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English 111-77B

November 6, 2001

A Zoo Way of Thinking

The Virginia Zoo is no longer merely a collection of interesting animals. Established in 1901 as an animal showcase within a Norfolk city park, the zoo continuously grows and improves. Animal rights groups oppose zoos, alleging animal cruelty while denying education and conservation contributions. On the contrary, our local zoo maintains high levels of husbandry and offers numerous education and preservation benefits.

Animal rights groups claim zoo animals live locked in small cages, cramped, lonely, and bored. Originally, paved roads separated rows of cages, but the Virginia Zoo removed or renovated these older, unacceptable displays in favor of a more natural atmosphere. Recently, with tremendous community financial support, the zoo designed and constructed its first major exhibit since 1969. This aesthetic tiger environment established the possibility and direction of the zoo's growth. A naturalistic African exhibit opens next spring, providing open grazing space and natural social structures that create conditions conducive to beneficial natural behavior. Furthermore, the zoo requires behavior enrichment programs, stimulating the animals mentally and physically by introducing toys, enticing smells and regular exercise based on continual research and observation. Staff members demonstrate deep knowledge and deep caring for the animals in their care.

Animal rights groups reject zoos' educational benefits, claiming zoos offer only basic information. The Virginia Zoo offers additional information, including conservation messages and alerts. The availability of staff members and volunteers for further insight promotes added interest. While recognizing that many visitors desire only recreation, the zoo strives to deliver important messages with unique onsite and community outreach programs including lectures, festivals, and tours that motivate participants through interactive live animal presentations while encouraging alertness and promoting conservation of wildlife and the environment. The Virginia Zoological Society reports annual participation of more than 35,000 schoolchildren in these wildlife education programs (Virginia Zoological Society 1). Such soaring possibility demands that even if not everyone leaves enlightened or influenced, they must continue efforts to reach those they can affect. The zoo also offers resources for teachers by providing instruction strategies and aides, as well as involving educators in developing new programs that help local teachers reinforce numerous Standards of Learning objectives. The involvement of live animals captures student interest and offers teachers an exceptional opportunity to captivate and educate their students.

Animal rights groups dispute zoos' conservation benefits; however, the Virginia Zoo actively participates in the American Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) conservation programs. Opponents often claim zoos favor popular animals while doing little for other species. Inclusion of these rare, endangered, and popular species helps generate revenue to support broader goals and provides vital information for field research assisting habitat and animal protection efforts. The zoo currently houses a trio of extremely endangered Virgin Island Boas, part of an AZA program to reintroduce

these remarkably rare snakes to their native home. Snakes are certainly less popular creatures, but revenue from more popular animals supports their care. Additionally, the AZA maintains careful lineage records in an effort to breed animals with rarest alleles ensuring diverse gene pools, supporting survival of many endangered species. Primary goals once focused on breeding for reintroduction. Due to habitat loss, the zoo now focuses on conservation, education, field projects, and research to support habitat protection. Many activists argue that efforts only help diminutive numbers of animals. Even if only small numbers benefit, this does not stop the need for ongoing efforts. I cannot save the world's starving children either. Should I refuse to support local Food Bank programs, no longer dropping my donations in grocery store collection boxes? No one can do everything, but everyone can do something.

The Virginia Zoo consistently improves exhibits and animal care. While completing final stages for Africa, the zoo is forming a committee to plan their next major, naturalistic, multi-species exhibit, North America. As an AZA accredited institution, the zoo continues to meet high standards and play an important role in local education and global conservation. Animal rights groups should acknowledge the zoo's benefits and support these animals by offering knowledge, time, or financial support to develop additional animal friendly habitats and maintain the exceptional care of our animals, ultimately helping save endangered species by ensuring their livelihood in addition to protecting their native habitats and combating human threats through education.

Works Cited

Virginia Zoological Society. *Quick Points*. Pamphlet .Virginia Zoological Society, 2001.