Ethics Essay

In this essay, I critique some of the points raised by Dita Wickins-Dražilová about the criteria used to determine the health of zoo animals, and ultimately disagree with her final conclusion about how to reform zoos. Wickins-Dražilová argues that current criteria to determine animal welfare in zoos (physical health, longevity, and reproduction) are not sufficient, and argues that we must also consider three other factors: natural and unnatural behavior, freedom and choice, and dignity. In her conclusion, she finds that these health conditions are not met and argues for a reform of zoos into closed-to-the public conservation facilities or public domestic animal sanctuaries (Wickins-Dražilová). While I do agree that these conditions can also play a role in determining the welfare of zoo animals, I believe that she does not evaluate these criteria properly and thoroughly, thus leading her to a false conclusion on the direction zoos should take in the future. In this essay, I will critique Wickins-Dražilová’s reasons behind these criteria by assessing them through a scientific lens and in comparison to the conditions the same animals would endure in their natural environment, as this is the only fair test of whether animals are worse off in zoos. Finally, I will explain my conclusion that, contrary to Wickins-Dražilová’s argument, the current zoo model is not only morally permissible, but also provides benefits to all animals that her new model of the zoo cannot.

Wickins-Dražilová presents the following argument in her essay “Zoo Animal Welfare.”

1. If zoos are morally permissible, then they must guarantee the welfare of their animals.
2. Zoos do not guarantee the welfare of their animals.
3. Therefore, zoos are not morally permissible (Wickins-Dražilová).

Premise one is clearly true. We should not condone an institution that is cruel to its charges, whether human or animal, and any zoo that does not treat its animals in accordance with strict guidelines of animal treatment is clearly in the moral wrong. However, that makes a statement on the morally wrong nature of animal mistreatment, not the moral status of zoos.

In her second premise, Wickins-Dražilová argues that animal mistreatment is an intrinsic property of zoos. She claims that the current criteria for determining zoo animal welfare, physical health, longevity, and reproduction, are not sufficient indicators. Then, she presents three other factors, natural and unnatural behavior, freedom and choice, and dignity, and finds them lacking (Wickins-Dražilová). However, I disagree with this second premise and will address all of the criteria Wickins-Dražilová uses to reach it. Since we can all likely agree that the first three factors are necessary to the welfare of animals, even if they are not sufficient, I want to focus on Wickins-Dražilová added criteria, as these are the new arguments she brings to the discussion and the ones most needing critique.

For the first condition, she argues that since zoos cannot exactly replicate an animal’s natural environment, this can lead to unnatural behavior and references “usual zoo stereotypes [of] constant licking of bars or walls and head-swaying (Wickins-Dražilová 30).” However, the problem with this objection is that these behaviors are just that, stereotypes, and not the truth found in well-managed zoo environments. Good zoos try to simulate natural, stimulus-rich environments as closely as possible so animals can live natural lives. While animals in zoos do not behave exactly the way they would in the wild, this is not to say that such behavior is “unnatural.” For instance, a zoo animal may interact with a human in a way a wild animal might not, but that is not to say that it is unnatural for the animal to do so. If wild animals were frequently in proximity with humans in a positive context, it is likely that they would naturally develop the same behaviors as their zoo counterparts. The detrimentally unnatural behaviors that concern Wickins-Dražilová arise from poor treatment or environments, which are a separate issue and cannot be used to argue against zoos as a whole.

In her second criterion, Wickins-Dražilová argues that animals in zoos do not have the freedom of movement that they have in the wild and they cannot make choices about how to live their lives because they do not have the ability to perform many actions they would in the wild, such as hunting (Wickins-Dražilová 31-32). However, I argue that while it is true that zoo animals do not have the freedom to leave their enclosures and migrate that they might enjoy in the wild, a zoo that provides proper habitat and stimulus may actually provide animals with other freedoms that they cannot enjoy in the wild. For instance, on the subject of hunting, can we say that a starving animal is exercising its freedom to hunt? I would argue that it is in fact being forced to hunt in order to survive, which prevents it from choosing other actions. In a zoo environment, an animal is never forced to hunt, and this action can still be simulated without the use of live animals if the predatory species enjoys it. Without the pressure to hunt or other pressures, such as the need to compete for mates, animals with proper environments and stimulus actually have more freedom to choose how they will spend their time, even if they do not have the freedom to leave the zoo. Thus, I argue that zoo animals actually do enjoy sufficient freedom, and a freedom they would not enjoy in the wild.

Finally, the third criterion involves zoo animals’ dignity, which Wickins-Dražilová believes is violated. While there is likely much disagreement on whether or not animals have dignity, for the sake of argument let us suppose that they do, on the same level as equally mentally capable humans in society, for even if animals have this dignity, Wickins-Dražilová’s argument still fails. In her argument, she compares zoo animals to old mental asylum practices, where “mental patients were often chained and frequently exhibited to the public for an entrance fee (Wickins-Dražilová 32-33).” I agree that this is certainly a violation of the patients’ dignity, but I disagree that this situation is comparable to zoo animals. In this instance, the patients are being treated with mockery, and they are not being given humane conditions, as evidenced by the fact that they were in chains. However, now let us change the example slightly. In this new example, let’s suppose that a doctor is observing a mental patient in good, humane institution in order to study and learn from his behavior. This hardly seems like a violation of the patient’s dignity, and can actually serve to benefit society. I find this example to be much more in line with zoo animals in well-managed facilities. One of the greatest objectives of zoos is education, and people stand to learn a lot from observing zoo animals and their behaviors. One of the most important things people learn from zoos is compassion for other species. If someone has never even seen a white rhinoceros, for instance, it is difficult for them to care about conservation efforts to preserve the species. Zoos foster a connection between us and animal species, which is a critical component to the welfare of all animals in a world that threatens their existence.

In response to my arguments, Wickins-Dražilová and others who share her views might argue, for example, against my conclusion about zoo animals’ freedom. They may argue that freedom of migration and the ability to perform actions they would in nature are much more important and crucial to animal welfare, and the other freedoms they may enjoy are additional and unnatural, and thus cannot make up for the loss of these more important, natural freedoms. However, this places too much importance on what is supposedly “natural” or “unnatural.” Simply because something happens in nature does not inherently make it preferable. In nature, animals have the freedom to abandon their young and kill one another, yet no one would argue that exercising these freedoms makes animals better off. It is a flaw in logic to give greater importance to freedoms found in nature than to those specific to a zoo environment, and these freedoms should instead be weighted on their benefits to the animals.

Thus, I conclude that all of Wickins-Dražilová’s necessary and sufficient conditions for assessing zoo animal welfare are achieved by well-managed, humane zoos, and thus they are morally permissible. Her notion that zoos should be changed into closed-to-the public conservation facilities or public domestic animal sanctuaries negates an important aspect of the current zoo model that I brought up in my critique of her final criterion. Zoos must be able to have wild animals for public display in order to educate the public about conservation efforts and foster human empathy with endangered animal species. Thus, a well-managed zoo not only promotes the welfare of its own animals, but also the welfare of all animals, which is something that cannot be accomplished by Wickins-Dražilová’s proposed changes to the nature of zoos.

# Works Cited

Wickins-Dražilová, Dita. "Zoo Animal Welfare." *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* (2006): 27-36.