

Opinion: Gorilla in the Midst of a Zoo Fog

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On 28th May 2016, a young boy fell or climbed into the Western lowland gorilla (*Gorilla gorilla gorilla*) enclosure at Cincinnati Zoo, Ohio, USA. Shortly thereafter, a decision was taken by zoo management to shoot dead 17-year-old male gorilla *Harambe*, after he was seen handling and manipulating the boy.

The controversy sparked by the shooting of *Harambe* was truly global, generating extraordinary media attention and volumes of opinions, drawing in aspects as diverse as the ethics of zoos, animal welfare, human values, public safety, parenting and racism.

While there is little value in rehashing these points here, I would like to offer a few thoughts on the events from the perspective of an animal welfare researcher and campaigner, with a particular interest in animals in captivity and the conservation claims of zoos.

Much of the global outcry generated by *Harambe's* killing may have been fostered by the public perception of gorillas as peaceable vegetarians (who doesn't recall David Attenborough

sitting quietly among wild mountain gorillas?). Indeed, this (mis)perception¹ may have been further perpetuated by two previous instances of children falling into gorilla enclosures at zoos in Chicago in 1996 and Jersey in 1986; both of which ended happily in the rescue of the children without harm to the gorillas.

Or perhaps it is tempting to conclude that the public reaction was so strong because the similarities between the great apes (including humans) are clear, and that efforts to raise awareness of the rights of nonhuman great apes² have hit their mark. However, would the outrage have been so vehement if an agitated male chimpanzee had his hands on the

child and was shot and killed, instead of a gorilla, I wonder?

In today's media age, footage of *Harambe's* actual interactions with the child was quickly available for all to see online. The video I have seen includes *Harambe* very briefly but forcibly dragging the child through a shallow water moat, yet the remaining sequences show a curious ape gently holding the child's limbs and investigating his clothing without obvious intent to harm. Primatologist Frans de Waal believes that "*He showed a combination of protection and confusion... There was no moment of acute aggression*".³ If this footage constitutes the sum of his behaviour around the child, my personal opinion is that the gorilla posed a limited risk, and the shooting may have been an over-reaction.

Whatever the justifications or otherwise for *Harambe's* death, it was a distressing event that brought Cincinnati Zoo and, by extension, captive animal facilities worldwide into the media and public spotlight, and stimulated debate which extended well beyond considerations of public safety.

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¹ Yamagiwa J, Kahekwa J & Basabose AK (2009). Infanticide and social flexibility in the genus *Gorilla*. *Primates* 50: 293-303

² <http://www.nonhumanrightsproject.org/>

³ De Waal, F (2016). <http://www.alternet.org/environment/rip-Harambe>

While his death should give us concern, I would maintain that so should his life, or at least the circumstances of his life. *Harambe*'s grandparents were caught in the wild and imported to the US. He was born at a zoo in Texas, and was transferred to Cincinnati Zoo's "Gorilla World" exhibit in 2014. This enclosure was constructed in 1978, and set to be expanded by 2017 to include a new 400m² indoor exhibit⁴ (which is about one-fifteenth the size of a football pitch, in a city where the average low outdoor temperature exceeds 10°C for only five months of the year⁵). *Harambe* was hand-raised by humans: an all-too-common event for captive primates resulting in some cases from maternal inexperience or incapacity, but sometimes from an automatic institutional policy to intervene.⁶ The long-term effects of hand-rearing are not well known.

Few commentaries mentioned the likely negative impact of *Harambe*'s death on the remaining two female gorillas at the zoo, nor on the keepers who worked with and around him daily. Mammals rarely exist in isolation in nature, without dependent and/or connected, bonded

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or familiar conspecifics. *Harambe* was clearly not “in nature” yet he should not be considered in isolation. He was a 17 year old ape, with needs and desires (many of which I suspect could not be met in a zoo environment), living with two female conspecifics who no doubt interacted with him, liked or disliked him, and thought about him on a repeated and frequent basis. I have no doubt that his keepers did the same and are also affected by the fact and manner of his death.

Many articles have made reference to the fact that *Harambe* was a representative of a Critically Endangered species,⁷ as if his death were more outrageous as a result. But while *Harambe* the individual should not be considered in isolation, the captive population of gorillas is, in any real sense, entirely isolated from the wild population upon which the Critically Endangered status is based. In my opinion, maintaining Western lowland gorillas in zoos seems to contribute little or nothing to the conservation of the species. To *Harambe*, the plight of his conspecifics in remaining populations in the wild was of no tangible consequence. He was, in so many respects, just another captive animal destined to live out his life in a zoo.

But the argument that *Harambe*'s death was a double tragedy due to the threats to gorillas in the wild is pervasive and hints at the competing priorities of animals as individuals and the conservation claims of zoos.

Much has been made of the role of or potential for zoos in conservation⁸.

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Wildlife and ecosystems certainly face enormous threats and an uncertain certain future. But I am convinced that zoos are claiming a wildly overstated stake in offering a solution to these threats. A small number of species – a relative handful including the familiar case studies of Arabian oryx, black-footed ferrets and California condors – can indeed trace their continued survival to some level of involvement by one or a few zoos. Does this justify claims that zoos in general, or even those specific zoos, are uniquely positioned to combat conservation threats?⁹ Absolutely not. Reintroduction from zoos is very much the exception rather than the norm, and will continue to be so. Captive breeding programmes to maintain populations in perpetuity are hit and miss, limited in number, and produce animals that may be entirely inappropriate and ill-equipped for release to the wild. Bizarrely, across the industry, zoos generally keep species that are not currently threatened with extinction in the wild.¹⁰

Nonetheless, zoos in EU member states have a legal requirement to implement conservation measures, primarily through public education on biodiversity conservation and participation in one or more optional activities such as research, training, captive breeding, reintroduction and

⁴ <http://cincinnati-zoo.org/gorilla-world/>

⁵ <http://www.usclimatedata.com/climate/cincinnati/ohio/united-states/usoh0188>

⁶ Porton I & Niebruegge K (2006). The changing role of hand rearing in zoo-based primate breeding programs. Pp. 22-31 in Sackett G, Ruppenthal G & Elias K (eds): Nursery Rearing of Nonhuman Primates in the 21st Century. Springer

⁷ <http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/9406/0>

⁸ Gusset M & Dick G (2011). The global reach of zoos and aquariums in visitor numbers and conservation expenditures. *Zoo Biology* 30: 566-569

⁹ American Humane Association (2016). *Arks of Hope: Ambassadors for Animals*. <http://humaneconservation.org/about/white-paper/>

¹⁰ Martin TE, Lurbiecki H, Joy JB & Mooers AO (2014). Mammal and bird species held in zoos are less endemic and less threatened than their close relatives not held in zoos. *Animal Conservation* 17: 89-96

the vague “exchange of information”.¹¹ No such legal requirement exists for zoos in the USA or in many other countries.

Globally, contrary to claims that zoos are catalysts for conservation¹², a more honest assessment is that zoos (still) exist to display animals to the public; conservation is neither their heritage nor their true mandate.

Whatever the conservation potential or dividend of zoos, it should be weighed carefully against the almost inevitable compromise to animals’ welfare that comes from life in a relatively restricted environment. There are myriad challenges to achieving good welfare in captivity: for example, range sizes and social groupings may be inadequate, climates and diets inappropriate, while the endless gaze of zoo visitors may be stressful. While systems for licensing and inspection of zoos are in place in the USA¹³, across the EU¹⁴ including the UK¹⁵ and elsewhere, application and enforcement is problematic.^{16 17}

I have been working for some time to promote an agenda of compassionate conservation, an emerging cross-disciplinary field that reimagines our relationship with, and responsibility towards, wild animals and nature by unifying animal welfare science with the theory and practice of conservation.¹⁸ Compassionate conservation posits that individuals matter for ethical and practical reasons.¹⁹ Thus, the well-being of individual animals needs to be factored in when making conservation decisions. When viewed through the lens of compassionate conservation,

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zoos generally present a paradigm of high welfare risk, low conservation gain.

We all need to decide how we wish to mourn *Harambe*’s death: as a regrettable but rare accident on the road to conservation salvation, or a consequence of an exploitative obsession with exhibition.

¹¹European Council Directive 1999/22/EC, Article 3

¹²Zimmerman A, Hatchwell M, Dickie L & West C (2007). *Zoos in the 21st Century: Catalysts for Conservation?* Cambridge University Press

¹³Zoos, marine mammal shows, carnivals, circuses and promotional exhibits with wild animals are licensed similarly as Class C Animal Exhibitors under the United States Animal Welfare Act

¹⁴European Council Directive 1999/22/EC

¹⁵Zoo Licensing Act 1981 as amended; Zoos Licensing Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003

¹⁶Draper C (2011). The Zoo Licensing Act 1981 and the welfare of animals in UK zoos. *Journal of Animal Welfare Law*, March 2011: 20-21

¹⁷Draper C, Browne W & Harris S (2013). Do formal inspections ensure that British zoos meet and improve

on minimum animal welfare standards? *Animals* 3(4), 1058-1072

¹⁸See www.compassionateconservation.org

¹⁹Draper C, Baker L & Ramp D (2015). Why compassionate conservation can improve the welfare of wild animals. UFAW International Animal Welfare Science Symposium, Zagreb, Croatia 14-15 July 2015