

Heather Browning & Walter Veit. *What Are Zoos For?*. Bristol University Press 2024. 156 pp. £8.99 GBP (Paperback 9781529231045); £8.99 GBP (eBook 9781529231052).

Modern zoos serve many purposes. There's no doubt that some of the main ones are recreation, research, conservation, and education. However, in *What Are Zoos For?*, Heather Browning and Walter Veit argue that zoos' traditional purposes are of secondary importance. They maintain that, first and foremost, zoos are for the animals who live in them, or in other words, that providing animals with a sufficiently high standard of welfare should be zoos' primary purpose (3-4). Part of Browning and Veit's rationale is that since most of the animals in zoos are born there and are dependent upon zoos for having their needs met, zoos, in turn, have a special duty to meet those needs (65 and 102-3), one that's similar to the duty that parents have to care for their children. Additionally, though, Browning and Veit maintain that so long as zoos secure a sufficiently high level of welfare, no other purposes are needed to justify their existence (3-4). Contrary to what zoo abolitionists believe, captivity is only, in and of itself, harmful to those who possess the capacity to realize that they're in captivity (97-102). Though certain highly complex animals, such as great apes and elephants, may possess this capacity, Browning and Veit contend that most animals do not (98 and 112). The upshot is that so long as zoos refrain from housing highly complex animals, and so long as they maintain a high standard of welfare for the animals that they do house, there really isn't anything morally wrong with them.

Browning and Veit's argument is made in the same vein as arguments recently advanced by Rachel Robison-Greene in [Edibility and In Vitro Meat: Ethical Considerations](#) (Lexington Books, 2022), and by Josh Milburn in [Food, Justice, and Animals: Feeding the World Respectfully](#) (Oxford University Press, 2023). Robison-Greene and Milburn are concerned with animal agriculture, rather than with zoos, but they share Browning and Veit's critical attitude toward abolitionism. Traditionally, debates in animal ethics assume that if animals do have basic rights, such as a right to live and to be free, then both zoos and animal agriculture should be abolished. Abolition may be less politically feasible at present than welfarist reforms (such as increasing cage sizes) are, but the traditional view is that ultimately, and over the long term, animal rights advocacy should work towards abolition. But if the arguments made by the above authors are sound, then respect for animal rights doesn't necessarily entail a commitment to abolition. Though current agricultural practices, such as the practice of killing animals for meat, are rights violating, there's no reason to think that animal agriculture can't be rights-respecting. Possibilities include replacing slaughter-based meat with 'lab-grown' (cultured) meat, extending workers' rights to egg-producing chickens (see Chapter 6 of *Food, Justice, and Animals*), and various others. And though many zoos provide many zoo animals with insufficient space, and insufficient opportunities for agency and enrichment, there's no reason think that zoos can't be rights-respecting if, as Browning and Veit argue, captivity is not intrinsically harmful to zoo animals.

Central to Browning and Veit's argument is a distinction between two types of freedom: liberty and agency (98-9). Agency, or the freedom to make choices, is an important part of animals' welfare. Ensuring that zoo animals have the opportunity to exercise agency requires ensuring that



their enclosures are spacious enough, and rich enough, to afford inhabitants a wide variety of options to choose from, such as various options for rest, play, food, exercise, and social interaction. It also requires ensuring that they have the ability to choose their environment, such as a ground level environment vs. an elevated one, a sunny one vs. a shady one, etc. Though liberty, or the absence of barriers (such as fences), can enhance agency by providing animals with additional options to choose from, Browning and Veit contend that a high level of agency is still possible within enclosures (98-101). What's more, the animals who possess the most liberty, namely animals who live in the wild, often face adverse conditions such as food scarcity and the threat of predators. The negative effects that such conditions have on animals' agency compete with liberty's positive effects, since searching for food and avoiding danger can leave animals with relatively little opportunity to do many of the things they enjoy (101). As a result, zoo animals who lack the ability to recognize, and thus to regret, that they live in captivity, aren't harmed by it so long as their enclosures are sufficiently spacious and rich to afford them a large measure of agency. Indeed, many zoo animals have the potential to enjoy more agency, and a higher level of welfare, than their counterparts in the wild do (101-2 and 106).

Much of *What Are Zoos For?* is devoted to explaining, and critically assessing the justificatory adequacy of, zoos' four traditional purposes: recreation, research, conservation, and education. The rest of the book explores several theoretical and practical issues concerning zoo animal welfare, and it argues that securing a sufficiently high level of welfare is of the utmost importance. An obvious upshot is that in cases where one of zoos' traditional purposes conflicts with zoo animals' welfare, the latter should take priority. For example, the conservation breeding programs zoos sometimes run can significantly harm the animals involved, such as when animals considered genetically unsuitable for breeding are 'culled'. Prioritizing welfare entails that such harms ought to be avoided (114-16). Thankfully, breeding programs are not the main way zoos contribute to conservation anyways (55-9). Browning and Veit maintain that zoos make a much larger, indirect contribution to conservation by educating visitors about the various threats housed species face, and by encouraging visitors to emotionally connect with members of those species (72-7). What's more, animal welfare and zoos' traditional goals are sometimes complementary. For example, Browning and Veit note that zoos are less likely to receive visitors when the animals are visibly depressed, bored, etc. (103). Interestingly, Browning and Veit also note that doing animal cognition research in zoos, rather than in laboratories, is a viable option with significant welfare benefits. Quality of life for animals in a zoo has the potential to be far higher than their quality of life in a laboratory would be (49-50).

What Are Zoos For? is optimistic about the ability of zoos to achieve a high level of welfare for the animals they house, but it doesn't turn a blind eye to zoos' shortcomings either. One significant issue is that many zoos house members of species whose needs they can't realistically meet. For example, small city zoos sometimes house large animals that require more space than the zoo can provide, and zoos located in warm climates sometimes house animals who need to live in a cold climate to be comfortable (111). Another issue is that many zoos house carnivorous animals who must be fed meat to remain healthy. In some cases, the meat they're fed is purchased from

industrial meat producers (which has its own welfare issues), but in many cases zoos raise their own feed animals, such as mice. In addition to being killed, feed animals are often kept in far worse conditions than the animals who interact with the public: they're treated much the way animals in industrial agriculture are (116-17).

Thankfully, welfare problems such as the above are not insurmountable. Zoos should refrain from housing members of species whose needs they can't meet, and they should provide feed animals with the same level of care that they provide their other animals. It may even one day be feasible to stop relying on slaughter-based meat altogether and to instead feed carnivores cultured meat (117). Still, the fact that zoos currently have these welfare deficiencies raises ethical issues for consumers. Though Browning and Veit make it seem as if potential visitors need only check to make sure that a zoo they'd like to visit is accredited (11), even accredited zoos have the above-mentioned deficiencies, so supporting them may be unethical. However, acknowledging as much complements the view that zoos ought to be reformed and not abolished. So long as consumers make it clear that whether they'll visit depends on whether zoos make significant welfare improvements, consumer boycotts promise to provide the motivation zoos need to make the reforms Browning and Veit argue for.

All in all, *What Are Zoos For?* is an accessible, engaging, well-argued, and original book. I highly recommend it.

Kyle Johannsen, Trent University