

Exhibiting animals in Japanese public zoos

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Today Japanese public zoos are facing a crisis due to a dwindling number of spectators coming to places such as Ueno zoo or Asahiyama zoo are forcing them to rethink their roles in society. In response, Japanese zoos have been tried to change. Since the 1970's, zoo managers have tried to develop a new science of zoos that has sought to move away from a reliance on entertainment to focus on conservation of the natural environment. This paper looks at whether this initiative has been successful. To do so, this investigation analyses Zoo Science, the history of display techniques, and new exhibition techniques in Japan.

Chapter one looks at the characteristics of Zoo Science, questioning whether it can withstand the scrutiny of a social scientific and humanities approach to zoos. Chapter two looks at the historical development of zoos, asking how western and Japanese zoos evolved differently. Chapter three takes a closer look at two popular exhibition techniques, contrasting the different message contained in them.

One contention of this paper is to argue for a more social scientific and humanities approach to zoos. The existing Japanese language literature on zoos tends to lack a human-animal perspective, privileging viewpoint informed by the natural science. Yet recently social scientists have become interested in this field, looking at moral implications of exhibiting animals. By using methods performed by western scholars of human-animal relationships, this study shows places zoo animals within a broader social framework.