

Consultation on Standards of Modern Zoo Practice for Great Britain

Link response: 20 May 2022

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is the largest nature coalition in England, bringing together 65 organisations to use their joint voice for the protection of animals and the natural world

- We welcome this consultation from the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on proposals for new Standards of Modern Zoo Practice. We note that the new conservation, education and research requirements in the standards will only come into force when the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill receives Royal Assent.
- Our response, drawn from the expertise of the Link Animal Welfare Group, falls into three sections:
 - An expression of broad support for the new standards
 - Detailed comment on the new conservation, education and research requirements
 - The need for higher ambition through phasing out of the keeping of elephants in zoos, as a species that particularly struggles in captivity.
- This thematic response conveys the views of Link in a clearer manner than a question-by-question format would have. We hope that it is a useful contribution to the consultation.

The new standards

- We welcome the new standards. The current Standards of Modern Zoo Practice for Great Britain need to be updated, to reflect a decade of research and new evidence on how to provide for the welfare of animals kept in zoos¹ and to address clear failures to adhere to welfare standards. As reported by a 2013 survey of 136 British zoos *"most zoos did not meet all the minimum animal welfare standards and there was no clear evidence of improving levels of compliance with standards associated with the Zoo Licensing Act 1981."*²
- The new standards are clearly informed by recent research and have the potential to deliver higher levels of animal welfare than is currently the case. We particularly welcome the following new requirements:
 - For zoos to ensure indoor and outdoor areas of their enclosures are suitable for the "comfort, welfare and behavioural needs of the species and individual animals at all times" (2.1).
 - For all animals of each species to have an active programme of enrichment (4.5).
 - For all types of animal experience to be subject to welfare assessment and ethical review before taking place (9.2).
- There is the potential for the new standards to go further. Given the illegal trade in animals and animal parts, we suggest that within the mission statement of any zoo there should be a clear commitment to abstain from commercial trade and promote public transparency on how animals are sourced, and how zoos deal with offspring and deceased animals. Link is also supportive of efforts to help zoos to go further and transition away from all experiences with wild animals, to ensure species-appropriate behaviours are sustained at all times.

¹ <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-019-0345-3>

² <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4494370/>

- We are concerned that the drafting of the new standards would appear to allow for cetaceans to be kept in confined facilities (see Appendix 1.7). This has the potential to allow for facilities or captive display of whales, dolphins and porpoises to be reintroduced into the UK. It is nearly 30 years since the UK's last dolphinarium closed alongside growing recognition that no captive facility is able to provide the space and environmental conditions that these highly social creatures need to thrive. We ask that the wording of the standards are tightened up, so that the keeping of whales, dolphins and porpoises in captivity is expressly prohibited, to prevent an inadvertent regression of UK welfare standards.
- Higher standards are also just one side of the coin – to deliver an uplift in zoo animal welfare, these standards need to be properly enforced. As a 2013 Born Free study demonstrated, enforcement of zoo standards is variable across the country, with resource deprived local authorities struggling to deliver meaningful enforcement, often hampered by a lack of expertise.³ Clarification is needed around how the new standards will be enforced in practice, including how the system of directions will be used, and the period of time a zoo will be given to correct any identified deficits. The zoo licensing and inspection process itself should be centralised, to eliminate reliance on already overstretched and insufficiently resourced local authorities, and to ensure the new standards are consistently and effectively enforced.

New conservation, education and research requirements

- We broadly welcome the proposed new conservation, education and research requirements which represent a significant improvement to the existing provisions within the Zoo Licensing Act. Each requirement would benefit from the following further improvements:

Conservation

- Using zoo size as a proposed metric for assessing the level of conservation requirement different zoos must meet opens the door to manipulation. The method for determining whether a zoo should be categorised as 'small, medium or large' appears to be based on the assumption that the metric has been tested out on at least a subset of British zoos and has been proven. The Standards should include a requirement for DEFRA to review the effectiveness of the metric over time, particularly to determine whether zoos are manipulating the metric in order to prevent themselves from being placed in a larger category with more onerous requirements, or whether for certain facilities the metric doesn't accurately reflect the institution.
- Similarly including the number of species maintained by a zoo as a metric to help determine the level of conservation requirement may open the door to manipulation. For example, facilities might divest of invertebrate or aquatic species to lower their metric score. Defra should again review the effectiveness of this metric over time, to check for any abuses.
- All conservation activities should be assessed by an independent professional conservationist to ensure such activities meaningfully contribute to *in situ* conservation. As a 2021 Born Free study highlighted, recent conservation activities undertaken by UK zoos have sometimes failed to demonstrate such a meaningful contribution.⁴ Inspectors tasked with reviewing conservation

³ <https://www.bornfree.org.uk/publications/application-enforcement-zoo-1981>

⁴ <https://www.bornfree.org.uk/publications/zoo-funding-report>

documentation may not have the necessary expertise to make this assessment, necessitating professional conservationist involvement.

Education

- The education requirement should include an animal welfare element, to make the usual welfare requirements of zoo animals clear to visitors. The omission of this from the proposed standards is a significant and concerning omission.
- This animal welfare element could be delivered by ensuring educational material always includes information about the species' normal social structure (e.g., solitary/gregarious) and natural habitat, with specific reference to the species home range/territory size.

Research

- Large zoos should be required to carry out at least one significant piece of research on animals in their natural environment per year, to ensure they contribute to the study and conservation of animals in the wild.
- All zoo research projects should be aimed at benefiting the conservation of species in the wild, while also improving the health and welfare of animals being held by zoos. Results of research conducted by zoos should be published annually.

Phasing out the keeping of elephants

- The complex social, physical, behavioural, and environmental needs of certain species means that they are wholly unsuited to be kept in captivity. As these animals will never thrive in captivity, their presence in zoos should be phased out, unless there is a clear and essential conservation purpose.
- Elephants meet this category. In the words of a comprehensive RSPCA study of the available evidence "*the benefits of keeping elephants in zoos do not outweigh the cost*".⁵
- The home range of wild elephants ranges from 14 - 10,738km² for African savanna elephants and 34 – 997km² for Asian elephants. A minimum enclosure size of 0.02km² (2ha) as proposed in the new standards, while representing a small improvement on current recommendations, remains wholly inadequate and orders of magnitude smaller than the area elephants have evolved to live in.
- Elephants in captivity also frequently have to contend with unnatural social groupings, consisting of small numbers of unrelated elephants. This is a damaging living arrangement for highly complex social animals that live in tightly bound family groups in the wild.

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<https://science.rspca.org.uk/documents/1494935/9042554/A+review+of+the+welfare+of+zoo+elephants+in+Europe.pdf/8dd529a1-5f5b-e713-fcac-4a99c7b90489?t=1553171443018>

See also:

<https://science.rspca.org.uk/documents/1494935/9042554/Live+hard+die+young+Z06.pdf/99aa1282-4484-5c6f-e5bb-83b57339ce5a?t=1553171442360> and <https://www.bornfree.org.uk/elephant-free-uk>

- In consequence of these conditions, elephants in captivity often suffer from significant health issues, including obesity and joint weakness, and are observed displaying abnormal behaviours such as repetitive swaying.
- In light of this clear evidence, the new standards should seize the opportunity to phase out the keeping of elephants in zoos. No further breeding of elephants should take place in UK zoos. A “retirement facility for non-breeding animals” should be the only acceptable purpose for a zoo housing elephants under the new standards.
- We are also concerned that the revised standards for elephants have been drafted prior to the Government response to the Elephant Welfare Group’s long-awaited 10-year report on elephants in UK zoos, which we understand is itself currently the subject of review by the Zoo Expert Committee and other stakeholders.

For questions or further information please contact:

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