



Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

27th February 2008

To: San Francisco Board of Supervisors

Visit to San Francisco Zoo on 1st February 2008

I have worked in and been involved with the zoo industry for a significant part of the last twenty-five years. I started my career at the London Zoo and later became the animal curator at Woburn Safari Park, a UK zoo. In addition, I spent twelve years conducting conservation and welfare research at Oxford University. I am currently the Head of the Wildlife Department at the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA).

I visited the San Francisco Zoo at the invitation of a local NGO, In Defense of Animals, who asked me to write to you. IDA wanted an external opinion about animal exhibits at the San Francisco Zoo. I accepted IDA's invitation as I considered the visit a legitimate part of my duties as a representative of the RSPCA. I did not receive any compensation from IDA and my time and expenses were covered by the RSPCA.

My February 1, 2008 visit to San Francisco Zoo followed a visit in May 2004. However, if I had not been told that the zoo spent many millions of dollars on renovations since 2004, I would not have guessed that improvements had been made. So many aspects of the zoo's animal husbandry represent an out-of-date, rather than progressive, approach to animal welfare. My overall impression was that the San Francisco Zoo has failed to adopt modern approaches to animal husbandry, which are rooted in concern for the animals' welfare as well as their conservation, and which are informed by up-to-date biological information.

I will not list all my concerns in detail, because I do not wish to give the impression that by not mentioning a particular exhibit I considered it satisfactory. Nonetheless, some startlingly obvious examples were:

- The rhino exhibit: I cannot understand how the Zoo thinks a small, bare earth enclosure with a stump in it is good enough for a rhinoceros, or any other animal. When I visited I could see no food at all, let alone natural grazing.
- The African Savannah: In common with other exhibits (e.g. gorillas) in the Zoo, public viewing points surround the animals. This is, frankly, simply out-dated exhibit design and I was most surprised to see it in a modern exhibit.
- There appeared to be little shelter available in the savannah exhibit, and there appeared to be little food. Notably, the giraffe had no browse, and appeared to have licked or chewed the side of the house. Giraffe are prone to stereotyped licking if they have insufficient browse.
- The grey seal pit: This defies explanation. The very fact that this 19th century exhibit has been allowed to persist points to a serious lack of knowledge about animal welfare – or at least the will to do something about it – at the San Francisco Zoo.

Cont'd/...

Science Group

RSPCA, Wilberforce Way
Southwater, Horsham
West Sussex RH13 9RS

Tel main switchboard
+44(0)300 123 0100

Science Group Fax
+44(0)303 123 0042

A charity registered in
England & Wales
Charity no. 219099

www.rspca.org.uk/sciencegroup

Patron HM The Queen

Vice Patron His Grace
The Archbishop of Canterbury



Helping animals through welfare science

- The polar bear exhibit: This is the same as out-dated polar bear exhibits the world over – a cramped, concrete pen with a stereotyping bear in it. The San Francisco polar bear has a very fixed stereotypy; eight steps one way, eight steps back, at the front of the exhibit. Documentaries over the last thirty years have shown us repeatedly that polar bears' habitats are very different to the way zoo designers thought they were. Modern science has predicted successfully, time and again, that when a wide-ranging carnivore is cooped up in a tiny, barren enclosure, the frustrated behaviours are likely to manifest themselves as stereotypies. No amount of justification, explanation or excuse gets us away from these fundamental facts.
- The chimp exhibit: This tiny, moated, impoverished exhibit belongs to a bygone age. Chimpanzees simply cannot lead fulfilling lives when the exhibit is too small to permit a natural group size or to allow for the environmental complexity necessary to occupy the minds of humans' closest relatives.

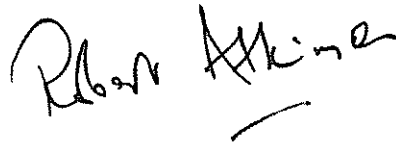
Ever since I first worked with zoos in the early 1980s they have generated criticism. Some of it was justified, and my colleagues and I would regard it as our duty to explain to our zoo guests why things were not as good as they could be. I have noticed over the last few years that zoos have perhaps become more defensive and self-justifying.

I have lived with captive animals since I could walk, on farms, in zoos, for research and as companions. It is not my ambition to close down the San Francisco Zoo – I am not anti-zoo. I believe that zoos can potentially provide care for some species with no or little compromise to their welfare.

I am, however, greatly concerned about the welfare consequences of keeping some animals in some exhibits in some zoos, and perplexed by the justifications and defences given by zoos to counter the public's concerns.

I am saddened, surprised and disappointed that the San Francisco Zoo is, in many respects, just average, and in many respects less than average. I have seen far better zoos, and I do not mean those with more money. I am assuming San Francisco wants its Zoo compared with the best, not the worst, and so it should. San Francisco is one of the most vibrant, forward-thinking, progressive cities in the world. If my observations in some small way help San Franciscans to rethink, revitalise and radicalise their Zoo into something they can be proud of, then they will have been worthwhile.

Yours sincerely



Robert P D Atkinson BSc (Lond) MSc DPhil (Oxon)
Head of Wildlife Department



Helping animals through welfare science