CONTEXTUALISING THE ROLE OF ZOOS IN CONSERVATION:
AN AUSTRALASIAN EXPERIENCE

Nicole Andrea Mazur
BSc, MEnvSt

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**TITLE PAGE** ........................................................................................................... 1  
**TABLE OF CONTENTS** ......................................................................................... ii  
**LIST OF TABLES** ................................................................................................... vii  
**LIST OF FIGURES** ................................................................................................ xi  
**LIST OF PLATES** .................................................................................................... xv  
**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS** .................................................................................... xxvi  
**ABSTRACT** ............................................................................................................. xxviii  
**DECLARATION** ....................................................................................................... xxx  
**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** ......................................................................................... xxxi  

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION ........................................................................... 1  
1.1 ZOO FEATURES ..................................................................................................... 1  
1.2 EXPLORING ZOOS’ ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITIES AND VALUES ............ 3  
1.3 ENVIRONMENTAL AND WILDLIFE POLICIES IN A TECHNOCENTRIC WORLD .... 8  
1.4 RESEARCH ASPIRATIONS AND DIRECTIONS ................................................. 9  
1.5 ZOO POLICY ........................................................................................................ 10  
  1.5.1 Rational Decision Making Models and Incremental Policy Advances ......... 12  
  1.5.2 Bureaucratic Structures and Conservative Policies .................................... 14  
  1.5.3 Organisational Deliberations ...................................................................... 17  
1.6 ZOO POLITICS AND POWER ............................................................................ 20  
  1.6.1 Models of Power ....................................................................................... 21  
  1.6.2 Corporatising the Public Sector: the Converging and Dominating Interests of Business and the State ......................................................... 24  
1.7 DISSERTATION STRUCTURE AND THEMES .............................................. 26  
1.8 CONCLUSION ...................................................................................................... 28  

## CHAPTER TWO: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH DESIGN IN ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES ............................................................................................. 30  
2.1 INTRODUCTION ................................................................................................. 30  
2.2 CONSTRUCTING ZOO KNOWLEDGE ............................................................ 31  
  2.2.1 A Synthesis of Empirical, Cultural and Critical Inquiries ....................... 31  
  2.2.2 A Discussion on an Interdisciplinary Approach ...................................... 33  
  2.2.3 Policy Analysis as a Guiding Principle for Research ......................... 35  
  2.2.4 A Qualitative Inquiry .............................................................................. 37
2.3 RESEARCH TECHNIQUES ................................................................. 38
  2.3.1 Literature Review ................................................................. 38
  2.3.2 The Zoo Selection ................................................................. 40
  2.3.3 Informal Observation ............................................................ 42
  2.3.4 Interviews ........................................................................... 43
    i. Specifics of Zoo Interviews ....................................................... 45
    ii. Specifics of Interviews with the Conservation Community .......... 45
  2.3.5 Questionnaires ...................................................................... 46
    i. Specifics of Zoo Visitor Questionnaires ..................................... 47
    ii. Specifics of Conservation Community Questionnaires ............... 49

2.4 CONCLUSION ........................................................................ 50

CHAPTER THREE: ZOOS AND CONSERVATION, AN HISTORICAL ACCOUNT ................................................................. 51
  3.1 INTRODUCTION ...................................................................... 51
  3.2 ANCIENT MENAGERIES .............................................................. 52
  3.3 THE MIDDLE AGES ................................................................. 54
  3.4 DISCOVERY AND TRADE DURING THE RENAISSANCE ............... 55
  3.5 REVOLUTIONS IN THOUGHT AND OTHER ZOO DEVELOPMENTS .... 57
    3.5.1 Scientific and Political Influences ........................................ 58
    3.5.2 An Evolving Zoo Identity: in Pursuit of Legitimacy ............... 60
  3.6 SHIFTING TO A NEW ERA .......................................................... 67
  3.7 MODERN ZOOS ...................................................................... 69
    3.7.1 Developing Zoo Sciences ...................................................... 69
    3.7.2 Exhibiting Animals and Educating Visitors ......................... 69
    3.7.3 Education Trends .............................................................. 70
    3.7.4 Emerging Industry-wide Conservation Principles and Practices ... 71
    3.7.5 Searching for a Balance Among Competing Priorities ............. 74
  3.8 CONCLUSION ....................................................................... 78

CHAPTER FOUR: THE PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF ZOOS' ROLE IN CONSERVATION ................................................... 80
  4.1 INTRODUCTION .................................................................... 80
  4.2 ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST ZOOS .................................... 80
    4.2.1 Using Species Conservation to Protect Biodiversity ............... 81
      i. Limited Scope of Zoo-Based Ex-Situ Efforts ............................ 83
      ii. Reintroduction Problems .................................................... 84
      iii. High Costs and Misplaced Priorities ................................... 86
      iv. Institutional Commitments to and Capabilities for Conducting Captive Breeding ...................................... 87
      v. Misleading Messages .......................................................... 87
    4.2.2 Education vs Entertainment ................................................ 88
    4.2.3 Research ......................................................................... 90
4.3 INTERPRETING AND VALUING NON-HUMAN NATURE IN ZOOS

4.3.1 Instrumental and Intrinsic Value for Non-Human Nature

i. Instrumental Value

ii. Intrinsic Value

4.3.2 Applying Value Theory to Zoos

i. Conservation Justifications

4.4 CONCLUSION

CHAPTER FIVE: VISITING THE STUDY SITES

5.1 COMPARING AND CONTRASTING AUSTRALASIAN ZOOS

5.1.1 Animal Collections and Exhibit Designs

5.1.2 Organisational Structures

5.2 THE ADELAIDE ZOO

5.2.1 Animal Collections & Exhibit Designs

5.2.2 Organisational Structures

i. Zoo Personnel and Conservation Practices

5.3 THE PERTH ZOO

5.3.1 Animal Collections and Exhibit Designs

5.3.2 Organisational Arrangements

i. Zoo Personnel & Conservation Practices

5.4 THE TERRITORY WILDLIFE PARK

5.4.1 Animal Collection and Exhibit Designs

5.4.2 Organisational Arrangements

i. Zoo Personnel & Conservation Practices

5.5 CURRUMBIN SANCTUARY

5.5.1 Animal Collections and Exhibit Designs

5.5.2 Organisational Arrangements

i. Zoo Personnel & Conservation Practices

5.6 ZOOLOGICAL PARKS BOARD OF NEW SOUTH WALES (Taronga and Western Plains Zoos)

5.6.1 Taronga Zoo

i. Animal Collection & Exhibit Designs

5.6.2 Western Plains Zoo

i. Animal Collection & Exhibit Designs

5.6.3 Organisational Arrangements

i. Zoo Personnel & Conservation Practices (Taronga & Western Plains Zoos)

5.7 THE VICTORIAN ZOOS

5.7.1 Melbourne Zoo

i. Animal Collections & Exhibit Designs

5.7.2 Healesville Sanctuary

i. Animal Collections & Exhibit Designs
5.7 THE VICTORIAN ZOOS (cont.)
5.7.3 Werribee Zoo ............................................................................. 194
   i. Animal Collections & Exhibit Designs .................................................. 194
5.7.4 Organisational Arrangements ............................................................. 197
   i. Zoo Personnel & Conservation Practices (ZBV, Melbourne Zoo, Healesville Sanctuary & Werribee Zoo) .................. 200
5.8 THE AUCKLAND ZOO ....................................................................... 201
5.8.1 Animal Collection and Exhibit Designs ............................................. 202
5.8.2 Organisational Arrangements ............................................................. 212
   i. Zoo Personnel & Conservation Practices ........................................... 212
5.9 CONCLUSION ..................................................................................... 214

CHAPTER 6: ZOO CONSERVATION PROGRAMS ........................................ 215
6.1 INTRODUCTION ................................................................................. 215
6.2 SPECIES MANAGEMENT ..................................................................... 215
6.3 ZOOS AND THEIR INTER-AGENCY EFFORTS: EX SITU FOR IN SITU ................................................................. 226
6.4 CONSERVATION OUTREACH ............................................................ 229
6.5 EDUCATION ....................................................................................... 231
   6.5.1 Forms and Structures of Zoo Education Programs ......................... 233
   6.5.2 Schools Programs ........................................................................ 237
   6.5.3 The Zoo-Visitor Experience - a Question of Informal Learning ........ 239
      i. Zoo Staff-Visitor Interactions ......................................................... 244
   6.5.4 Community Education ................................................................. 245
6.6 RESEARCH ......................................................................................... 245
6.7 THE PUBLIC PROFILE OF ZOOS ........................................................ 246
6.8 CONCLUSION ..................................................................................... 248

CHAPTER SEVEN: INSTITUTIONAL AND REGULATORY FACTORS INFLUENCING ZOO POLICY ............................................................. 250
7.1 INTRODUCTION ................................................................................. 250
7.2 FEDERALISM AND ZOO POLICY: GOVERNMENT STRATEGIES, POLICIES AND RELEVANT LEGISLATION .................................................. 250
7.3 SHARING ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY .................................. 251
7.4 ADMINISTRATIVE AND LEGISLATIVE MECHANISMS AND STRATEGIES .......................................................................................... 253
   7.4.1 Administrative Structures ............................................................. 253
   7.4.2 Enangered Species Legislation and Strategies .............................. 255
   7.4.3 Legislation for Regulating the Holding and Taking of Native Species ................................................................. 261
   7.4.4 Legislation for Animal Transfers ................................................... 263
   7.4.5 Legislation Regulating Conditions for Captive Animals ................ 266
   7.4.6 Legislative Mechanisms for Establishing and Restricting Zoos' Conservation Policies ........................................ 267
7.5 DISCUSSION ...................................................................................... 267
7.6 ADDRESSING COMPLEX TASKS WITHIN A RIGID STRUCTURE ........................................... 269
  7.6.1 Zoo Structures ............................................................................................................. 269
     i. The Second Organisational Level ............................................................................. 276
     ii. The Third Organisational Level ........................................................................... 271
     iii. Decision-Making Structures and Tools ................................................................. 273
     iv. A Mandate for Professional Proficiency ............................................................... 273
     v. Divisions of Labour .................................................................................................. 275
  7.7 CONCLUSION ................................................................................................................ 277

CHAPTER EIGHT: CORPORATISING AND COMMERCIALISING ZOOS ........................................... 280
  8.1 CORPORATE MANAGERIALISM .................................................................................. 280
  8.2 CORPORATISING ZOOS ............................................................................................... 281
  8.3 MANAGEMENT TOOLS IN ZOOS ................................................................................ 283
      8.3.1 Annual Reports and Mission Statements ......................................................... 284
      8.3.2 Master Plans ....................................................................................................... 285
      8.3.3 Business Strategies and Plans .......................................................................... 285
      8.3.4 Product Formats and Performance Measures ................................................ 288
      8.3.5 Zoo Finance ........................................................................................................ 291
      8.3.6 Corporate Support in Zoos .............................................................................. 293
  8.4 CONCLUSION ................................................................................................................ 300

CHAPTER 9 - PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF THE ROLE OF ZOOS IN CONSERVATION ......................... 301
  9.1 THE IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS IN CONSERVATION NETWORKS ................. 301
      9.1.2 The Zoo Community .......................................................................................... 302
  9.2 THE EFFECTS OF ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE ON NETWORK RELATIONSHIPS ............... 302
      9.2.1 Zoo Culture ........................................................................................................ 303
          i. Organisational Climate ...................................................................................... 303
          ii. Zoos and Education ......................................................................................... 305
          iii. Captive Breeding .............................................................................................. 307
          iv. Inter-agency Relations .................................................................................... 307
      9.2.2 The Conservation Community .......................................................................... 309
      9.2.3 Conservation Community Interviews and Questionnaires ............................... 312
          i. Questionnaire Results ...................................................................................... 312
          ii. Interview Results ............................................................................................. 317
      9.2.4 The Zoo Visitors ................................................................................................ 321
          i. Questionnaire Results Trends ........................................................................... 322
          ii. Who Uses the Zoo? ......................................................................................... 322
          iii. Visitor Interests & Knowledge ........................................................................ 324
          iv. How Informed are Zoo Visitors? ..................................................................... 329
          v. Visitor Valuations of Non-human Nature and Locus of Control ..................... 329
9.2.4 The Zoo Visitors (cont.)
vi. Visitors’ Assessment of Zoo Performance ........................................... 329
vii. Visitor Perceptions and Appraisals of Zoos and Other Agencies ........................................... 334
viii. Inter-agency Efforts .............................................................................. 337
ix. Conservation Methods and Priorities ................................................... 337
x. Discussion .............................................................................................. 339

9.3 CONCLUSION ....................................................................................... 342

CHAPTER TEN: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS ................................. 343
10.1 ZOO INCLINATIONS ............................................................................. 343
10.2 ZOOS AND ENVIRONMENTALISM ...................................................... 346
10.3 EXPANDING THE ZOO-CONSERVATION DISCOURSE .......................... 346
  10.3.1 Future Research ............................................................................. 347
10.4 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS ............................................................ 348
  10.4.1 Zoo-Based Endangered Species Restoration ..................................... 349
  10.4.2 Zoo Education ................................................................................ 349
  10.4.3 Zoo Policy: Specifying Goals and Sustaining Relevance .................... 349
  10.4.4 Discarding Defensive Decision-Making ................................................ 351
  10.4.5 Utilising Policy Analysis in Zoos ....................................................... 353
  10.4.6 Suitable Organisational Procedures .................................................. 353
  10.4.7 Learning and Change in Zoo Organisations ....................................... 355
  10.4.8 Nurturing Zoo Personnel ................................................................. 355
10.5 FINAL THOUGHTS ............................................................................... 357

APPENDIX 1: Zoo Community Interview Outline ........................................... 360
APPENDIX 2: Conservation Community Interview Outline ................................. 361
APPENDIX 3: Zoo Visitor Questionnaire ......................................................... 362
APPENDIX 4: Conservation Community Questionnaire ......................................... 368
APPENDIX 5: Histories of select Australasian zoos ........................................... 370
APPENDIX 6: Further examples of Australasian inter-agency endangered species programs ........................................... 381
APPENDIX 7: Visitors who were attending the zoo with and without children .......... 385
APPENDIX 8: Schooling levels of zoo visitors .................................................. 386
APPENDIX 9: Age distribution of zoo visitors responding to survey .................. 387
APPENDIX 10: Zoo visitors’ occupations .......................................................... 388
APPENDIX 11: Where zoo visitors are from .................................................... 389
APPENDIX 12: Categorised conservation responses to zoo visitor questionnaire item ‘I didn’t know/never realised that & It reminded me that’ ................... 390

BIBLIOGRAPHY ..................................................................................... 398
ABSTRACT

The 'zoo' is an enduring human institution. Yet its form and purpose have been subject to numerous changes through the ages. As smaller collections of animals, menageries fulfilled the often frivolous whims of powerful elites from the time of ancient societies up until the French Revolution. Eventually, these private collections became public domain and zoos gained an educational purpose. By the middle of this century when public concerns were growing about animal welfare and environmental degradation, zoo professionals began promoting conservation as the new raison d'être for their organisations. The alleged transformation of zoos serves as initial point of departure for this research which explores numerous factors influencing how conservation in Australasian and overseas zoos is constructed and realised.

Most western zoos address the problem of global (and regional) extinctions through their participation in endangered species conservation and by educating the public about this issue. Zoo-based breeding programs can assist with species restoration by placing individuals from captive populations into the wild to sustain the size and genetic variability of natural populations. Education in zoos includes formal and informal programs designed to increase visitors' knowledge about conservation problems and solutions. Recently, zoo conservation expanded to include, in some cases, field conservation projects and conservation outreach programs.

These activities are undertaken by a community of dedicated and resourceful zoo professionals who are eager to transform zoos into effective and influential conservation organisations. Such ambitions, however, are realised in particular ideological and practical contexts. Many zoo professionals have embraced certain contemporary administrative trends that confine zoo conservation policy to the realm of conventionality. Highly-ordered zoo structures inhibit creative problem-solving. Corporate management systems accompanying these bureaucratic arrangements infuse zoo conservation principles and practices with a paradigm of economic rationality.

The example of zoo conservation principles and practices demonstrates the traditional institutional settings tend to be dominated by technocratic - rather than ecocentric - environmental values. Consequently, zoo conservation programs fall far short of solving ecological dilemmas. Captive breeding and species management schemes shift attention away from habitat conservation; incur enormous costs; can compromise the welfare of individual animals; and require extraordinary levels of inter-organisational coordination and cooperation for success. Educational programs are often limited in scope and effectiveness by an insufficient allocation of financial and organisational resources. Finally, the primacy of business imperatives in many Western zoos delegitims conservation ideals to economic terms.
That the zoo community can boast some admirable conservation achievements is not in doubt. Nonetheless, modern zoos remain predominantly devoted to ideals that are profoundly similar to those embodied in the royal menageries and zoological gardens of previous centuries. The supremacy of technocentric ideologies in zoo principles and practices is testimony to similarities between the conservation role of zoos and broader trends in contemporary environmental policy. Reductionist, fragmented, economic and short-term perspectives abandon progressive approaches to resolving ecological dilemmas in favour of supporting the status-quo. The degree to which the conservation role of zoos can promote progressive environmental knowledge remains an important point of debate for the zoo community and general public. This research has generated data that the Australasian and international fraternity of zoo professionals can apply to future problem-solving and to increasing the relevance and effectiveness of zoo conservation policies for modern-day ecological problems.