With this issue, *Society & Animals* launches a new section of the journal, “Animal Issues.” Taking over from the journal, *Animal Issues*, the section will focus on conceptual/philosophical aspects and cover areas of potential controversy or debate. The series begins with the article, “Bears, Zoos and Wilderness: The Poverty of Social Constructionism.” The author, Daniel Dombrowski, poses several thought-provoking and challenging questions relevant to a great deal of research on human-animal relationships.

How we think about “nature” is a difficult and provocative question. Does nature have a reality outside us, or is our understanding of it always mediated by social meanings? Does nature exist—or is it an idea as socially constructed as a traffic light? Anyone working on issues to do with nature or animals must, at some time, deal with this central—and apparently irreconcilable—tension between realism and social constructionism. At different times, we may make different decisions: Dombrowski reminds us that if we run headlong into a bear on a hiking trail, we are unlikely to spend much time pondering the construction of meanings of bears. Later, we might tell the story of our narrow escape and weave a tale of bears as symbols of wildness. Similarly,
various authors may reach different conclusions at different times about the significance of social constructionism in how they think about animals.

Dombrowski throws out some challenges to others concerned about the realism versus constructionism debate. In particular, he wonders whether social constructionists meaningfully can argue particular ethical positions. Moral debates loom large in our studies of the human-animal relationship, so this is a significant question. Dombrowski focuses on the dilemmas of keeping animals—specifically bears—in zoos. If the argument against keeping bears in zoos rests on assumptions that doing so conflicts with the autonomy of bears and their loss of freedoms of the wild, then how does that fit with the notion of “bears” as socially constructed ideas?

How we define nature is a critically important theme underlying our work in thinking about animals and one we all need to address. To think about animals, we must constantly ask, What is an animal? What is nature? What is wild? This article focuses on a specific kind of animal: bears—highly potent symbols, icons of raw, untamed wilderness. Yet, most people are likely to encounter them in captivity, in zoos, thus turning meanings on their head. Zoos, Dombrowski notes, are human inventions that many might question. Do they—as they often claim—fulfill a purpose in conservation? Rather, are they merely glorified prisons, removing the true authenticity of the animals?

These questions provide, I believe, a good starting point for “Animal Issues,” which is a forum for airing such contentious themes. Dombrowski has raised a number of these questions in his provocative article. I hope that it will stimulate further discussion and debate.

To reply to these issues please send a manuscript of no more than 1000 words, either electronically by attachment in Microsoft Word or as a disk. Papers on a new topic should be no more than 3000 words.

The “Animal Issues” section focuses specifically on conceptual/philosophical issues around the relationships between humans and animals. We particularly welcome papers that open up new areas of debate. Before submission, please consult the contributors’ guidelines published on the inside cover of each issue of Society & Animals. Submit manuscripts and correspondence to Dr. Lynda Birke, Institute for Women’s Studies, University of Lancaster, Lancaster, UK, LA1 4YW. E-mail: ghv37@dial.pipex.com