Good And Bad Sides Of The Zoo System: Opinion Essay

One of my favorite places to go as a child was the zoo; whether it be class field trips or a Saturday afternoon with my family. I loved seeing the animals and learning about their habitats. More recently, zoos have been the subject of massive controversy over their very existence. Zoos are being questioned about their purpose to the public and whether the animal's best interests are in mind. This stirred a moral dilemma in me, as I could not make up my mind over whether zoos were beneficial to animals or not, thus prompting me to do further research. Are zoos good or bad? What do people say about zoos? If they are good, what are the major issues? If they are bad, how should we fix them? These questions led me to multiple sources, which I will summarize and analyze as I try to answer the questions I have posed.

The first source called "Are Zoos Bad News?" gives a great overview of the heated debate between zoo officials and animal rights activists. The author tackles the animal rights activists' perspective first by opening with a tiger attack at the San Francisco Zoo. The author writes that the zoo "shot and killed the animal, but the damage had already been done" ("Are Zoos Bad News?"). Figuratively, this is a great word choice because the damage started the backlash from animal rights activists, specifically the treatment of animals in zoos. It does show a slight bias towards the con-side of zoos, as opening an article with a tragedy at a zoo sheds more light on why they should not exist. However, the article does bring up the views of zoo officials and cites, "'A National Science Foundation Study showed that people who visit zoos actually change their behavior towards animals'" ("Are Zoos Bad News?"). The author's choice of scientific fact shows the pro-zoo side does know what they are talking about and emphasizes that zoos foster an animal-human connection. This source was created to challenge the reader to choose which side they agree with and why, but it clearly highlights the key differences between the pro-zoo and anti-zoo debate.

This source does not offer an obvious opinion, as it asks the audience directly "Are zoos bad for wild animals?" which is similar to the question I am trying to answer ("Are Zoos Bad News?"). Much of the reaction to this source was helping me understand the debate more thoroughly and it gave a clear idea of what it was all about. This source highlighted what to look for throughout my research and allowed me to start developing an answer to my question.

On the zoo perspective, the article "The Last Menageries" by author Greg Miller discusses progressive zoos. At the start, Miller gave some background on zoo history to contrast with current times. Miller notes, "zoos were little more than spectacles that symbolized the might of nations or their rulers" but now, zoos "portray themselves as modern versions of Noah's ark, rounding up endangered species...until they could be reintroduced to their native habitat." Miller's use of logos with having that historical commentary benefits Miller's larger argument that zoos need to continually change to fit the public appeal. Zoos are realizing their need to "justify their existence" to counter the animal rights activist groups and one way they are doing this is reinventing the conservation efforts (Miller). The Congo Gorilla Forest exhibit at the Bronx Zoo allows "Visitors [to] pay a $3 supplement and then choose which of four conservation projects they'd like their money to go to" (Miller). Miller uses this ethical approach that if the Bronx Zoo can do this, other zoos should follow in their footsteps.

Miller mentions that zoos are helping endangered animals in more ways than we realize. Miller brought up that “Zoos do have one advantage over other [organisations] when it comes to field conservation: their expertise with wild animals.” Miller goes on to explain that the veterinarians at zoos learn how to care for these animals and can conduct studies on them, which is a lot easier than trying to accomplish the same tasks on free-range wildlife. Zoos can discover more about wild animals in a controlled habitat instead of trying to track them down and potentially traumatize them by capturing or anesthetizing them for research purposes. Most importantly, Miller defines what a zoo should be doing, which is to help the patron realize the complexity of nature and how they can improve the environment for the sake of animals.

This article helped to answer my question because it gave concrete evidence over the general scope of zoos. I specifically liked the Bronx Zoo exhibit example, as it targets the idea that zoos offer an animal-human connection. There is more of an obligation to donate to the conservation efforts if the audience can see the animal that is being affected. I know this from a personal standpoint, as I donated to the San Diego Zoo’s Wildlife Conservation effort by purchasing a panda stuffed animal after seeing the pandas at the zoo. Zoos are making an effort to change their reputation, which is more reassuring, and they are coming up with valid conservation methods to back up their conservation claims.

The other pro-zoo article was “The Future of Zoos” by author Justin Worland. This article is helpful towards the zoo debate, as it talks about zoos that have made adaptations to make the lives of animals in captivity easier. Worland talks about how “zoos are finding that balancing the demands of entertainment, education and conservation is increasingly difficult” because of the outrage from animal rights activists, especially with new studies regarding animal emotion. Logically, he contrasts this with zoos that have made successful efforts in making animals in captivity more comfortable. Worland uses Philadelphia Zoo’s progressive Zoo360 program as an example, where animals have trails to follow around the whole park. Not only will the animals have more space, but the article says, “officials hope Zoo360 will provide those moments of connection…‘That moment in a zoo, when a person sees a gorilla look them back in the eye, helps them grasp their role in a greater natural world’” (Worland). Because of these animal-human connections, the public’s interest is still high, suggesting society getting rid of zoos would be very unlikely to happen as “zoos have experienced record attendance” (Worland).

The article furthermore addresses another major criticism by animal rights activists: zoos do not do enough for conservation. Worland provides evidence to prove that wrong, writing, “they advance conservation work by educating patrons and pushing them to donate to the cause. Other zoos tell their visitors to act on climate change to protect animal habitats across the globe.” This idea boils down to “broadening” conservation, which gives zoos more opportunities to make an even bigger change in the world by tackling larger events that impact animal environments. This benefits his claim that zoos are working towards conservation in new ways.

Overall, the article proved to be helpful by addressing that zoos are trying to make a change, so we should do our part to let them. It gave insight on new exhibits being made and the new conservation efforts, similar to Miller’s article. I have personally noticed many zoos have social media pages, like the Franklin Park Zoo in Massachusetts, where they bring in bigger problems in the environment, such as the recent palm oil plantation crisis that affects animals. Zoos are trying to reach people in a variety of ways, but are not receiving recognition.

Regarding the animal rights activist's opinion on zoos, the viewpoint essay titled "Zoos Are Cruel and Unnecessary" by Liz Tyson is an excerpted commentary off on an interview that provides scathing criticism on the zoo system. When asked if zoos are necessary to educate, Tyson responds, "Not at all..there is a wealth of information out there which someone who is interested in learning about wildlife can access at the touch of a button." Although we can indeed find out anything on the internet, getting rid of zoos means that society would not get any face value with the animals they are learning about, thus making them less likely to support any conservation efforts. Tyson argues that "zoos show animals out of context" and zoos fail to show children "the urgency of the need for habitat conservation...or the ways in which that child could aid the conservation." However, it should be noted that children are not the only humans in attendance at zoos. A six-year-old child is not going to grasp habitat conservation, but at least zoos are introducing the animals to them and giving them a good memory so when they come back as adults, they can understand more about why the animals were there. Lastly, the article argues that "Subjecting an animal to a lifetime of captivity, whether to inspire passion for conservation or to entertain are two sides of the same coin" (Tyson). Tyson is suggesting that zoos are not genuine in their motives and are only trying to entertain at the expense of animals' lives, something she believes is unacceptable.

The first thing I want to note about this source is that because it is excerpted, it caused a lot of confusion. Not having the counterclaims the original source had made Tyson's argument less effective and made the piece seem overly opinionated. That being said, I still found myself generally disagreeing with this article because the author had a dismissive tone as if she viewed people who liked zoos to be lesser than her, which seemed to lower her credibility in my eyes. Generally, everything Tyson said could be disproved by the other sources I have read on animals in zoos. In regards to her statements that zoos are just trying to entertain, I can agree when it comes to animal shows that zoos are not genuine, but the overall showing off animals to the public is necessary entertainment, thus unhelpful in proving her point. Entertainment is how you inspire and create passion, which I know, as I am a theatre major, film minor. Had I not been entertained by the movies I loved and the plays I attended, there would be no opportunity for inspiration. Very few wake up and say they want to be a veterinarian or a researcher on exotic animals without seeing an animal in a zoo or working with animals firsthand. Getting rid of zoos altogether purely because of the entertainment aspect would be highly controversial and would hurt the wildlife conservation efforts, as fewer people would be interested in the field.

Adding on to the animal rights side, the article "Animals are Persons, Too" by Maureen Mitra goes in-depth into the inner-workings of the activists behind the Nonhuman Rights Project (NHrP). They are pushing to consider chimpanzees as "persons," meaning their interests and well-being would be protected by U.S. law, thus making it illegal for anyone to own or keep them as property. She gives zoos a negative connotation from the start, criticizing a zoo for housing a Hollywood star chimpanzee without giving it enough space, and then launches into the NHrP case for chimpanzees and other exotic animals. However, the four chimpanzees they are defending in the case are either private pets owned by humans or being used for research (Mitra). None of these animals are owned by zoos or have been negatively affected by zoos, so why paint zoos in a nasty light? Mitra highlights other issues with animal personhood, like the worry of "animal personhood [leading] to the demise of animal research, ranching, and perhaps pet ownership," but acknowledges that people generally believe the NhRP to be beneficial because it is bringing animal rights to the forefront. The article brings up the point that some people believe "animals have social and emotional lives and deserve to be free" (Mitra). While animals do have feelings similar to human emotions, and there is a whole range of studies on

that, zoos are necessary for endangered species. No matter how much an animal wishes to be free, if the species is endangered, it needs to be monitored and presented to the public, especially in cases where the animal is close to extinction. Having an endangered animal housed in a zoo can help create sympathy in the public. Mitra presents other strategies to help the movement, like public opinion and considering animals “living property,” but they all benefit her claim that humans have a moral responsibility to animals. Because we know what they need, we should be providing for them in the wild instead of hindering them in a zoo.

I found that I generally disagreed with this article because of weak evidentiary support. The claims and evidence Mitra used clashed, and a lot of the animal rights movement points she cited had nothing to do with zoos. Mitra bringing up her zoo experience at the beginning of the story clashes with the evidence she provided in the lawsuit. The lawsuit wants animals’ interests protected, which is understandable in the case of animal abuse and private ownership of exotic animals, as the case is trying to do, but zoos with state-of-the-art habitats are not causing these issues. Another example of weak evidence that Mitra used was her citing Lori Marino, the NhRP science director, who said “‘None of them [veterinary schools], I think, now use live animals.’” Mitra’s choice in quote was not strong, as her source used the words “I think”, which is not the most convincing of arguments, nor does it help her establish credibility. I know for a fact that veterinary programs do still use live animals, as Franklin Park Zoo, among others, partners with One Health to invite students training in the medical field to participate in their vet program. They get to practice on live animals in a safe environment and get hands-on experience to apply to the human medical field, which directly contradicts Marino’s statement. The article was not as beneficial as I would have hoped it would be, but it did provide a clear stance on the zoo debate.

Throughout my research, I have learned both the good and bad sides of the zoo system. Zoos do try to educate the public through conservation and providing close encounters with the animals. Zoos do their very best to keep the animals safe and stimulated in natural-like habitats. However, they are not doing enough, as many articles concluded. They need to make bigger exhibits and house fewer animals, regardless of public opinion. Animal welfare should be the forefront of zoos, who’s main purpose besides educating the public is to help endangered wildlife. Critics of zoos do not seem to be changing their opinion any time soon, so zoos will continue to get bad publicity until they start adding more emphasis on the changes they are making and the accreditation process they go through. Are zoos good or bad? I think it is somewhere in the healthy middle. They are not perfect, but they are needed and are trying to make sure they benefit the animals just as much as humans