

Qualia

A controversial choice for zoos: Birth control or euthanasia?

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Birth control is used for more than half of the female Western lowland gorillas held in 50 or so American zoos, according to the New York Times report. (Photo: Peggy Mihelich/AAAS)

Nothing draws crowds to a zoo like the birth of an adorable baby animal. But zoos must deal with limited capacity and the need to preserve diversity in the gene pools of endangered species. A *New York Times* report (see below) examines the difficult choices that zoos worldwide make when it comes to exotic animal reproduction.

There are two ways zoos can control their animal populations: in the U.S., the method is contraception. Apes take human birth control pills, while other animals eat hormone-spiked food or have slow-releasing hormones implanted in their bodies. The second option, used in European zoos, is to let the animals breed and raise their young, and then euthanize the unneeded offspring.

It's a shocking idea to many Americans, but European zookeepers argue that euthanasia is the more humane option. It helps control the population and recreate the extremely high mortality rate that most young animals face in the wild. Bengt Holst, director of conservation for the Copenhagen Zoo, explains why euthanizing the offspring of exotic animals helps those creatures retain aspects of their natural behavior:

"We'd rather they have as natural behavior as possible. We have already taken away their predatory and antipredatory behaviors. If we take away their parenting behavior, they have not much left."

In many European zoos, animals are allowed to raise their young until an age at which they would naturally separate from their parents. If the offspring do not fit into breeding plans for the species, they are euthanized.

For the American public, the more palatable choice is birth control. While it's safe for some, side effects can and do occur. Great apes tolerate birth control pills well, because they are most similar to humans, but some big cats and canines can develop uterine infections or tumors as a result of hormonal birth control implants.

European zoos that use euthanasia for population control cite the health risks of contraception as well as the enrichment of parenting. As Leslie Kaufman in the *New York Times* puts it, "...in Europe, some zookeepers would rather euthanize unneeded offspring after they mature than deny the animal parents the experience of procreating and nurturing their young."

It cannot be an easy choice for zookeepers, and it is controversial among the public and conservationists. What do you think?

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