A Brief History of Zoos

A zoo is a place where animals live in captivity and are put on display for people to view. The word “zoo” is short for “zoological park.” Zoos contain wide varieties of animals that are native to all parts of the Earth.

Though people have kept wild animals for thousands of years, those collections have not always resembled modern zoos. The first zoos were created as private collections by the wealthy to show their power. These private collections were called menageries.

Wall carvings found in Egypt and Mesopotamia are evidence that rulers and aristocrats created menageries as early as 2500 BCE. They left records of expeditions to distant places to bring back exotic animals such as giraffes, elephants, bears, dolphins, and birds. There is evidence that ancient zoo owners hired animal handlers to make sure their animals thrived and reproduced.

Zoos also existed in later civilizations, including China, Greece, and Rome. The Aztec emperor Montezuma II, in what is today Mexico, maintained one of the earliest animal collections in the Western Hemisphere. It was destroyed by Hernan Cortes during the Spanish conquest in 1520.

Modern Zoos

The model of the modern, public zoo became popular in 18th century, during the Age of Enlightenment. The Age of Enlightenment was a period in European history when science, reason, and logic were promoted as ideals of society and government. The scientific focus of the Age of Enlightenment extended to zoology.

During this time, people started wanting to study animals for scientific reasons. Scientists wanted to research animal behavior and anatomy. To do this, scientists and zookeepers had
to keep animals in places that were close to, or resembled, the animals’ natural habitats.

The first modern zoo, built in 1793, opened in Paris, France. The menageries of French aristocrats, including the king and queen, were taken by leaders of the French Revolution and relocated to the Ménagerie du Jardin des Plantes. The facility is still a busy and popular zoo in downtown Paris.

Early zoos like the Menagerie du Jardin des Plantes were more like museums of living animals than natural habitats. Animals were kept in small display areas, with as many species as space would allow.

Today, zoos are meant to entertain and educate the public but have a strong emphasis on scientific research and species conservation. There is a trend toward giving animals more space and recreating natural habitats. Zoos are usually regulated and inspected by the government.