

The Great Zoo Debate

This is a sad post for me to write – a veteran trainer, Dawn Brancheau, was killed yesterday by an Orca whale at Sea World in Orlando, Florida. Reports of the incident have been conflicting, but it seems that the trainer was pulled into the tank when the giant sea mammal grabbed her ponytail. She subsequently drowned. Unmistakably, this is a tragedy – pure and simple.

But it also re-awakens the great zoo debate – should humans be able to keep wild animals in zoos? As they say, you can take an animal out of the wild, but you can't take the wild out of the animal, and tragedies such as yesterday's incident at Sea World prove this. It is also apparent that no matter how many precautions are taken to avoid tragedy, an accident can always occur. However, I love zoos, and I strongly and truly believe that the conservation education and money raised by zoos has been and will continue to be detrimental in helping certain species survive and bounce back from the brink of extinction. Many other people disagree, and tragedies such as this and the fatal Siberian tiger mauling at the San Francisco Zoo in 2007 always add fervor to the great zoo debate, which is depicted in this video from Good Morning America and features zoo advocate Jack Hanna debating with the Vice President of an anti-zoo organization, Born Free:

In my opinion, they did not let Mr. Hanna have an equal part in the debate. He has some good points, and it's very difficult to say where the status of certain endangered species would be right now if it were not for the conservation efforts of zoos and wildlife parks – no one knows what **could** or **would** have been either way, so how can that be a part of the debate? As Mr. Roberts points out, the number of tigers has greatly dwindled over the past century. But one can also point out that no one knows for sure if it would have been worse had zoos not been educating the public about tigers or if they had not been learning how to breed them in captivity to continue the species.

The bottom line is, in my opinion, (and this is MY blog, so I get the bottom line) zoos and aquariums have taken great strides forward for the preservation of many animal species. I believe their work and conservation efforts are **invaluable** to conservation (not to mention how many thousands of jobs zoos, aquariums, wildlife parks, and conservation programs bring to societies in hundreds of countries); in fact, AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums have funded more than 3,700 conservation projects in more than 100 countries and spend nearly \$70 million on conservation initiatives annually. Remember my post about the [Kihansi Spray Toad](#)? This is just **one** example of a creature that would be completely extinct (it is believed to be extinct in the wild but still exists in just two zoos in the world) if it weren't for the efforts of zoos trying to save it.

Obviously what happened in Orlando is a tragedy of great proportion. And I'm not trying to undermine it, but Dawn's friends, family, and colleagues are all stating that she was aware of the inherent risks of her job and that she would want nothing but for her work to go on despite what happened. Perhaps changes need to be made; maybe certain species of animal require bigger and better habitats and different types of interaction and stimulation – the modern zoo world is

relatively new, and experts are still learning. But I think their hard work is invaluable to the world, and I hope that someday, all of this is just as obvious to the nay-sayers as it is to us zoo-lovers.



Kind of puts this into perspective now... I wonder if Marineland in Niagara Falls Canada still allows this after recent tragedies involving the killer whale?