

# Barren Cages, Empty Lives

Roadside Zoos in Canada



**WSPA**

World Society for the Protection of Animals



A peculiar anomaly of the late 20th Century, the roadside zoo typically bears little resemblance to the large well-funded public institutions most people think of when they hear the word “zoo”.

## The roadside zoo defined

The roadside zoo is a grossly substandard, usually amateur facility that lacks trained, experienced animal care staff, proper funding and safety practices.

Animals are confined to small, barren, often filthy cages, with next to nothing to do day in and day out.

Deficient in all respects, these cages are not typically designed with the needs of the animal in mind, but rather to enhance public-viewing and ease cleaning — though at many roadside zoos, cleaning of cages may not take place on a daily (or even a weekly) basis.

Animals in roadside zoos suffer poor welfare as a result of inadequate housing, care and diet. Deprived of opportunities to exercise their natural behaviours, most animals experience some degree of frustration and boredom. In the most severe cases, these animals become psychologically disturbed and may manifest abnormal behaviours.

## Behavioural needs not met

Like the traveling menageries of the 19th century, roadside zoos house animals in typically small, ramshackle cages and enclosures. Like beast wagons (or circus trailers) in traveling shows, enclosures in roadside zoos are generally small, poorly designed and barren. While responsible zoo managers build complex environments that — as much as is possible in a captive situation — mimic the animals’ natural habitats, roadside zoo enclosures often provide little more than a water bowl, a food bowl and a shelter box for the animal to sleep in.

Animals that, in the wild, roam for many kilometres in a single day over varied terrain, hunting or foraging for food are instead confined to small, featureless cages that fail completely to stimulate their natural behaviours. Deprived of opportunities to engage in natural activities, their lives become as empty as the wire-mesh and steel-barred prisons they are forced to inhabit.

This failure to provide for the animals' behavioural needs leads to boredom, frustration, and chronic stress resulting in a range of abnormal behaviours including lethargy (with animals sitting, lying or sleeping their lives away) and bizarre, abnormal behaviours, such as stereotypies.

## Stereotypies

Stereotypies are meaningless, repetitive movements that have no apparent goal or function. They include pacing, stationary movements such as rocking, head-tossing or air-biting, abnormal interactions with the animal's environment such as bar-biting, chewing or licking and self-mutilation. Stereotypies result from a lack of stimulation and complexity in the animal's environment.

In the WSPA report *The State of the Ark: Investigating Ontario's Zoos* (2002), independent zoo consultants Jennifer L. Long and Karen Cowan, both zoo professionals with experience working at large, professionally-run, modern zoos, cite examples of stereotypies and other behavioural problems at 14 of the 16 zoos they visited.

In a separate investigation in the same year, Long describes an Alberta zoo in which an "American black bear, both wolves and a silver fox were pacing excessively." Two years previous, veterinarian and animal behaviourist Dr. Samantha Scott visited the same zoo and observed "stereotypic behaviour in many of the animals. The most appalling example of this was a bear 'cub' that was rapidly pacing and in obvious distress in a small, unsheltered cage."

These animals are psychologically disturbed and suffering because of it.

**(top left) Injury, disease and stress may result when there is no separation between cages.**

**(top right) Lacking opportunities they would have in the wild, many animals sleep their lives away.**

**(centre) According to zoo staff, this animal had its tail bitten off by an animal in the adjacent cage.**

**(right) Inappropriate contact between zoo visitors and animals put both at risk of disease and injury.**



# The Myth of Education and Conservation

Roadside zoos usually argue that the public should overlook their deficiencies because of the contribution they make to public education and conservation. These claims don't hold up to scrutiny.

Signs at roadside zoos offer little in the way of education. Many are poorly designed, difficult to read, and inaccurate. In many cases, only the name of the animal appears and occasionally the animal's age, birthdate, date of acquisition and/or species name. Other kinds of educational programs that are found in more professional zoos are almost always absent.

Breeding efforts nearly always involve haphazard, inadvertent births of common animals that are already in a surplus situation in captivity. These unwanted offspring almost always end up in other equally bad, roadside zoos or in the pet trade. Nearly all of these animals are of unknown genetic history or are hybrids. Roadside zoos have, for example, been a major factor in the production of the estimated 10,000 hybrid tigers kept as pets in North America.

**In truth, roadside zoos serve no legitimate educational or conservation purposes.**

Signs like this do little to educate the public.



## Physical needs not met

When it comes to meeting the physical needs of their animals, roadside zoos do just as poorly. Cages are often so small they make it impossible for animals to move in a normal way or exercise. Some can barely move at all. Uncomfortable concrete or wire floors make normal movement difficult. Many zoos also fail to provide adequate shelter, shade and privacy, so animals overheat in the summer and go cold in the winter. Filthy cages and dirty water are common.

Writing about one Ontario zoo, *State of the Ark* author Long had this to say: "The environments provided for the animals are not at all suitable, even at a minimum level. They are too small, lack perching, have no hiding places for animals to remove themselves from public view, little, if any shelter, and many of them are filled with feces."

At a second Ontario zoo, Long was disturbed to find a red kangaroo being housed in a small enclosure, no more than 3 m long by 2 m deep, part of this space taken up by a metal den box. Noting that the red kangaroo can cover three to four metres between jumps and reach speeds of up to 50 km/h, Long has some harsh words of criticism: "To house an animal with these abilities in such a small enclosure is inappropriate. Normal movement for this animal would be difficult, especially maneuvering into and out of the metal den box."

In another section of the same report, Cowan describes enclosures which were in a "shabby state of repair and badly constructed." Many of the animals were found to be without appropriate shade or shelter, including, a coatimundi whose "nest box was rotted and chewed to the point of being an ineffectual cover," the spotted jaguars which were provided with no shelter whatsoever, and two wolves "housed in an enclosure with a shelter large enough for only one wolf to enter."

(top left) This kangaroo is deprived of room to properly jump in this small and featureless exhibit.

(top right) Barriers at roadside zoos often fail to keep the public at a safe distance.

(centre right) Inappropriate, hard surfaces can be damaging to animals' feet and joints.

(right) Lacking opportunities to run, swim and climb, this tiger cage is as inadequate as it is boring.





At the moment, in many areas of Canada almost anyone can acquire wild animals, nail together a few rickety cages, stick up a sign, and call themselves a zoo.

## Why is this tolerated?

In most provinces there is no requirement that zoo owners have any practical experience in zoo management or animal husbandry. Many roadside zoo operators have been known to describe their operation as a “hobby gone wild”. These playful words are revealing as many zoos collect animals the way others collect stamps or hockey cards. More and more animals are sought to feed the collectors’ hobby. The animals’ needs are only rarely considered. Many of these zoo owners run into financial problems as a result of their desire to expand their operation to include a greater number of animals.

While several Canadian provinces have passed some type of zoo legislation, few of these laws adequately address the welfare of individual animals or their psychological well-being. In some parts of Canada it is all too easy to acquire wild animals, nail together a few rickety cages and stick up a sign that says “zoo.”

Across Canada, dozens of roadside zoos operate with little or no regulation. Many do not meet the basic biological and ethological needs of their animals. Almost all pose significant health and safety problems to visitors and animals alike. Failure to enact regulations that would close down grossly substandard roadside zoos has resulted in a great deal of animal suffering and puts both animals and the public at risk.

Some municipalities have, for safety and nuisance reasons, prohibited private citizens from keeping certain types of dangerous animals (lions, tigers, venomous snakes, etc.) For the most part however, zoos are exempt from these regulations and public safety concerns remain unaddressed. Zoos are given free reign to operate regardless of the risk their activities pose to their staff and neighbours. This sad state of affairs has already resulted in numerous human injuries and animal escapes.

**(left) Few Canadian laws speak to the welfare of individual animals and none to their psychological well-being.**



## WSPA's Zoo Campaign

Since 1995, WSPA has been calling for tougher provincial legislation that would close substandard zoos and force all zoos to

operate at a higher standard. Numerous reports have been published about zoos in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Ontario, Saskatchewan and Alberta. Based on independent audits undertaken by consultant veterinarians, animal behaviourists and professional zoo keepers, these reports have documented serious, often outrageous animal welfare and public safety problems in Canadian roadside zoos. Time and time again, they encountered disturbed, unhealthy animals housed in filthy conditions in poorly constructed cages and enclosures. Social animals were housed alone. Solitary animals were housed in groups. Animals that dig burrows were being kept on concrete or wire floors. Nocturnal animals were found in bright cages with no shelter. Birds had no opportunity to fly. Running animals couldn't run. Excessive faeces and refuse were observed in cages and in public walkways. Water bowls were often dirty or empty. Food was often inappropriate and, occasionally, rotten.

Outdated, dangerous and cruel practices that would not be tolerated in more responsible, professionally run zoos are commonplace in roadside zoos. Different species of animals are housed in enclosures immediately adjacent to each other leaving them to injure each other through the barrier or to transmit disease. Many enclosures lack stand-off barriers to safeguard the public from the animals and animals from the public. This puts both at risk of injury and disease. Public feeding, now banned at most professional zoos is actively encouraged. And potentially dangerous animals are kept in unsafe cages.

For the animals imprisoned in these zoos, life is hell. Not a life at all really but a life sentence. Days of boredom and misery become weeks of boredom and misery. Weeks become months and months become years. From birth until death, many of these unfortunate wild creatures exist in conditions of severe hardship and deprivation. This intolerable situation must be brought to an end. Those few roadside zoos that have the ability to rise to a professional standard should be required by law to do so. The rest should be closed.

**(above and inset) WSPA is campaigning for zoo standards that would require all zoos to operate at a professional standard or be closed.**

**Bored animals in filthy ramshackle cages are common at roadside zoos.**



## WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- **Do not visit roadside zoos** or animal displays.
- If you decide to visit a roadside zoo to see the conditions first hand, **take photographs and/or video and make notes.**
- **Direct any concerns about animal suffering to your local or provincial SPCA.** Can't find the address or phone number for your local humane society? Call the Canadian Federation of Humane Societies at 1-888-678-CFHS or visit <http://www.cfhs.ca/Members/index.htm>
- **Direct general concerns about roadside zoos as well as any public safety concerns to your provincial government.** Contact your Premier and your provincial representative (M.L.A., M.R.P., M.N.A). For contact information visit the government of Canada website at [http://www.gc.ca/othergov/prov\\_e.html](http://www.gc.ca/othergov/prov_e.html), consult the blue pages in your telephone book or contact WSPA at 1-800-363-9772.
- For a zoo in your own municipality, **investigate local laws** concerning exotic and captive animals.
- **Contact your local politician** and lodge a complaint. Local councils are particularly concerned about public safety issues such as a lack of stand-off barriers and perimeter fencing to prevent animal escapes.
- **Organize a town hall meeting** with your neighbours to discuss the local zoo and your concerns.
- **Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper.** Be sure to include your full name and address and a number for the paper to contact you.
- Copy correspondence to WSPA at the address below:



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