Moral Captivity: A Debate in Zoo Ethics

My paper is going to be about zoos and the animals they contain, namely the differing perspectives that economists and animal rights activists have in regards to the treatment of animals and the debate that zoos are, in fact, doing a disservice to the creatures. There is much controversy surrounding zoos, usually pertaining to the idea that they capture animals and cage them in an effort to increase the bottom line, while disregarding animal welfare and their true needs.

In addition to this, I will discuss and relate philosophies, economics and animal rights, all in an effort to connect these opposing arguments.

Some things to question:
Do humans have a right to determine an animal’s fate?
If we capture one elephant for research and subject it to tests, this truly going to increase the welfare of its wild counterparts?
If we show people animals first hand, will they be more likely to donate money to protect them in the wild and preserve their natural habitat?
If animals can suffer why do we not treat them as equals within society?
Are animals part of society?

Finally, after a well thought out analysis and discussion, I will attempt to make a connection between the two schools of thought, economist vs. activist, whereby a solid understanding of each party’s beliefs will be explained and connected. I understand that the topic of zoo ethics has been around for a very long time and obviously zoo’s still exist, but I still would like to surmount this enduring debate of education and conservation through interaction vs. animal rights and welfare, via a vivid understanding of each party’s concerns and a connection by critical thinking.

I will begin my essay with an anecdote, a short story that will excite the reader about my paper and will illustrate how zoos have changed over the last century. I will then discuss what zoos are intended to do (according to zoos) and how they operate.

I will then take an economists’ perspective and analyze the efficiency of zoos according to an economic view of the world. This analysis will entail looking at the zoo from a distant perspective, where the possibility exists of keeping one animal captive to save its wild relatives. I find the idea very interesting that in order to protect wild animals and preserve their habitats, we must educate and introduce people to animals, which is arguably most effective through direct interaction.

Next, I will guide the discussion to animal rights (fathered by Peter Singer) and delve into the philosophies and rights that many activists advocate animals should be entitled to as a result of their existence. This section of the paper will take a deep look at the workings of a zoo, how the operate, the kind of care animals receive, and the living conditions
compared to their wild counterparts. It is in this section where I will also speak of the two types of zoos, those that are AZA (Association of Zoos and Aquariums) certified and those that are not. It is my understanding that many zoos do not comply with many AZA regulations, which I believe recently resulted in a tiger attack at the San Francisco Zoo. I may also discuss the differences in conditions (or lack thereof) that exist in certified v. non-certified zoos.

Finally I will recap both viewpoints, and make a plausible connection that could facilitate some sort of solution or at least create an environment where both parties are content. This will be followed by a conclusion, a summary of my points, and a final thought.

What I want this paper to do is critically look at the zoo environment animals must sustain, but more importantly make the reader critically think about the parties involved (economist v. animal activist v. the animal) and reach an independent decision as a result of my discussion. This paper needs to accomplish this task, and only when I completely discuss each philosophy and moral agenda, will an educated and accurate picture of the ethics and debate behind zoos be possible.

I. Introduction
   A. What the zoo is according to the zoos
   B. Why it is this way
   C. How it has changed

II. Economics of a Zoo
    A. Economist view
    B. Efficiency

III. Animal Rights

IV. Alternative view of zoo

V. Connection between economist and alternative viewpoints

VI. Possible solution

VII. Conclusion.

Preliminary Reading/Listening List: ®=Have Read
Thank you and I look forward to your comments,

Eric