What Are the Pros of Having Zoos?

**1. Zoos provide an educational resource.**  
The modern zoo plays a critical role in education children and families about the different animals with whom we share this planet. Staff from a zoo will travel to local schools to make presentations, offer special programs on the zoo grounds, and partner with community providers to extend educational opportunities to everyone. No matter what a person’s socioeconomic status may be, there is a chance to learn something new because of the work of a zoo.

**2. A zoo provides a protected environment for endangered animals.**  
There are several animals which are poached frequently because of certain items. Having a zoo provides these animals with a safer place to live because they are behind multiple levels of protection. Although poachers have been able to break into zoos to take animals in the past, this is not a frequent occurrence and is normally not successful when it does occur.

**3. Zoos can provide a place for the humane treatment of rare animals.**  
One of the best examples of this is the Przewalski horse. In 1945, there were 13 horses that were captured from the wild and placed into a zoo. The last Przewalski horse was seen in the wild in 1966. Because of extensive breeding programs and an effort to reintroduce these horses into protected habitats in the wild, this unique species can continue to survive. It is a unique breed in the equine world because it has 66 chromosomes instead of 64. More than 1,500 of these horses exist today and all can trace their lineage back to the 13 that were captured at the end of World War II.

**4. Zoos can also be an economic resource for a community.**  
Zoos do more than just provide a place for animals to reside. They are a place that provides jobs, creates tourism opportunities, and can even be an economic nexus for a community. The Woodland Park Zoo in Seattle has an annual budget that exceeds $36 million and they pay $17 million in wages annually. Another $5.2 million is paid in outside vendor contracts. The zoo was established in 1898 and 70% of its revenues come from zoo visits and private contributions.

**5. Zookeepers are trained with specialized knowledge about their animals.**  
In the past, zoos were a place where animals were kept behind steel bars. Those who oversaw these animals had a general knowledge of upkeep, but not much more. Today’s zookeepers are highly trained and educated people who have specialized knowledge of the animals that are under their charge. This has reduced accidents and attacks, especially when handlers follow established policies and procedures to maintain safety.

**6. Preservation efforts at zoos can stop extinction events.**  
Zoos around the world work together to preserve rare and extremely endangered species. These connections make it possible to bring a pair of these animals together to begin the mating process so that the species can continue living. If these rare animals were forced to find each other in the wild, the result could be very different. Animals that have been saved from likely extinction by zoos include the Arabian Oryx, Golden Lion Tamarin, Puerto Rican Parrot, and Freshwater mussels.

What Are the Cons of Having Zoos?

**1. Holding any animal in captivity has questionable ethics.**  
There may be educational value in a zoo, but keeping animals in captivity offers an ethical dilemma. Some animals, like the average house cat, will thrive in a captive environment. Others, like orcas, do very poorly when living in captivity. An orca in the wild may live up to 100 years in the wild, but the average age at a captive orca is less than 30 years – and it’s 17 years for a male orca.

**2. Breeding programs create dependencies.**  
Wild animals struggle to adapt to a confined environment, but many can make the transition – even if it is forced upon them. The same cannot always be said for the newborns that become part of local zoo breeding programs. If the animal is part of a predator species, most newborns that are born in captivity will die if they are released because of the dependencies they have on the captivity.

**3. Most zoos are treated as a recreational facility.**  
Since the 19th century, in both good and bad ways, most zoos were established to further a scientific understanding about the nature which surrounds us. That has changed over the years to the point where many see a zoo as nothing more than a recreational facility. Established zoos cater to this attitude and justify it because they need to have funds to further the research or preservation efforts that are taking place.

**4. The lives of animals are secondary to the lives of people.**  
Because zoos are treated more as a recreational facility, visitors do not always have respect for the boundaries and borders that keep them safe from potentially dangerous animals. If visitors intrude into the animal enclosure, it is usually the life of the animal that is put at risk. An example of this occurred in 2016 when a 3-year old boy was left unsupervised long enough to crawl into a gorilla enclosure. To save the boy, the zoo killed the male gorilla named Harambe.

**5. Many zoos are struggling financially and can no longer care for their animals properly.**  
The Woodland Park Zoo in Seattle is thought to be one of the best in the US. In 2015, their expenses were $2 million more than their incoming revenues. Their status as a 501c3 organization, however, can help to provide a buffer on years where losses like that occur. Other zoos do not have that luxury. Many zoos euthanize healthy animals because of their cost or to “preserve” genetic health. In Agate, CO a wildlife sanctuary euthanized all 11 of their animals because of a denial to relocate their facilities due to “ongoing flooding.”

**6. Conservation is a goal that isn’t always sought.**  
Most zoos have a goal of conservation when it comes to animal species. There are certainly success stories, such as the Przewalski horse. Unfortunately, this goal tends to be more of a marketing technique than an actual mission statement. It is quite common to have offspring created at a zoo to be moved to another zoo, sold to raise money, or in the case of the Giant Panda, used as a financial resource for an entire country.

**7. Even natural habitat enclosures do not fully serve the needs of all animals.**  
The goal of many modern zoos is to replicate the natural environments of the animal for their enclosure. For some animals, such as the elephant, this is virtually impossible within the confines of a zoo. A herd (or memory) of elephants is known to travel between 30-50 kilometers every day. In the wild, you’ll find them grouping into herds of 40+ individuals. That is a habitat which a small zoo cannot replicate.

**8. Zoos can set an improper standard for future generations.**  
Children learn from the adults in their lives. When they go to a zoo, what they are seeing is that it is okay for people to put animals into enclosures for entertainment purposes. For a zoo experience to be beneficial, there must be an effort to take all visitors through the scientific and preservation components of a zoological program. Unfortunately, most zoo visitors go to look at the animals and nothing more, which shows imprisonment can be entertainment – and that may transfer to their views about humanity.

**9. Breeding programs are not a guarantee for species survival.**  
The Giant Panda is an example of how difficult breeding programs in captivity can be. Up through the 1990s, just 30% of the Giant Pandas in captivity could successfully reproduce. When the cubs were born, more than 60% of them would die while still in infancy. Survival percentages have risen to over 70% since then, but this is because of artificial insemination and husbandry efforts that essentially force the newborn cub to be reliant on humans for potentially its entire life.