Nonhuman Zoo Animal Welfare: A Systematic Guide to Troubleshooting Problems

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Historically, nonhuman zoo animal welfare has borrowed heavily from farm animal welfare science, considering the mind, body, and nature of animals. Pragmatically, animal welfare therefore is studied as a measure of animal behavior, behavioral flexibility, and physiology. Arguably, there are limitations to considering zoo animal welfare problems from this perspective, but the greatest hurdle to its application and our understanding of which factors may lead to situations that compromise zoo animal welfare is our own bias. It is inevitable that due to our backgrounds (veterinarians are principally trained to explore health parameters; caretakers consider housing and husbandry; many zoo researchers are ethologists or endocrinologists) and available resources (i.e., budget, equipment, and skilled staff), we are likely to be biased in our approach to animal welfare and our designation of what “problems” exist where. What is less transparent is that following our bias is financial and time costly, often fails to resolve the issue, and confirms our bias. The solution is simple: be systematic in our approach to zoo animal welfare. However, we probably believe we are being systematic already. To facilitate the adoption of a systematic approach to animal welfare problems, it is suggested that information about several key exogenous and endogenous factors should be collected. These extend the more familiar categories to include environmental factors, individual differences, nutrition, and human-animal interactions. Furthermore, it is suggested that this “evidence-based” approach will also help distinguish between situations that do compromise welfare rather than those that are just “proposed” to be problematic.

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