

## COMMENTARY

# Zoos and the Surplus Problem: An Alternative Solution

In a recent editorial (Zoo Biology 10:1-2, 1991), Donald Lindburg raised important questions about the responsible management of surplus animals. As he pointed out, surplus animals can arise for a variety of reasons, including mistakes (not always on the part of the managers responsible for the animals), sex ratios at birth that differ from the sex ratios of social groups of adults, and even good management (the production of all offspring desired for a breeding program within the first part of an animal's potential lifespan). Lindburg is correct in arguing that it is time for action by the profession both nationally and internationally.

I disagree, however, with a solution he proposed to the surplus problem: paying the cost of maintaining animals in off-site facilities ("retirement homes") through the duration of lifespans that terminate only when the animals die due to failures of health. Lindburg points out that these costs, while expensive, could be managed creatively to keep them as low as possible. He rejects outright an alternative which I would argue is more rational, responsible, and ethical, when he states "[e]xcept for humane considerations, euthanasia is also ruled out on moral grounds."

If there is any issue that will overshadow the surplus problem through the 1990s, it is the related issue of managerial euthanasia (more properly termed culling). All of us find the decision to euthanize an animal in our care to be difficult and troubling. Many argue that euthanasia, except when necessary to alleviate suffering, is an abdication of the responsibility to care for an animal that we accepted when we acquired that animal by breeding, by purchase, or by exchange. It is argued that managerial euthanasia represents extreme speciesism, the granting of greater moral and practical consideration to our own species than to others. It is argued that managerial euthanasia unnecessarily and unacceptably sacrifices the welfare of an individual animal for economic and conservation benefit. Finally, it is argued that whatever the ethical and practical considerations, managerial euthanasia is too risky because we might incur the wrath of animal activist groups, or even the general

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public. I would argue the reverse on each of these points: the reluctance of most of the profession to consider managerial euthanasia results from a refusal to acknowledge that we are responsible for the lives and deaths of animals in our care, from the placement of our interests above those both of other species (as entities) and of individuals of other species, and from inconsistent policies that can only damage public trust in the long run.

First, consider what is entailed by managerial euthanasia: taking the life of one animal no longer needed for breeding, display, or research, in order to release resources needed for the care of other animals. Unfortunately, resources are limiting. Therefore, any decision to euthanize or not involves trade-offs among values. Is it more ethical to care for one animal for a healthy lifespan of 20 years, terminated by poor health, than to care for two animals, each with lifespans of 10 years, terminated by painless euthanasia? Which would the animals choose? I submit that we usually choose the former because it is easier and provides greater comfort for *us*. I personally value the creation of a productive life more than I regret the necessity of a death. Interestingly, our laws and our religions are almost unanimous in decreeing the saving of a human life as the one just cause for the taking of another human life. There is often, but not always, a requirement of near temporal synchrony, such that killing is not commonly justified to save future lives (those not yet born). Yet, because of limited resources, we must accept that prolonging the life of a surplus animal in a zoo or at a zoo-supported off-exhibit facility will often take away the (potential) life of another, non-surplus, animal. Our sensitivities to this trade-off are usually protected by the lack of knowledge about which other life has been sacrificed, but that does not make the refusal to euthanize surplus animals any more moral. Recognizing that many people will question whether I would apply my ethics equally and fairly to myself and to humans that are close to me, let me state that I also consider it to be illogical and immoral for people to expend tremendous resources on prolonging human lives (including my own, if the situation arose) while other people are suffering greatly and dying because no one will expend even minor resources to assure their welfare.

Lindburg suggested that it might cost \$44,000 to maintain a surplus orang-utan for the (10-year) duration of a natural life at a zoo. That money could be found in the budgets of most zoos (and is being found in the budgets of many zoos), but that expense takes away money that otherwise could have been used to care for more animals, or to care better for animals already at the zoo. Right now there are 88 hybrid orang-utans in North America. As a result, the breeding program of the orang SSP is seriously compromised. Brookfield Zoo, as just one example, cannot breed its pure-bred orang-utans because the needed spaces are occupied by (still young) hybrids. Using Lindburg's rough estimate of the cost of maintaining an orang-utan, we can guess that the current practice of maintaining the hybrids within SSP institutions until they slowly die out will cost on the order of \$3,872,000. Perhaps the spaces currently filled by surplus hybrids should be made available for breeding more pure-bred orangs, or the \$3,872,000 used for other breeding programs. That much money could "save" the lives of many more than 88 animals, and could probably save some species.

Lindburg is right to try to find an acceptable solution to the surplus problem that will minimize costs and thus save resources for further conservation efforts. Yet even if the cost of retirement facilities outside of our institutions could be kept, say, below

one-quarter the cost of maintenance of animals within zoos, the cumulative costs, in terms of dollars and animals and species, of applying Lindburg's suggestion to all species we manage is still staggering. Tremendous opportunities for bettering the life and survival of individual animals and species will be (and are being) forfeited because we value animals we know as individuals more than animals not yet seen and more than population and species health.

Considering the very real and very painful trade-off further, it is worth examining some decisions that we make in our daily lives. Most of us (although there are certainly exceptions) and our society generally consider it morally acceptable to kill healthy livestock in order to provide us with a diet rich in meat that we find pleasurable, while usually admitting is not particularly good for our health. We sanction legally the rearing of some farm animals in conditions that zoos would find appalling and inhumane. Thus, it seems that our real values place our own personal pleasure and comfort above personal health, and personal well-being above the rights of animals to healthy and long lives. Sadly, perhaps, management practices of zoos make it clear that we place rights of some individual animals above the rights of others, and the rights of the favored animals above the rights of future generations and species persistence. Is not the ultimate manifestation of speciesism the willingness to watch another species go extinct (because of human actions, no less) so that we do not have to feel uncomfortable with ending the life of our favored animals? Species will disappear forever because we drive them to the brink of extinction (often because of a perceived economic benefit from our actions) and then choose not to devote resources to help them recover. Resources spent otherwise than on species conservation make clear statements about our priorities and morals regarding other species.

Often it is argued that the killing of farm animals to satisfy our desires is justified because those animals were bred for that purpose. First, I doubt that it matters to the animals. Again, it is our own discomfort we are trying to lessen by these arguments; we are not acting out of concern for animal welfare. Secondly, in a properly managed modern zoo almost all the animals in the collection would also have been bred for purposes defined by human managers. In a zoo, animals are bred to sustain species and to provide for the education of the public. Generally, the public education in zoos, made possible by captive breeding programs, is also directed toward better appreciation of and caring for our natural world. Farm animals are bred for the purpose of providing us with our favorite dinner. Is that more justified morally than the goals for which zoo animals are bred?

Euthanasia of all surplus animals is not necessary to maintain moral consistency, and I view the practice of euthanasia as unethical when it is not needed to promote, even indirectly, the welfare of animals and species. Many zoo animals are occupying spaces, and are sustained with resources, that would not in the event of their euthanasia become available for other animals in need of a place to live and breed. Some exhibits are not suitable for breeding, but serve valuable functions, nonetheless. Some non-breeders can be kept in social groups, without interfering with and perhaps contributing to breeding by others (e.g., by socializing infants, or by maintaining group structure). Only when an animal is truly surplus to all the diverse goals of the zoo, and its continued maintenance is interfering with the attainment of those goals, would I advocate managerial euthanasia. Note that an animal could be used to promote the goals of a zoo by being given to another zoo, and that alternative should always be explored before an animal is euthanized. If the animal cannot be

placed anywhere that would provide appropriate care without thereby compromising the greater good of the welfare of more animals, then it is the moral responsibility of the institution with stewardship of the animal to euthanize it. I agree with Lindburg that sending animals to substandard facilities or to animal dealers that can sell the animal to any sort of facility is an unethical abdication of responsibility.

The inconsistency of many zoos in the application of their implicit or explicit euthanasia policy is most apparent in the moral considerations given to different taxa. Great apes are almost never euthanized; zoos will go to extreme lengths to maintain the life of an ape, at times beyond the point at which it could breed or even be returned to a social group. Other primates are rarely euthanized for management reasons, at least not if the public (read *press*) are likely to notice. Hoofstock are euthanized by some zoos, usually after fulfilling reproduction goals. Rodents and bats are frequently euthanized at many facilities, just because the zoo did not bother to control reproduction. Birds, herps, and especially fish hardly merit consideration in most debates about euthanasia. A possible justification for our selective use of morality arguments when considering euthanasia might be that the "lower" vertebrates have lesser mental abilities and are therefore less likely to perceive their own welfare. Our behavior belies such an excuse, however. The lack of respect given to bats and rodents relative to hoofstock, for example, is not due to an evaluation of sensory and mental capabilities. The decisions made by most zoos (and most people; we are not alone in this) regarding the moral value of a life reflect how closely we identify with that animal. Thus, like a decision to maintain one animal at the expense of another that we cannot see, the primary if not sole basis for our "moral" judgment is to minimize human discomfort. After years of caring for an animal, the care-giver and the animal will learn a lot about each other. We might decide that ending the life of such a friend is just too difficult for us, even while recognizing that others in the species, or perhaps even the species as a whole, might suffer as a result of the preferential care given to our favorites. I can accept that euthanasia of some (perhaps many) surplus animals might be rejected in order to protect our feelings, but I hope that we admit our motivations. I hope also that our sensitivities serve to keep us from ever deciding lightly or quickly to euthanize an animal. Euthanasia should never become an acceptable post-hoc "fix" for bad management (e.g., failure to control breeding when offspring are not wanted), but rather must only be a cautiously considered component of good management that aims toward the collective welfare of animals and species.

The very strong feelings we all share about caring for those humans and animals around us, even at the expense of others with as much moral worth, are understandable in light of reciprocity (we want others to do unto us as we have done unto them) and in the context of having, until very recently in evolutionary and historical time, little impact on those not in our immediate vicinity. It is only recently that nepotism, racism, speciesism, and similar rankings of moral value by proximity have had significant, damaging impacts on other peoples, animals, and species. Our actions now do have national and even global impacts, we understand some of those impacts, and it is not unethical to act for a broader good based on that understanding.

I recognize that many of my colleagues, whose views I value greatly, will strongly disagree with the above arguments. These issues are being debated at my own institution, and my personal and professional views should not be taken as representing institutional policy. The use of managerial euthanasia as a means to deal

with the surplus “problem” must be discussed widely throughout the profession, although I do not know if it will be possible or necessary to reach consensus. Individuals and institutions will have to decide which goals outweigh the continued life of an animal, and which do not. Does the benefit derived from entertaining people with the charm of a baby animal justify the production of that baby and its subsequent euthanasia when it reaches adolescence? For me, it does not, because it places temporary human pleasure above the life of an animal. Does the production of the next generation of animals in an effort to keep a species from extinction justify euthanasia of older animals from whom no further progeny could or should be obtained? I think so, because it places the existence of animals for generations to come above the prolonged life of a single animal. These questions must be addressed openly and honestly by all of us. I appreciate Donald Lindburg’s initiation of this dialogue. I would also appreciate criticism, or support, from colleagues in response to these issues.

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