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Zoo animals and humans killed because of human negligent behavior

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Dear editor,

Between May 22 and May 29, 2016, zoo animals killed people or had to be put to death because of human incautious behaviour. Chronologically, two lions were put to death in the Santiago de Chile Zoo after a man jumped into its enclosure, a walrus killed two people in China clearly after a tourist had a bad judgement of potential danger and fell into the animal's tank and a gorilla was also shot to death after a child fell into its enclosure in Cincinnati Zoo.

Case 1: in May 22, two lions were shot in Santiago's Zoo Park, Chile when a man jumped the enclosure for no apparent reason[1]. According to the available information, a man partially undressed entered (or jumped into) the lions' enclosure and zoo staff had no choice but to kill the big cats.

Case 2: on the next day, a walrus in Xixiajou Wildlife Park, Shandong Province, China killed a tourist and its long time zookeeper[2]. News and additional information report that a tourist ignored safety measures and got too close to the walrus' tank when he felled into it. The animal's long time trainer tried a rescue but both were drowned by the walrus that clung to them and dragged the two men down.

Case 3: in the 29th, a lowland gorilla was shot by the Cincinnati Zoo staff after a young boy fell into its enclosure[3]. The child was momentarily alone and fell into the gorilla's enclosure where a silverback male dragged the boy for about 10 min after which a decision was made by the park's staff to shoot it and save the young boy.

Public awareness of real dangers in zoological parks seems to be poor as well as urban persons being generally imprinted with a romanticized vision of wildlife that is not at all the reality of what they are facing when visiting such parks. In fact, the overall problem of tolerance towards wildlife as described by Treves and Bruskotter is widespread in both natural parks and zoos[4].

Accidents such as the above mentioned clearly point to inadequate behaviour (cases 1 and 2) and to lack of proper vigilance of a child (case 3).

While the dramatic death of people is always regrettable and zoo animals should not be kept in a situation that might result in their own deaths because of human lack of common sense and bad

perception of real dangers[5]. Thousands of people visit zoos every day and it is widely known that accidents such as those mentioned here do occur but rarely discussed in scientific journals. It is easy to collect information from newspapers throughout the world and these do show that it is relatively common that most accidents are caused by people voluntarily trespassing fences into enclosures with large sized predators, especially those containing bears and big cats. If these are more due to suicidal attempts or to a kind of exhibitionist act by people is yet to be fully comprehended and this is not the focus of this letter. An absolute perception of potential dangers is essential and must include adequate training and permanent attention from the part of professional staff members.

Conflict of interest statement

We declare that we have no conflict of interest.

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