

Are zoos a good thing?

Zoos are hugely popular attractions for adults and children alike. But are they actually a good thing?

Critics of zoos would argue that animals often suffer physically and mentally by being enclosed. Even the best artificial environments can't come close to matching the space, diversity, and freedom that animals have in their natural habitats. This deprivation causes many zoo animals to become stressed or mentally ill. Capturing animals in the wild also causes much suffering by splitting up families. Some zoos make animals behave unnaturally: for example, marine parks often force dolphins and whales to perform tricks. These mammals may die decades earlier than their wild relatives, and some even try to commit suicide.

On the other hand, by bringing people and animals together, zoos have the potential to educate the public about conservation issues and inspire people to protect animals and their habitats. Some zoos provide a safe environment for animals which have been mistreated in circuses, or pets which have been abandoned. Zoos also carry out important research into subjects like animal behaviour and how to treat illnesses.

One of the most important modern functions of zoos is supporting international breeding programmes, particularly for endangered species. In the wild, some of the rarest species have difficulty in finding mates and breeding, and they might also be threatened by poachers, loss of their habitat and predators. A good zoo will enable these species to live and breed in a secure environment. In addition, as numbers of some wild species drop, there is an increased danger of populations becoming too genetically similar. Breeding programmes provide a safeguard: zoo-bred animals can be released into the wild to increase genetic diversity.

However, opponents of zoos say that the vast majority of captive breeding programmes do not release animals back into the wild. Surplus animals are sold not only to other zoos but also to circuses or hunting ranches in the US or South Africa, where some people are willing to pay a lot of money for the chance to kill an animal in a fenced enclosure. Often, these animals are familiar with humans and have very little chance of escaping.

So, are zoos good for animals or not? Perhaps it all depends on how well individual zoos are managed, and the benefits of zoos can surely outweigh their harmful effects. However, it is understandable that many people believe imprisoning animals for any reason is simply wrong.

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Robot teachers

If you think of the jobs robots could never do, you would probably put doctors and teachers at the top of the list. It's easy to imagine robot cleaners and factory workers, but some jobs need human connection and creativity. But are we underestimating what robots can do? In some cases, they already perform better than doctors at diagnosing illness. Also, some patients might feel more comfortable sharing personal information with a machine than a person. Could there be a place for robots in education after all?

British education expert Anthony Seldon thinks so. And he even has a date for the robot takeover of the classroom: 2027. He predicts robots will do the main job of transferring information and teachers will be like assistants. Intelligent robots will read students' faces, movements and maybe even brain signals. Then they will adapt the information to each student. It's not a popular opinion and it's unlikely robots will ever have empathy and the ability to really connect with humans like another human can.

One thing is certain, though. A robot teacher is better than no teacher at all. In some parts of the world, there aren't enough teachers and 9–16 per cent of children under the age of 14 don't go to school. That problem could be partly solved by robots because they can teach anywhere and won't get stressed, or tired, or move somewhere for an easier, higher-paid job.

Those negative aspects of teaching are something everyone agrees on. Teachers all over the world are leaving because it is a difficult job and they feel overworked. Perhaps the question is not 'Will robots replace teachers?' but 'How can robots help teachers?' Office workers can use software to do things like organise and answer emails, arrange meetings and update calendars. Teachers waste a lot of time doing non-teaching work, including more than 11 hours a week marking homework. If robots could cut the time teachers spend marking homework and writing reports, teachers would have more time and energy for the parts of the job humans do best.

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