

The Economics of Wildlife Conservation

People have long held conflicting viewpoints about the ethics of keeping animals in captivity. The American Humane Association (AHA) argues that as long as animal welfare standards are upheld, zoos and aquariums aid us in our moral duty to preserve endangered wildlife - a cause not only valuable for the earth but also the economy

By **Jennifer Khoo**





On 23rd September 2016, Ocean Park Hong Kong was awarded certification under American Humane Association's global Humane Conservation program for animal welfare. Hong Kong's home-grown marine life-themed park with a focus on education and conservation joins an elite group of only six institutions worldwide to earn the prestigious Humane Conservation seal of approval, and is the first to be certified in Asia.

American Humane Association (AHA), the first national humane organization in the United States and the world's largest certifier of animal welfare, launched the program in June as the world's first-ever certification devoted solely to verifying the humane treatment of animals living in zoos, aquariums, and conservation centers across the globe.

In its latest white paper *Arks of Hope: Ambassadors for Animals*, AHA advocates for the humane treatment of animals within these institutions, and for the value that these institutions bring - not only to animals and the planet, but to jobs and economies around the world.

Inherent value of conservation

Researchers believe the world is amid a "sixth mass extinction," this time driven by humankind and the unprecedented rate at which our ever-expanding population is consuming the planet's finite resources.

Our dominant presence on earth has been steadily encroaching upon the natural habitats and homes of animals in the wild, placing more pressure than ever on conservation efforts to sustain those animal populations being slowly edged out of existence.

Dr. Robin Ganzert, President and CEO of AHA, believes that humanity has a moral obligation to preserve wild and endangered animals for the benefit of all life on earth. But to make sure conservation efforts are sustained far into the future, educating people - especially younger generations - on the issue is key.

"People won't protect what they don't love and they can't love what they don't know," she says.

To this end, zoos and aquariums provide spaces for people to learn about and appreciate animals which we might otherwise never see in person, says Dr. Ganzert.

In addition to safely housing and sustaining critically endangered species, many reputable institutions have breeding programs which support the conservation and preservation of certain species. Alongside these commendable efforts, she says zoos and aquariums must also uphold high standards of animal welfare, and ideally be endorsed by credible third-party certification like AHA's Humane Conservation program.



Sea mammal trainers at Ocean Park

Troubling ethics of wildlife tourism

In many poorer parts of the world, the concept of animal welfare is still very much abstract. In places like India and Cambodia for example, animals are still used extensively within the tourism and entertainment industries, providing a desperately-needed source of income for many.

But within recent years, countless cases of animal cruelty and neglect have been brought to light, prompting renewed concern from the international community and denting tourist numbers to zoos and aquariums in developing countries.

Thailand's infamous Tiger Temple made headlines in June 2016, when investigators discovered forty dead

tiger cubs in the Temple's freezer during a raid, amid long-standing allegations of animal abuse at the institution.

Prior to the raid, the "animal sanctuary" was long considered a top tourist attraction in Thailand, drawing millions of visitors from around the world to sit and play with the oddly tame wild beasts, for a fee.

The scandal forced wildlife tourists everywhere to reevaluate their knowledge of what truly happens in these institutions behind closed doors.

The troubling ethics of wildlife tourism isn't just applicable to developing countries. The US is littered with "roadside zoos," many of which have suffered their fair share of bad press concerning cases of animal abuse and neglect at the hands of improperly trained and unqualified "zoo" staff.

Several undercover investigations at such attractions



Park conservationists in action



Onlookers watch a feeding session at Ocean Park

have revealed ghastly treatment of animals exploited for lucrative photographic opportunities, including overhandling and food deprivation.

The solution: Raising awareness

From AHA's standpoint, the solution isn't necessarily to shut down these poorly-managed attractions but to help them improve, by transforming them into humanely-run, safe havens for animals, for the purposes of conservation and public education.

No doubt proper resources are required to make this aspiration a reality, starting with sufficient funding, which by far remains the biggest challenge (particularly in developing countries.) Under these circumstances, simply raising awareness of the issues can be effective

on two levels.

First, it can place pressure on local governments to introduce proper legislation concerning animal welfare, and perhaps even secure funding. The goal is to convince governments that investing in wildlife conservation will bring economic benefits, among others, to countries.

Second, it can demonstrate to local communities that from a livelihood perspective, properly managed wildlife attractions can be just as profitable, if not more so, than many of the morally-questionable attractions in operation today.

Just as many modern consumers are willing to pay a premium for humanely farmed meat, many tourists – if given a choice – would happily pay more to visit animals in humanely-run institutions.

In a survey conducted by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA), the results revealed that for most visitors, learning was one of the top reasons for visiting these institutions, and animal welfare – knowing that these animals were kept in enriched environments – as well as experiential factors, contributed most greatly to their satisfaction with a visit.

This is evidence of a growing trend that visitors to zoos and aquariums value these institutions increasingly for the education and conservation benefits, rather than solely as a place for entertainment.

Economic value of conservation

The success of Ocean Park in Hong Kong is evidence of the economic benefits a wildlife attraction can bring to a city when combined with a focus on



Dr. Robin Ganzert (fourth from right) with representatives from Ocean Park Hong Kong and AHA

learning and proper conservation.

During FY2014/15, the Park recorded its third-highest ever annual attendance and second-highest ever overall revenue of nearly HK\$2 billion (US\$258 million). During that period, the Park also started construction on two new major affiliated projects: its on-site Hong Kong Ocean Park Marriott Hotel and the long-awaited seafront water park, Water World, anticipated to open in the second half of 2018.

These new initiatives will not only enhance Park visitors' experiences and strengthen Hong Kong's appeal as a tourist destination overall, but will also contribute significantly to the local economy.

Ocean Park's Chairman, Leo Kung, told local press last year, "The hotel project is expected to create approximately 3,500 employment positions during the construction phase and, upon completion, approximately 500 hospitality positions; whilst the Water World project is projected to create 2,900 jobs and add HK\$842 million to the GDP by 2018."

Ultimately, the Park remains committed to supporting conservation and education within the local community.


In 2015, the Park donated HK\$13.3 million to the Ocean Park Conservation Foundation Hong Kong (OPCFHK), during FY2014/15, and offered around 1,600 conservation education courses to over 53,000

recorded its

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local students ranging from kindergarten to senior secondary.

Since the inception of the Park's education programs in 1992, close to 800,000 students have taken part in different courses to learn about conservation.

Hopefully, AHA's certification of Ocean Park Hong Kong will set the benchmark for other zoos and aquariums in the region, serving as proof that investing in conservation isn't just the right thing to do; it can also be profitable, in every sense of the word. 

Welfare vs. Rights

Animal Welfare - Animal Welfare is a human responsibility that encompasses all aspects of animal well-being, including proper housing, management, disease prevention and treatment, responsible care, humane handling, and, when necessary, humane euthanasia. AHA are advocates of this stance.

Animal Rights - Animal Rights is a philosophical view that animals have rights similar or the same as humans. True animal rights proponents believe that humans do not have the right to use animals at all, and wish to ban all use of animals by humans.

Definition provided by the Animal Welfare Council