

Assessment and Opinion of Health and Welfare of Animals at Spring River Park and Zoo

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March 9, 2017

Introduction:

My name is Christine Capaldo, DVM and I am a veterinarian who recently visited Spring River Park and Zoo in Roswell, New Mexico. I graduated from Mississippi State University in 2000, completed an internship at Purdue University the following year, and then practiced primarily small animal medicine for 16 years. In 2016, I started working with the PETA Foundation as a veterinarian focusing on captive wildlife. I have had the opportunity to work and consult with several veterinarians that specialize in treating exotic species and wildlife, in addition to receiving formal training at The Wild Animal Sanctuary in Keenesburg, Colorado in their large carnivore training program. I also attended the Advancing Bear Care Conference hosted by The Bear Care Group in October, 2016.

While visiting Spring River Park and Zoo on February 25 and 26th of 2017, I witnessed numerous serious health and welfare concerns involving many of the animals. The most serious concerns are the mountain lions and bears held in extremely small, outdated concrete pits, as well as other animals held in tiny corn crib enclosures with concrete flooring. In addition, I witnessed some animals with medical problems and/or psychological problems, some of which are directly related to the improper housing.

Discussion of Findings and Opinion:

During my visit, I witnessed two mountain lions (Bart and Bret) and two bears (Ursula and Sierra) living in concrete pit-like enclosures. These enclosures are completely inappropriate for any animal, let alone large mammals that have vast home ranges with varied terrain in the wild. The enclosures are virtually barren, lack appropriate enrichment, lack natural substrate, and the concrete walls deny the animals the ability to even see or smell anything around them. Confining animals on concrete leads to excessive wear on footpads, loss of muscle tone and degenerative joint disease (arthritis), and does not allow for normal behaviors such as digging and foraging.



Photo 1: Bear and mountain lion pits

Mountain lions have large territories in the wild, and they explore scents, hunt, climb, scratch, perch and lounge on ledges and trees, and play. These are innate behaviors that mountain lions are driven to do, and when they cannot perform these behaviors, they suffer immensely. The mountain lions at Spring River Park and Zoo are isolated to enclosures that resemble dungeons, denied the ability to perform natural behaviors, and denied natural substrate and bedding. I witnessed both mountain lions exhibiting medical as well as psychological issues as a result of their captivity in these inadequate conditions. Both the lions are overweight, and one is more overweight than the other. They both lack muscle mass and have an overall poor body condition. This is likely the result of being housed entirely on concrete, with inadequate space and enrichment.



Photo 2: Obese mountain lion

Without the ability to perform species appropriate behaviors, the lions have not built up their muscle mass, and have excessive body fat in their sternal (chest), abdominal and inguinal (lower belly) and tail regions. In addition, I noticed a red mass-like lesion on the ventral aspect (underside) of the inguinal fat pad of the more overweight lion. It was visible when the lion would pace and the fat pad would swing. It seemed to be several inches in diameter and appeared to be missing hair. This needs to be evaluated by a veterinarian, and housing the lion on concrete will only irritate the lesion further. I also witnessed this same lion chewing on a small pile of what appeared to be grass placed on the concrete on the left side of the enclosure. In the afternoon around 1pm, I could see that near the pile of grass, there was now a pile of what appeared to be vomited grass. With binoculars, it appeared that the vomit contained chewed grass and foamy saliva. The mountain lions are not being offered appropriate or adequate enrichment to benefit their mental and physical health.



Photo 3: Vomit in the pit confining mountain lions

Both mountain lions spent a significant amount of time pacing back and forth in a repetitive manner. Pacing is a type of abnormal behavior that results when an animal is trying to cope with a stressful situation. The repetitive behavior is an indication that both mountain lions are suffering psychologically, most likely due to their confinement in these small, empty pits which do not allow them to express normal behaviors.

The two black bears are confined to a small, barren concrete pit-like enclosure, which is very similar to the mountain lion enclosure. There is no natural substrate or enrichment, and the concrete walls deny the bears the ability to see or smell. Bears rely heavily on their sense of smell, and in the wild will raise their noses in the air to pick up scents in wind currents. Bears in the wild also spend most of their time engaging in behaviors that are biologically driven such as digging, climbing, bathing and foraging over vast distances. The exhibit at Spring River Park and Zoo does not allow these bears to engage in these normal behaviors, and they are likely suffering as a consequence. Both bears also had thinning of hair on the legs and hind end. One of the bears had significant thinning of hair on the back end. Some of the hair loss could be from chronic irritation from being housed on concrete. In addition, bears in the wild rub their bodies on trees and other objects during scent marking which aids in the shedding process. The enclosure at Spring River Park and Zoo is devoid of any trees or natural substances denying the bears this opportunity. The bears should also be evaluated for ectoparasites, skin infections or allergies which can lead to hair loss and discomfort.



Photo 4: Significant hair loss on one bear's hind end and back legs

During my visit, I noticed one of the bears scooping up hay or straw with her paw to try to make a resting area behind a small concrete wall. The bear was obviously trying to avoid the view of the public; however, the wall was only a couple of feet high and not big enough to allow the bear to hide completely. This enclosure fails to meet the basic needs of these bears in many ways and is detrimental to their medical and psychological well-being.

Numerous other animals were housed in tiny corn crib enclosures with concrete flooring. Each crib has a complete roof cover preventing access to views of the sky and limiting sun exposure. These types of enclosures are outdated, unnatural, and entirely too small to house animals, especially carnivores with large home ranges such as bobcats and foxes. I witnessed one of the bobcats repetitively pacing, a sign of psychological distress. Bobcats, like mountain lions, roam vast distances in the wild over varied terrain while hunting, stalking prey, scratching and climbing. The enclosure at this zoo is extremely inadequate and does not allow the animals to express normal behaviors, or even the opportunity to rest on soft substrate. Other animals confined to corn cribs at the zoo include foxes, a porcupine, a raccoon, two coatimundi and several ring-tailed lemurs. Both coatimundi had hair loss on their distal (end) aspect of their tails. It is very likely that these animals are self-mutilating, which is another coping mechanism seen in animals in distress in captivity.



Photo 5: Corn crib cages with cement flooring which confine bobcats (left) and coatimundis (right)



Photo 6: Close-up on a coatimundi's tail with hair missing from the end

In addition, the lemurs at the zoo appeared to be overweight, with one in particular appearing obese. Ring-tailed lemurs in the wild routinely climb and are agile in the tree-tops spending a significant amount of time foraging and exploring. Their corn crib enclosure is entirely too small and inadequate for allowing these lemurs to perform their natural active behaviors. Obesity in lemurs may lead to health problems such as diabetes, coronary heart disease, and inactivity and mobility issues.



Photo 7: Overweight lemurs confined to corn crib cage

The enclosures housing farm animals were barren and small and had minimal shade. One aoudad had noticeably overgrown hooves, which can lead to lameness and pain.



Photo 8: Overgrown aoudad hooves

Another problem I noticed were the small, inadequate raptor enclosures with little to no visual enrichment. Raptors are visually oriented and allowing them to have a view of the landscape is crucial. Raptors should also have a perch that gives them a view of the sky and moving raptor perches regularly will allow raptors to have a new view. The raptors at Spring River Park and Zoo have little opportunity for high perching and viewing, and none of the enclosures appeared to have decent perches for viewing the sky.



Photo 9: Enclosure confining a falcon

There was a grassy enclosure housing one coyote. Coyotes in the wild are social animals and live in packs in which they communicate to each other and form social bonds. The lone coyote at Spring River Park and Zoo is isolated from other conspecifics which is likely stressful and may lead to boredom and frustration.



Photo 10: Enclosure confining solitary coyote

Conclusion:

Many of the exhibits at Spring River Park and Zoo are completely archaic, entirely too small, confine animals exclusively to concrete, and lack natural habitat and exposure to the sky and sun. Several of the animals have medical issues and/or psychological issues as a result. In light of these issues, consideration must be taken to move the animals to appropriate habitats at reputable sanctuaries where they can receive proper care.