Welcome

Jack O. Walther, DVM
AVMA President-Elect

Good morning. It is my pleasure to welcome you to the thirteenth annual Animal Welfare Forum on behalf of the more than 68,000 members of the American Veterinary Medical Association. The Animal Welfare Forum is held each year as the highlight of Animal Welfare Week, which is a public awareness program designed to promote the welfare of animals. For more than a decade, the Forum has served as a useful platform for highlighting and exploring important animal welfare concerns affecting a variety of species. This year the AVMA is pleased to present “The Welfare of Zoo Animals” in partnership with the American Association of Zoo Veterinarians.

Today’s speakers will take us on a guided tour of the world of zoo animal welfare. We’ll explore whether zoos are arks or archaic, why monkeys can’t run in the monkey house, how an entire zoo collection can be managed to maximize individual welfare, why it is necessary to accredit zoos and aquariums, the realities of modern wildlife conservation, and whether animals maintained humanely can serve as ambassadors for those in the wild.

Attempting to touch on all the welfare issues affecting zoo animals during a one-day Forum is incredibly ambitious. Although we don’t pretend to have all the answers, the AVMA’s Animal Welfare Committee has assembled an excellent panel of speakers to provide all of us with scientifically based information that we can use to understand and improve the welfare of zoo animals.

Our goal for this Forum, as it has been for all previous Forums, is to promote the well-being of animals. The AVMA is proud of the vital role veterinarians have played in advancing the welfare of animals in captivity.

In defense of zoos and aquariums: the ethical basis for keeping wild animals in captivity

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American’s zoos and aquariums have been the focus of recent criticism by some animal rights and welfare advocates and in print and electronic media. Critics have characterized zoos and aquariums as animal prisons or, even worse, as exploiters and traffickers of wildlife. These accusations have fueled growing public and governmental concern about the welfare of zoo and aquarium animals and the appropriate use of these animals by public institutions.

Critics often generalize their claims to include all zoologic facilities, regardless of their quality or accomplishments. It is important to understand that there are 2 different kinds of wildlife facilities in the United States: those that are accredited by the American Zoo and Aquarium Association (AZA) and those that are not. The AZA is the only zoo and aquarium association in the world with an effective accreditation program that helps ensure quality animal care, a code of professional ethics that helps guide and regulate its members’ actions, and a dedicated conservation vision. Of the more than 2,300 animal exhibitors licensed by the USDA’s Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), fewer than 10% are qualified to be AZA members. Our comments are restricted to zoos and aquariums accredited by the AZA.

Although critics of zoos and aquariums tend to receive plenty of media attention, their generalizations about public perceptions of accredited zoologic facilities are not supported by the facts: more than 135 million people visit AZA-accredited institutions annually, more than 58,000 people volunteer more than 5 million hours annually at AZA facilities, a 1992 Roper poll identified zoos and aquariums as the third most trusted messenger on wildlife conservation and environmental issues (trailing only National Geographic and Jacques Cousteau), and reputable print and electronic media outlets produce numerous positive reports about the conservation, scientific, and educational efforts of AZA institutions. Given these often disparate perspectives, how should ethically mature, caring people view accredited zoos and aquariums today? Are accredited zoos and aquariums justifiable? If so, under what conditions are they justifiable?

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