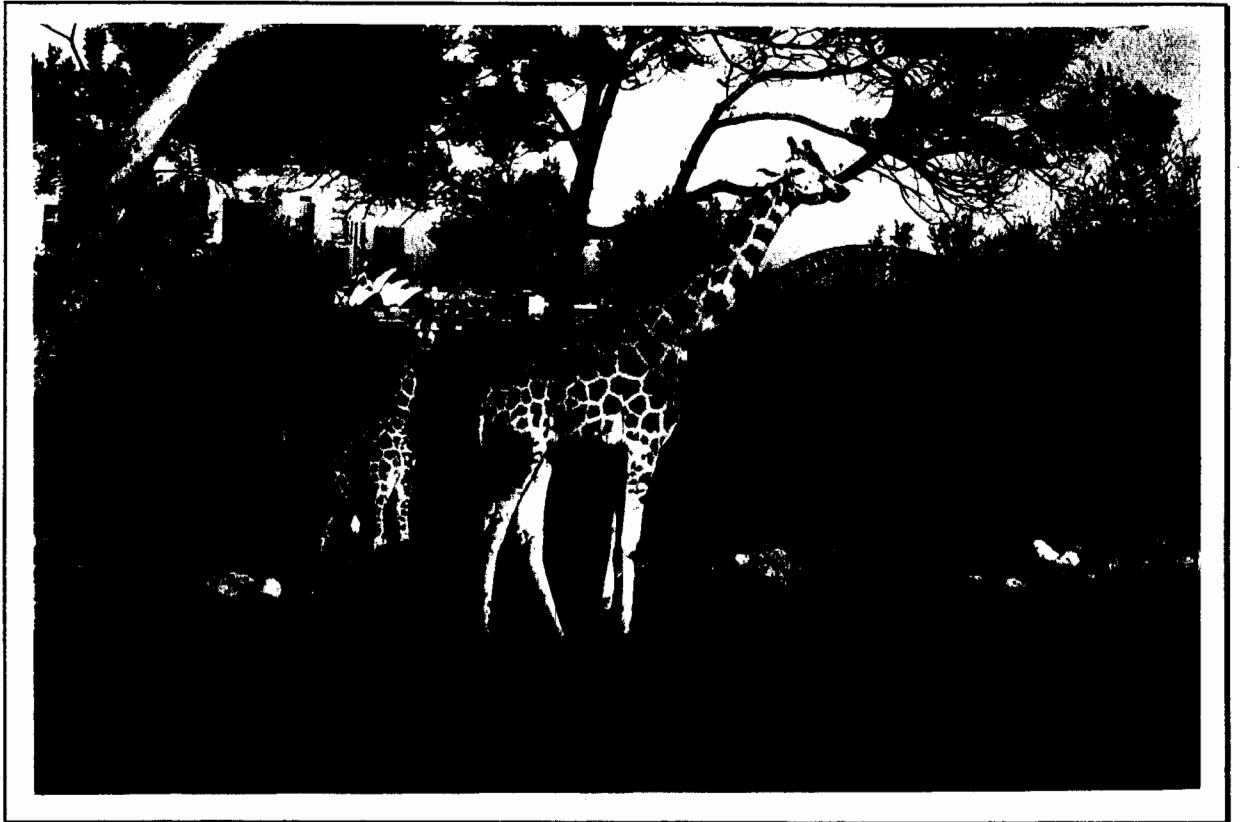


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**CONTEXTUALISING THE ROLE OF ZOOS IN CONSERVATION:
AN AUSTRALASIAN EXPERIENCE**



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BSc, MEnvSt**

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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 that traditional institutional settings tend to be dominated by technocentric - 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 delimits 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.