species to garner attention, we must ensure that conservation efforts center around whole environments including the non-cuddly and cute animals that live in them.

The main goal of these policies is to promote a healthy view of nature in our guests, in which life and death both play their part. The survival of biodiversity long term is the goal, and the preservation of individual animals should not take precedence over this. If we are not careful in avoiding showing a “Disneyfied” version of nature, where all animals live forever and none of them eat each other, we are failing as educational institutions.

It is also important that we remain honest and scientific. While some zoos may claim that they would never euthanize a healthy animal, it happens at every institution working with live animals. Even if a zoo never euthanizes animals from its collection, it purchases meat products for the carnivores to eat, all made from healthy animals euthanized in their youth. Modern agriculture, even that which produces plants, kills millions of animals a day. The natural world is a game of eat and be eaten and if our zoos try to hide certain aspects of our daily operations it may lead to public distrust in the zoo as a scientific establishment and further anti-zoo sentiment.

The zookeepers in Denmark are proud to take part in this practice of animal population management and feel like they are doing important conservation work while providing the best possible care. It is important to them to be a part of the animals' welfare from start to finish and to take responsibility for them at the end as well as the beginning. It also means a lot to the keepers that their animals not go to waste but rather are useful in feedings, education or scientific research.

This paper is meant to build a bridge between opposing viewpoints. There are many who have accused the Danish zoos of starting controversy simply for attention. Having read this I hope you will know that we do what we do because we believe it is the right thing, for educational, practical, environmental and ethical reasons. While our methods of population management may differ, our goals are the same, and come from the same fascination of the natural world.



GIRAFFE BEING PREPARED BY ZOOKEEPER AS FOOD FOR CARNIVORES IN REE PARK SAFARI (PHOTO: RENÉ RYHOLL)



LIONS FEEDING ON A ZEBRA IN COPENHAGEN ZOO (PHOTO: FRANK RØNSHOLT)