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EDITORIAL

Better Dead Than Captive Bred?

A central issue in wildlife conservation is not "when" but "whether" to bring individuals of an endangered species into captivity. This becomes an especially weighty issue if doing so would prevent ultimate extinction. Despite recent experiences with taxa that nearly died out before last minute rescues could be put in place, there are those — in fact, a great many — who cannot condone the idea of wild animals spending even a minute in a captive situation, even though passionately concerned about their survival. In extreme form, this view holds that, for those whose future in the wild is certainly doomed, it is better not to have been born at all than to survive only in the undignified and freedom-denying confines of captivity. Better to be dead than captive bred!

Why is there such disdain within a segment of the conservation community for captive efforts? Opposition in some cases arises from an outmoded view of zoos as places where animals are turned into pets, lose their survival skills, and acquire atypical ways of behaving. Others are in opposition, I fear, from self-serving reasons of heavy investment in their own "nobler" efforts of saving wild habitat. The belief that captivity deprives the wild animal of its dignity and its freedom is, however, a potent argument that is frequently used to sway the emotions in denigrating captive programs.

To add perspective to this issue, I invite the reader to take an imaginary tour with me to Amboseli National Park, in southern Kenya, where a wrinkled bull elephant, his massive tusks stained with mud and plant juices, moves with ponderous majesty and nonchalance as he grazes. As the first rays of the morning sun strike the glistening snows atop Kilimanjaro, a perfect backdrop is created for etching his image on film. What awesome beauty! How truly magnificent is this world of wild things! The folks back home will love this one! Suddenly, however, the reverie is broken by the approach of tour vehicles, swarming in from all directions like buzzards to a fetid carcass. In the moments that follow, the message that freedom for wild things is often relative comes home. In reality, our tusker has few options. If he leaves the Park, his life is imperiled for the ivory he carries. If he stays, he faces the daily onslaught of dust and fumes and the excited musings of those who have come to see nature up close. Long ago he became inured to the frequent impingements on his range, accepts them as a given, and casually feeds on as the engines are gunned by tour guides eager to seek out their clients' next quarry. The hard truth is that he is no longer truly wild, and thoughts of dignity and freedom for him and his kin seem a bit tarnished.

Far to the south, in the brushy expanse of Zimbabwe, a black rhino feels the

sharp sting of a dart fired from ambush by a small cadre of humans who are desperately worried about his chances of survival. His brain is quickly enshrouded in deep fog by the fast-acting anesthetic, sparing him the indignity of a chain saw that bites voraciously into the horns that adorn his snout. He does not feel the notching of his ears, the transponder being inserted through a slit in his skin, or the temperature probe that invades his rectum. After 40 minutes, he is up and about, free to roam until 18 months later, when the procedures must be repeated if he is to have a reasonable chance of avoiding the poacher's gun. In fact, the statistics suggest that, despite these heroic efforts, he has only a 50 or 60 percent chance of dying a more natural death. We may imagine that his "protectors" share a warm feeling in their guts because they're taking on a tough job that has to be done. They have no reticence from notions of dignity or freedom, and their actions are condoned, remarkably, by many of the same voices that have labelled more benign procedures with managed captives a "moral atrocity" (e.g., Varner and Monroe, *Endangered Species Update* 8(1):27–29, 1991).

The discomforting reality of our modern world is that it has become increasingly difficult to find pristine lands untrammeled by humans, or wildlife that is not, in one way or another, managed. Virtually all wild forms have some kind of contact with humans, some kind of curtailment of their once free world. And there is no going back. The natural world we cherish is forever compromised, forever a less friendly place for living things. Consequently, protecting habitat could not preclude events such as the dramatic loss of a mate to four of the last five wild-living pairs of California condors during the winter of 1985–1986. Nor can anyone guarantee that additional protection will be enough to spare giant pandas the nutritional stress or intense physical competition that leads to their being rescued from near death in an increasingly uninhabitable range. Those who would hold out for preservation only in the wild may have to settle for something less idealistic than they dream of, and, in some cases, unfortunately, of animals that exist only as pictures in the history books of extinction.

Contrary to common fiction, the majority of those working in zoos hold that wild animals should remain in the wild unless it can be reasonably shown that a stint in captivity would make the difference between dying out and surviving. The profession has become increasingly aware that propagation outside an animal's ecosystem is at best a way of buying time. If we could reliably predict the future, we would be spared much debate about strategies and tactics. Since we cannot, we should be sobered by the knowledge that roughly a third of the recovery plans implemented under the US Endangered Species Act manage for extinction rather than for survival (see Tear et al., *Science* 262:976–977, 1993). We should find it worrying when we read that other plans have failed because we debated too long about jurisdictions and tactics before getting started (see Griffith et al., *Science* 245:477–480, 1989). And we should find additional impetus for a strategy of buying time in the realization that the momentum of world forces cannot always be slowed soon enough to guarantee habitat to species so close to the brink. Such realities are an antidote to the sentiment, however well-intentioned, that saving habitat alone will invariably be enough.

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