

Forum

Towards a research-based conservation identity for zoos – a reply to Wehnelt and Wilkinson, and Thomas

Paul A. Rees

Wehnelt & Wilkinson (2005) suggest that I am confused about the aim of the Zoos Directive, stating that it is '... to further the conservation role of zoos rather than increasing research activities.' On the contrary, they have confused the aim with the means of compliance. Participating in research is but one means by which a zoo may demonstrate a conservation role. I have not suggested that research activity should be increased, or that poorly resourced zoos should develop research programmes, or indeed that research is a compulsory activity. I have merely suggested that much of the research undertaken in zoos is not directly relevant to conservation and, as such, does not fulfil the requirements of the Directive. Wehnelt & Wilkinson have produced no evidence to the contrary.

If zoos have moved the focus of their activity away from captive breeding and reintroduction and towards helping species *in situ*, as Wehnelt & Wilkinson suggest, their mission statements have failed to keep up: 'The role of the zoo is to support and promote conservation by breeding threatened species ...' (Chester Zoo); 'Bristol Zoo Gardens maintains and defends biodiversity through breeding endangered species ...' I completely agree that zoos should shift the focus of their conservation and research efforts towards *in situ* problems, and have previously argued this in relation to Asian elephants (Rees, 2003; Sukumar, 2003). But, if captive breeding and reintroduction are no longer to be central to a zoo's mission, the significant body of zoo research on reproduction and breeding suddenly becomes largely irrelevant to conservation.

Zoos perform useful conservation roles. They include education, captive breeding, the support of *in situ* populations and research. But zoos should not pretend that zoo research is currently clearly focused on applied conservation problems. That is not to say that it has no value, merely that it is not fulfilling the requirements of the Directive unless conservation benefits accrue. Rather than acknowledge that zoo research should be better

focused, Wehnelt & Wilkinson seek to redefine research to include basic activities such as record keeping. This is not research and, furthermore, record keeping is obligatory under Article 3 of the Directive.

Wehnelt & Wilkinson claim that '... zoos of all sizes encourage academics and zoo funded researchers to study their animals ...' and that 'Zoos support and encourage cooperation with and active input from research academics ...' But this is not always true. Zoos are selective about the studies they allow and highly sensitive about any work that has welfare implications. When Clubb & Mason (2002) sent questionnaires to the directors of 18 zoos in the UK in an attempt to collect data on the biology and husbandry of zoo elephants, none of the zoos replied. Zoos themselves set the agenda for the research carried out with their animals and they should take a lead in making sure that this is focused on conservation issues.

Thomas (2005) suggests that the 'high number of student research projects carried out in zoos may not directly accrue conservation benefits but the process is facilitating the training ... of potential conservation biologists.' Regrettably only around 10% of biology graduates in the UK find employment in scientific research (Anon., 2005) and the proportion entering employment in conservation is so small that it is not separately recorded. In any event, training is not research.

If zoo conservation research is thriving then so too should be zoo research journals. But they are not, and a recent attempt to establish *Aquarium Sciences and Conservation* resulted in failure after just three volumes due to lack of contributions. If the zoo community is happy with its research performance why did it declare, at a recent international symposium, a need to 'prioritize applied research relevant to conservation-related questions over studies with no direct conservation output'? (Anon., 2004). If zoos hope to 'use zoo-based research as part of forging a conservation identity', as suggested at this symposium (Anon., 2004), this change of focus will be critical. Zoos are not there yet.

Paul A. Rees School of Environment & Life Sciences and Research Institute for the Built and Human Environment, Peel Building, University of Salford, Salford, Greater Manchester, M5 4WT, UK. E-mail p.a.rees@salford.ac.uk

Received 28 January 2005. Accepted 28 January 2005.

References

- Anon. (2004) *Catalysts for Conservation: A Direction for Zoos in the 21st Century*. 19–20 February 2004. [Http://www.chesterzoo.org/conservation.asp](http://www.chesterzoo.org/conservation.asp) [accessed 21 March 2005]

- Catalysts%20for%20Conservation%20Summary%20Document.pdf [accessed 31 January 2005].
- Anon. (2005) *Biology – 2003 Graduates*.
[Http://www.prospects.ac.uk/cms/ShowPage/Home_page/What_do_graduates_do_2005/charts_and_tables_pages/p!eiglkfk?subject_id=2](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/cms/ShowPage/Home_page/What_do_graduates_do_2005/charts_and_tables_pages/p!eiglkfk?subject_id=2) [accessed 31 January 2005].
- Clubb, R. & Mason, G. (2002) *A Review of the Welfare of Zoo Elephants in Europe. A Report Commissioned by the RSPCA*. Animal Behaviour Research Group, Department of Zoology, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK.
- Rees, P.A. (2003) Asian elephants in zoos face global extinction: should zoos accept the inevitable? *Oryx*, **37**, 20–22.
- Sukumar, R. (2003) Asian elephants in zoos – a response to Rees. *Oryx*, **37**, 23–24.
- Thomas, R. (2005) Internal drive vs external directive: the delivery of conservation through zoo-based research – a response to Rees. *Oryx*, **39**, 134.
- Wehnelt, S. & Wilkinson, R. (2005) Research, conservation and zoos: the EC Zoos Directive – a response to Rees. *Oryx*, **39**, 132–133.