

# Madagascar

The [media](#) recently portrayed the escape of two wolves from their enclosure at Barcelona Zoo on March 30<sup>th</sup> as an extraordinary event. It seems the wolves, both females, jumped a three metre tall fence to get out on a sunny morning while visitors were walking around the zoo. They did not manage to escape from the zoo, however, and they were captured some hours later. The younger of the two, a cub, was found near the cage from which she had escaped.

Wolves (*canis lupus*) do not attack humans, contrary to how they are portrayed in the stories that have shaped our fear of them from our tenderest childhood. Stories like “Little Red Riding Hood,” “The three little pigs,” and “The wolf and the seven little goats” belong to the western oral tradition and have survived to our day through versions by the Grimm brothers or Perrault. In reality, wolves are predators that once inhabited wide ranges forrest all over the planet, but hunting, deforestation and pressures exerted by supposedly civilized technical means have led to them being endangered and, for that reason, exotic. Some of us remember the television programmes in which the sage voice of Dr. Rodríguez de la Fuente [1] alerted us of the extinction of the wolf in our dwindling forests, its natural habitat, in which it finds it increasingly difficult to survive.

We are destroying the wolf’s habitat, and this animal that has accompanied Humanity for millions of years, as Konrad Lorenz [2] taught us, is now an exhibit in zoos. It is precisely on the animal collections that I want to focus on today.

The practice of collecting animals that are regarded rare or exotic goes back to the very beginnings of Humanity. It has been widely recorded in the ancient texts of oriental cultures (Persian, Egyptian, Chinese, Asyrian), in which animals were collected to hunt or as objects of contemplation. In ancient Greece, Alexander the Great introduced the custom of colleting species from Africa and Asia, a custom then copied by the Romans, who also kept birds and fish as ornaments and status symbols in patrician homes [3]. Unfortunately this custom still survives today within our own borders.

Leaving aside these historical data, the collections of animals we know today, the zoos, originated in the West in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries [4]. The moving of the animals caged in the Versailles *menagerie* to the *Jardin des Plantes* in Paris was a post-revolutionary symbol inspired in the egalitarian idea that the people should also be able to enjoy the privileges that had been, until then, reserved to the powerful. The flame of this initiative to give citizens access to the exoticism of species they had never before seen, spread rapidly through the major European cities, where urban enclosures began to appear. In these first zoos the animals lived in spaces that, in the best of cases, were decorated to resemble what people imagined their natural habitats could look like: Polar bears in cement enclosures painted white, hippopotami in ponds surrounded with riparian plants, tuskless elephants (of course!), giraffes, zebras, lions, tigres..., in artificial landscapes and subjected to climates they are not suited to (too cold or too warm), in which they either managed to survive or gave up and died. Also all kinds of primates were kept, who, like the rest of species, would adopt repetitive behaviours that were uncharacteristic of their nature, which, as has been amply proven, is akin to that of humans.

In 1999 the EU published a directive of general application in all Member States [5], which in its preamble states the purposes zoos should fulfil: “the conservation of species, public education, and/or scientific research.” These purposes are consistent with those recognised in previous EU legislation,

which already reflected society's changes in sensitivity, and as the cited text expressly states, future legislation will follow the same path. This directive was reflected in Spain in 2003 with a specific law [6] –the preamble of which recognised that it covered a legal void– to apply the EU regulations. These legal texts only protect animals kept in zoos, but not those in circuses, whereas US federal law regarding animal welfare (AWA) [7] covers all animals shown to the public, and it places emphasis on demanding that animals be kept in conditions that pay adequate regards to the needs of the species, in other words, to what is “naturally” owed to them.

The present body of legislation we have on zoos is insufficient and scattered, as in other cases in which animal welfare is at stake. We need only to point out that only seven province capitals have regulations on the matter (Guadalajara, S. Sebastian, Seville, Jaén, Lugo and Vitoria), and that some ordinances go back to times prior to the EU directive of 1999 on zoos: Seville (1990), Madrid (1991), S. Sebastian and Vitoria (1994). This is also the case with the animal protection laws in the Autonomous Communities of Cantabria (1992), Baleares and Navarra (1994), La Rioja and the Canaries (1995), the Valencian Community (1996) and Galicia (1998) [8].

The aim of this commentary, therefore, is to bring attention to the need to revise our regulations concerning zoos. It needs to be more than just fine words on the conservation of nature, education and research. It has to be a true rethinking of the question of keeping animals in zoos, in a 21st century context in which it is plain and obvious that rare and exotic animals can be seen in myriad documentaries on every television channel in the world, without having to force sentient beings to live under conditions that, in the majority of cases, reduce them to mere puppets, mere shadows of the splendour they had, or could have had, in their natural habitats.

This longing for the “paradise lost” is the starting premise of an animation film that still makes us smile and think: a zebra, a lion, a giraffe and a hippopotamus in New York Central Zoo long to see the wide world beyond the walls of the zoo, and to stop having to please the visitors, so they escape into a plane that takes them to Madagascar [9]. Perhaps the wolves that escaped in Barcelona Zoo felt the same longing.

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[1] [enlace externo](#)

[2] K.LORENZ, Cuando el hombre encontró al perro (Barcelona 1977), ed. Tusquets.

[3] I. SAELID GILHUS, Animals, Gods and Humans (London-New York 2006) 12ss.

[4] BARATAY y HARDOUIN-FUGIER, Zoo. A History of Zoological Gardens in the West (London 2004).

[5] Directiva 1999/22/CE del Consejo, de 29 de marzo de 1999, relativa al mantenimiento de animales salvajes en parques zoológicos [Descargar](#)

[6] Ley 31/2003 de 27 de Octubre, de conservación de la fauna silvestre en los Parques Zoológicos [Descargar](#)

[7] AWA (=Animal Welfare Act) [promulgada en 1996](#) . Sobre esta cuestión trata ampliamente en su tesis doctoral, leida el 4.4.2011, Pilar López de la Osa.

[8] Vid. la normativa correspondiente en la Base de Datos de la web, bajo la voz “Zoológicos”, filtro: Comunidades Autónomas.

[9] Mas información, en [Enlace externo](#)