



Ideal animals and animal traits for zoos: General public perspectives



Neil Carr

Department of Tourism, University of Otago, 4th Floor, Commerce Building, P.O Box 56, Dunedin, New Zealand

HIGHLIGHTS

- For the public, 'endangered' is the most important trait for zoo animals.
- The public most wish to see large mammals.

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the ideal traits of zoo animals from the perspective of the general public and the types of animals they would most like to see. It is based on the recognition of the importance of this population to the continued health of zoos and the relative dearth of studies of their desires and behaviour. The paper is based on the results of a survey distributed to a convenience sample of the general public on the island of Jersey, UK in 2013. The results demonstrate that there are a variety of desirable traits including whether animals are endangered, active, and display intelligence. Regarding the animals the general public most wish to see, large mammals tend to dominate. The results have the potential to influence the future make-up of the animal population of a zoo but also have implications for the conservation and educational programmes zoos provide for visitors.

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1. Introduction

This paper provides an assessment the general public's perception of desirable traits amongst animals in zoos and which animals they most wish to see. The need for the paper is based on the recognition that zoos are highly dependent on the income they generate through paying visitors for their economic sustainability (Dibb, 1995). In turn, it is recognised that animals are the central, though not necessarily the sole,¹ thing that attracts the general public to zoos (Moss & Esson, 2010; Taplin, 2012). This means understanding which animals and characteristics of animals are most attractive to potential visitors should be of central importance to zoos. However, relatively little research has been undertaken on this topic to date and that which exists has produced varied findings that mean the popularity of different animals in zoos is currently unclear (Moss & Esson, 2010).

The paper is situated within the recognition that not all animals

are equally appealing to people. Indeed, referring to general animal conservation, Small (2011: 232) pointed out that "the public, politicians, scientists, the media and conservation organisations are extremely sympathetic to a select number of well-known and admired species, variously called flagship, charismatic, iconic, emblematic, marquee and poster species. These are extremely attractive, large, entertaining."

The importance and significance of this paper is highlighted by the scale of zoos as entities and visitor attractions around the world. Today, zoos can be found all over the globe and range from small scale entities to globally renowned ones such as London Zoo. While not all the zoos around the world are members, an estimate of the number of zoos is provided by the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums which consists of over 1200 institutions. The number of people who visit the zoos of the world each year is difficult to estimate but has been put at anywhere between over 600 million (Holtorf, 2008) and more than 700 million (Therkelsen & Lottrup, 2015). However, the value of this paper extends beyond mere numbers. Instead, if it is recognised, as claimed in the literature (e.g., Falk, et al., 2007; World Association of Zoos and Aquarium, 2005) that zoos can act as a venue for the education of the general population about the importance of environmental conservation then it is important not just to provide visitors with access to

E-mail address: neil.carr@otago.ac.nz.

¹ Zoos may also provide a pleasant outdoor experience and often offer play-ground experiences for children though these are secondary attractions rather than the primary attraction at zoos.

the type of animals they wish to see for the economic wellbeing of the zoo. Rather, doing so arguably may help to entice visitors in to zoos and in doing so expose them to the learning opportunities many zoos now offer. This does not ignore the point that the ability of zoos to act as an effective learning environment is a matter of ongoing debate or that there may be costs involved to the animals housed in zoos (Carr & Cohen, 2011).

While the term 'zoo' is employed throughout this article it is important to recognise that not all places that house live 'wild' animals and display them to the public are called zoos. Rather, they incorporate places referred to or self-identified as wildlife parks, safari parks, menageries, and zoological gardens, amongst other terms. The results of the research presented in this paper have implications for all of these places. Whilst zoos can and often do include aquatic animals it is arguable that aquaria that are dedicated solely to aquatic animals are separate from zoos. However, the results presented in this paper may still have implications for aquaria.

For the purpose of this paper the term 'box-office' is employed to define the most desirable zoo animals in the eyes of the public. This decision is made purely based on the notion that one term is needed rather than any assumption that one term is better than the others. Despite this, it is recognised that in choosing the term 'box-office' a clear link has been drawn between animals that fit this term and the entertainment industry through the use of a term that is so closely associated with the popular film entertainment industry.

2. The evolution of the zoo

The value of this paper exists not just in understanding which animals and animal characteristics find attractive but also how this perception sits in relation to the roles and realities of zoos and their management. In this context it is important to discuss the evolution of zoos. The first zoos to exist were more accurately defined as private menageries. The existence of these can be dated back approximately 4500 years (Benbow, 2004; Tribe, 2004). They were created to entertain humans and allow the owners to display their wealth and power (Bekoff, 2007; Carr & Cohen, 2011; Rabb, 2004). It is from this beginning that we see the emergence of public zoos as a distinct entity during the late 18th and early 19th century (Jamieson, 1985; Tribe, 2004; Turley, 1998). These were, like their menagerie forefathers, primarily concerned with the entertaining of human visitors. As such, the animals in these zoos were objects that were the source of this entertainment.

Today, a shift in social values related to a recognition of the rights and welfare of animals has seen zoos have to redefine themselves as something other than a site of human entertainment at the expense of the animals they house. Instead, many zoos now highlight their role in conservation and the education of the general public about the importance and value of conserving not only animals but also their natural habitat (Ballantyne, Packer, Hughes, & Dierking, 2007; Reade & Waran, 1996; Serrell, 1981; Smith & Broad, 2008). In addition, many zoos stress the important role they can and do play in research into animals (Jamieson, 1985; World Association of Zoos and Aquariums, 2005).

Although zoos may have shifted, or at least attempted to have been seen to move away from the use of animals to entertain visitors that predominated within zoos in the past, the reality remains today that the vast majority of zoos are economically dependent on people who pay to visit zoos during their leisure time (Dibb, 1995; Hallman & Benbow, 2006). Indeed, Turley (1998: 341) notes that "zoos cannot perform their more socially acceptable functions without satisfying the needs and requirements of day visitors, who by definition are on a recreational excursion." Such a view echoes

the thoughts of Gerald Durrell (1976: 20) who when talking about his own zoo, now called Durrell Wildlife Park, stated:

Ideally, it would be a scientific research and breeding station, not open to the public, but I knew this to be impossible. We needed the visitors to provide us not only with the running expenses, but also the cash to repay the loan and the interest [used to start the Park]. The zoo, therefore, would have to be sited either within easy reach of a large population, or else in a place that had a large influx of holidaymakers.

This view links with the point that despite a rising tide of public awareness of the rights of animals and the importance of their welfare, most visitors to zoos still see these places as sites of leisure experiences in which they wish to be entertained (Clayton, Fraser, & Saunders, 2009; Hyson, 2004; Lee, 2015; Pekarik, 2004; Ross & Gillespie, 2009; Therkelsen & Lottrup, 2015) In particular, they wish to be entertained by the animals they go to the zoos to see (Ryan & Seward, 2004). The recognition that zoos are dependent on leisured visitors illuminates the point that they are embedded within the consumer economy of liberal capitalism and in order to remain economically viable must listen to both their current customers and the potential customers that are represented by the general public regarding what they want from zoos as a leisure experience (Tomas, Crompton, & Scott, 2003).

3. Zoos and animal attractiveness

One of the earliest studies of the attractiveness of animals to zoo visitors was undertaken by Bitgood, Patterson, and Benefield (1988) although they measured 'attractiveness' indirectly by identifying the amount of time visitors spend viewing different types of animal rather than directly by asking visitors and/or the general public about which animals and/or animal characteristics they find attractive. Indeed, Bitgood, et al. may be said to have been more interested in zoo visitor behaviour than animal attractiveness per say. They identified size, activity levels, and proximity to visitors as important features when defining the attractiveness of an animal in a zoo. Margulis, Hoyos, and Anderson (2003) and Puan and Zakaria (2007) have also reported that zoo visitors have a preference for active animals. Similarly, Mitchell et al. (1992), whose work actually focuses on the influence of zoo visitors on animal behaviour, have suggested that active primates are more attractive to visitors than their less active counterparts.

Based on their work on zoos in America Bitgood et al. (1988: 475) reported that "Some animal characteristics that have been assumed to influence visitor behavior include ... novelty (e.g., giant panda, koala), and tendency of the animal to interact with the visitor." Ward, Mosberger, Kistler, and Fischer (1998), in another study of zoo visitor behaviour, also reported, that there was a positive relation between animal size and popularity. However, Balmford, Mace, and Leader-Williams (1996), who also measured attractiveness based on visitor behaviour in a zoo, in this case the number of people at an enclosure over a given period of time, suggested the popularity of animals was not related to their size. In comparison, Moss and Esson (2010: 715), whose study was based in Chester zoo in the Northwest of England, reported that "visitors were far more interested in mammals than any other group—although body size (length), increasing animal activity and whether the species was the primary or "flagship" species in an exhibit or not, were all found to have a significant bearing on visitor interest."

Unlike the studies of zoo animal attractiveness noted above, Sommer (2008) directly asked people about the nature of animals that they find attractive and wish to see in zoos. Sommer's study

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