Zoos evolved at a time when travel for most people was impractical. Nowadays, wildlife watchers can hop on a plane to Africa, Australia, or Costa Rica for photo safaris or even stay at home and catch nature documentaries on television or view live Internet video feeds, which capture animals’ natural behavior that is rarely, if ever, seen in zoos.

Zoos once boasted attendance of more than 142 million people each year. Now, however, zoos are of declining interest to a public that has become much more knowledgeable about the needs and behavior of wild animals and is more aware of the toll that captivity takes on animals who are meant to roam free.

There is no excuse for keeping intelligent, social animals in cages for our fleeting distraction and amusement. Habitat loss and other perils of the wild are not prevented by confining animals in cramped conditions and depriving them of everything that is natural and important to them.

Zoos often separate bonded individuals, who are traded and shuttled from place to place to suit breeding programs, leaving their complex and multifaceted social relationships in tatters.

Animal welfare typically takes a back seat to the bottom line. Precious financial resources, including taxpayer subsidies, are often squandered on gift shops and amusement rides instead of being spent to upgrade the exhibits.

Captivity Drives Animals Insane

Most zoo exhibits provide animals with little, if any, opportunity to express natural behavior or make choices in their daily lives, and this can lead to boredom and neurosis. With nothing to do, animals in zoos sleep too much, eat too much, and exhibit behavior that is rarely, if ever,
seen in the wild. Primates throw feces and engage in “regurgitation and reingestion”—vomiting and then consuming the vomit.

Wide-ranging animals such as bears and big cats pace incessantly. Primates and birds mutilate themselves, and chimpanzees and gorillas become overly aggressive. Hooved animals lick and chew on fences and make strange lip, neck, and tongue movements. Giraffes twist their necks, bending their heads back and forth repeatedly. Elephants bob their heads and sway from side to side. Captive animals might show no interest in mating or, alternatively, become obsessed with sex.

Marine mammals repeatedly swim in the same repetitious patterns in their tanks. Fish suffer too. A study conducted by the Captive Animals’ Protection Society concluded that 90 percent of public aquariums studied had animals that showed stereotypic (neurotic) behaviors, such as interacting with transparent boundaries, repeatedly raising their heads above the surface of the water, spinning around an imaginary object, and frequently turning on one side and rubbing along the floor of the tank.

**Surplus Animals**

Zoos know that nothing brings paying customers through their gates faster than newborn animals. But breeding programs—which often operate under the guise of species preservation—inevitably result in a surplus of adult animals who are less crowd-pleasing. So zoos routinely trade, lend, sell, barter, and warehouse adult animals they no longer want.

Unwanted animals may be sold to dealers, who then sell the animals to dilapidated roadside zoos or traveling circuses. Some animals end up at canned hunt facilities, where they become targets for hunters who are eager to shoot “big game.” From 2006 to 2009, Missouri’s Dickerson Park Zoo handed over “surplus” giraffes, zebras, kangaroos, wallabies, and exotic antelopes to questionable entities including Buddy Jordan, a notorious animal dealer who is known to have sold animals to hunting ranches, exotic-animal breeders, dealers, and unaccredited zoos. New Jersey’s Cape May County Zoo sold two giraffes, Twiggs and Jeffrey, to an animal broker who then sold them to a traveling circus.

The exotic-pet trade has become saturated with tigers and other big cats because of the zoo industry’s reckless disposal of exotic animals. Other animals are simply sold for slaughter. Each year, when baby animals who are exhibited in the Minnesota Zoo’s farm display grow up and lose their appeal, the zoo sends them to livestock auctions, and from there, many are ultimately sent to slaughter. The following spring, more babies are born, only to meet the same sad fate at the end of the season. The chief of veterinary services at the Cleveland Zoo has even called on members of the zoo community to support the use of surplus zoo animals in medical experimentation.

Not a single U.S. zoo has a policy of providing lifetime care for the animals who are born at its facilities, and many zoos breed species knowing in advance that the offspring—especially males—will be difficult to place when they mature.
By their very nature, zoos leave animals vulnerable to a variety of dangers from which they have no defense or opportunity to escape. Animals in zoos from coast to coast have been poisoned, left to starve, deprived of veterinary care, and burned alive in fires. Many have died after eating coins, plastic bags, and other items thrown into their cages. Animals have been beaten, bludgeoned, and stolen by people who were able to gain access to their exhibits.

A bear starved to death at the Toledo Zoo after zoo officials locked her up to hibernate without food or water—not knowing that her species doesn’t hibernate. At the Niabi Zoo in Illinois, a 3-month-old lion cub was euthanized after his spinal cord was crushed by a falling exhibit door. Despite knowing that two Asiatic bears had fought dozens of times, the Denver Zoo continued to house them together until one finally killed the other. A kangaroo who was struck by a train running through the exhibit at the Cleveland Zoo was so severely injured that she had to be euthanized; she was at least the fifth animal to be struck by the train. A hyena at the Buffalo Zoo was crushed to death by a boulder in the exhibit. At the Saint Louis Zoo, a polar bear died during exploratory surgery, which revealed that pieces of cloth and a plastic trash bag had obstructed his digestive tract.

At the National Zoo, dozens of animals have died in recent years, including two zebras who died of malnutrition, two red pandas who died from eating rat poison that was spread in their enclosure, and an orangutan who was euthanized because zoo officials mistakenly believed that she had cancer.

In the event of natural disasters such as floods, wildfires, or hurricanes, animals are often left to fend for themselves. When wildfires broke out near the Los Angeles Zoo, officials admitted that they had no evacuation plan. And during Hurricane Katrina, most of the 6,000 aquatic animals at a New Orleans aquarium perished when the power failed and employees were forced to vacate the premises.