

On communicating critical issues of population management in zoos to the public



Über die Vermittlung kritischer Inhalte des Populationsmanagements von Zoos an die Öffentlichkeit

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Abstract

For many years critical issues of zoo biology and breeding management were not fully communicated by zoos, nor were they realized or questioned by the general public. This has changed within the last few decades, leading to an increase in the transparency and credibility of zoos. I conducted qualitative research on how zoos communicate critical issues to the public by using semi-structured expert interviews, focusing on the issues of euthanasia, contraception and 'carcass-feeding'. The results draw a preliminary picture of how critical issues are currently communicated in European zoos, with a focus on Germany. Zoos can be divided into three groups: (1) those who communicate critical issues directly by displaying them to the public, (2) those who prefer a more indirect way of explaining these issues, and (3) those who neglect to communicate any critical issues. A list of methods used, as well as arguments for and against communication, was extracted out of the responses of the survey group. Furthermore, a first draft for Critical Issue Management (CIM) for zoos was developed and described, using the study results as well as recommendations for crisis communication. There is a great need to conduct further research about how communication from zoos is received by visitors and the general public. Nevertheless, the results suggest that zoos need to find a basic international agreement on how to communicate critical issues as part of a multi-institutional CIM, and to establish regional communication guidelines for critical issues.

Keywords: Zoo; Critical issues; Communication; Population management; Euthanasia

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Introduction

Zoos and their methods of keeping animals are often point of differences in public discussions, leading to strong controversies between zoo enthusiasts and anti-zoo groups. Although common misconceptions about zoos do exist (Bertram, 2004), there are indeed other issues about zoos which can be critically scrutinized and discussed within society (Rees, 2011). For many years management practices of captive breeding and other issues such as animal transportation and medication were not communicated by zoos or questioned by the general public (Lindburg, 1991; Revers, 2003). Nowadays with increasing ecological awareness and globalisation, these topics have gained in importance, not least driven by broad anti-zoo campaigns and sensationalism in social media (Wrzesinski, 2013; Steinke, 2014a). In this way public attention has been drawn to critical issues of zoo management.

These critical issues are often of a controversial nature (Martys, 2003) and, due to biological/veterinarian, legal or ethical aspects, valued very differently by the public. They cannot necessarily be deduced by an inexperienced visitor without background knowledge. In case of captive breeding management important critical issues include euthanasia and the regulation of reproduction physiology known as contraception (commonly hormonal). Carter and Kagan (2013) point out that dealing with surplus animals is the “most sensitive public relation issue” zoos have to face in modern times. They state that, for most people without professional backgrounds, these topics seem to be incongruent to the ideals that zoos represent. Certainly there are more critical issues zoos faces. Some zoos provide food to carnivores in a more natural way, by using bodies or body parts of other, euthanized zoo animals. So-called ‘full body feeding’ or ‘carcass feeding’ is a sensitive topic that is often met with incomprehension (Hancocks, 1980), even though it affects animal welfare positively (McPhee, 2002; Bashaw, Bloomsmith, Marr, & Maple, 2003; Depauw et al., 2012). Due to negative feedback several zoos have stopped this form of feeding in view of visitors (Rees, 2011).

Communicating these issues to zoo visitors and the general public has the potential to create strong ethical debates. Nevertheless, some zoo-professionals see it as their duty to bring critical issues to the public (Revers, 2003; Stauffacher, 2003). Referring to the World Zoo and Aquarium Conservation Strategy, founded in 1993, Rübel (2003, p. 25) claimed during a regional meeting of the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums (WAZA), that zoos should promote a nature-centred view, while taking into account the anthropocentric view of visitors. At a glance differences between articles in the media and the public announcements of zoos suggest strong differences in perception of the methods used by zoos (Kaufman, 2012; Hunn, 2014).

Up till now only a few scientific studies have been undertaken to focus on how the communication of critical issues in zoos works. Therefore the present study aims to answer the following questions, with a focus on the issues euthanasia, contraception, and carcass-feeding.

- How, and for what purpose do zoos currently communicate critical issues to the public?
- Are there any differences or similarities between current approaches on the communication of critical issues?

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