



**INVESTIGATES** 



# CHEYENNE MOUNTAIN ZOO

Colorado Springs, Colorado

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# INTRODUCTION

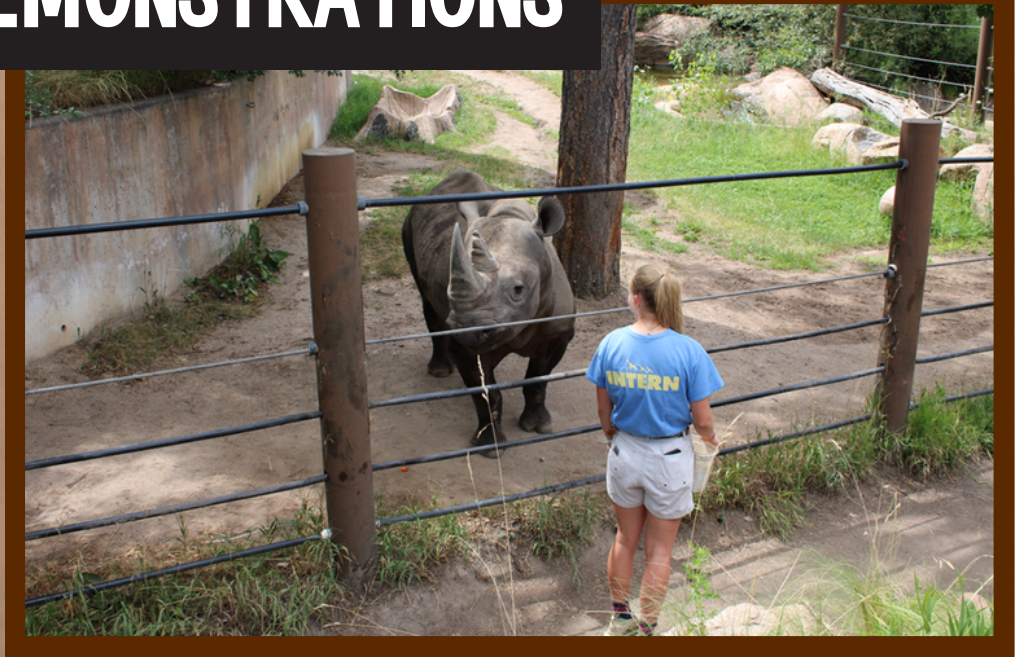


In July 2025, our team completed another undercover zoo investigation for one of the top zoos in the United States: the Cheyenne Mountain Zoo in Colorado Springs, Colorado. We only visited Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) certified facilities that are widely considered to excel in the fields of animal care and in facilitating meaningful interactions between animals and human visitors.

During our visit, we assessed the accuracy and efficacy of each major aim stated by the zoo industry, including educating visitors about the animals, providing optimal animal welfare with appropriate physical and mental stimulation, and participating in, or leading, meaningful conservation efforts. It is our intention that by providing data from the top zoos in the U.S., we illustrate a more accurate picture of whether those aims are being achieved and scrutinize what these facilities offer the animal inhabitants and human visitors.

We then argue whether zoos can justify their existence and continue to keep wild animals in captivity based on our findings. This research acts as an individual case study and adds to our overall assessment of the remaining zoos, which we will update in due course.

# ANIMAL DEMONSTRATIONS



At the Cheyenne Mountain Zoo, we attended black rhinoceros, Nile hippopotamus, barn owl, and grizzly bear animal demonstrations. During the rhino demonstration, the keeper stated that Jumbe was considered a “geriatric” animal at 22 years of age (despite the average life expectancy of black rhinos in the wild being 35-40 years old<sup>1</sup>), so they perform mobility and stretching exercises with him regularly to ensure that he can move safely and comfortably. The zoo also announced in 2024 that a routine blood test revealed a concerning level of iron saturation in his blood. This condition, called iron overload disorder, can damage his organs and potentially lead to fatal consequences over time. The disorder is caused by a mismatch between rhinos’ highly efficient iron absorption evolved for low-iron diets in the wild and the typically higher iron content in captive diets. Iron overload disease affects around one-third of black rhinos in captivity, and there are currently no guaranteed treatments.<sup>2</sup>

We also noticed that Jumbe had some areas on his horns that seemed to have considerable wear; both horns had several deep depressions on them. The keeper stated that these marks were from Jumbe rubbing his horns on various objects in his enclosure (like trees, fencing, rocks, concrete, cables, etc.). While rhinos in both the wild and captivity rub their horns for maintenance, rhinos in captivity have been observed to rub their horns more frequently and excessively, sometimes to the point of flattening them. This may be a behavior displacement activity (an often irrelevant, self-soothing behavior that can serve as an outlet for frustration) caused by the stress and lack of enrichment opportunities in their exhibits. This excessive horn rubbing differs from the natural, less intense horn-rubbing seen in the wild. In the wild, excessive horn rubbing is generally not needed, as wild rhinos use their horns more frequently for defense during combat, courtship behaviors, play, and accessing resources.<sup>3</sup>



Similarly, during the hippo training demonstration we attended, we learned that keepers train hippos in captivity to undergo regular tusk trimming by using target training and positive reinforcement. Like the black rhino Jumbo, this is another example of something that would not typically cause the animals any issues in the wild due to their ability to perform the natural, species-specific behaviors that would prevent their horns or tusks from growing too long or becoming otherwise problematic. We learned that tusk trimming is necessary in captivity to prevent overgrowth that can cause serious injury to the animal, other animals in the exhibit, and their handlers. This point is particularly important, as many zoos in the U.S. place rhinos in mixed species exhibits, which house rhinos in the same enclosure as other animals like cranes, deer, and antelopes. Unlike in the wild, where tusks are naturally worn down, the controlled environment and behavioral restrictions that animals experience at a zoo mean that hippos cannot maintain their dental health on their own and require intervention from the keepers. If left unattended in captivity, overgrown tusks can result in painful ulcers, punctured gums, oral/facial injuries, misalignment of teeth, eating difficulties, and malnutrition.<sup>4,5,6</sup>

We also observed a barn owl training demonstration with an owl named Hoosier, during which he screeched almost the entire time (~10 minutes). Barn owls are primarily nocturnal predators, who are typically active throughout the night to hunt small mammals like mice and voles. Being required to be active and exposed during the day in front of so many people could be highly stressful and disruptive to their natural routine. When asked to perform behaviors at the beginning of the demo (like perching on an object/the keeper and target training), Hoosier flew to the highest point available in his enclosure and screeched for several minutes. The keeper conducting the demonstration stated that they never feed Hoosier live prey (unless a small wild bird accidentally found their way into his enclosure) and used mostly prepared raw meat or insects for his diet. While the act of providing live animal prey to animals in captivity is largely considered unethical, it is important to note that the act of hunting and catching live prey provides crucial mental and physical stimulation for owls in the wild. Deprivation of this behavioral engagement can cause the animal to experience chronic boredom and potential psychological distress.



The grizzly bear demonstration began with the keeper explaining that they “rescued” two “nuisance” bears named Emmett and Digger from the wild. Both bears were born in the wild in Montana and allegedly had three potentially dangerous encounters with humans (including breaking into peoples’ garages and killing livestock). The zookeeper explained that typically, if no local wildlife sanctuaries have room to take in the “nuisance” bears, Montana wildlife management officials shoot the bears dead after “three strikes” of dangerous behavior. In this case, the zoo had space to house the bears, so they were transferred to Colorado and now live permanently at the zoo.



The show starred Emmett, which began with the keepers opening a garage door on one side of the exhibit, enabling them to feed the bear and practice target training through the fencing. The keepers placed a cinema-style ribbon between the crowd (which included many young children) and the open garage door and advised that no one should climb under or around the ribbon barrier. The demonstration with Emmett seemed a bit demeaning; for most of the presentation, the keeper held small bits of various foods (like peppers, celery, cucumber, lemons, etc.) up to Emmett while the audience guessed which ones he liked or disliked. The keepers and audience laughed when Emmett disliked one of the foods and either swat them away or spit them out.



In the second part of the demo, the keeper got Emmett to stand on his hind legs for a cup of sunflower seeds and then mocked him as they made him paw at the crowd while making fake “roar” noises to “scare” the crowd. This presentation of animal behavior seemed to be irresponsible and counterintuitive, as the reason the bears were at the zoo in the first place was because they were considered a dangerous threat to humans living near their habitat. The keepers never referenced any wildlife coexistence tips for humans that may live in areas where bears naturally occur to avoid human-wildlife conflict, nor did they discuss nonlethal wildlife management strategies for potentially dangerous or “nuisance” animals to help the audience learn how similar situations with bears could be avoided or amended in the future.



# SIGNAGE, STAFFING, AND VISITOR ENGAGEMENT



We observed several distinct examples of ineffective and misleading signage. In one instance, one sign stated very clearly to “not feed the meerkats,” yet we observed a child attempting to feed them by dropping the lettuce they got from the giraffe feeding experience into the open-top meerkat enclosure. All the parents said in response to their child doing this was “I don’t think meerkats eat lettuce,” despite the sign advising visitors against feeding the animals anything.

Foreign and potentially dangerous objects finding their way into zoo enclosures has been an issue for zoos across the U.S. for some time now; every year, there are several reports of captive animals at zoos consuming foreign objects thrown into their enclosures by zoo visitors, which can result in severe injury or death. This issue applies globally and across species; Edinburgh Zoo, Scotland, revealed in a report from 2013 that a vet had carried out 22 surgeries within four years to remove foreign objects swallowed by their gentoo penguin colony, including socks, gloves, and batteries.<sup>7</sup> Most recently, the Wildwood Zoo in Wisconsin released an urgent plea to the public begging them to stop throwing things into their animal exhibits after staff found a chewed-up dog toy in their wolf exhibit in January of 2026. Apparently, visitors have been throwing toys and food into the zoo’s exhibits weekly, creating problems for Malakai, a 14-year-old grey wolf. Zoo staff have also found fast food in Malakai’s exhibit, which should not be part of his diet. Staff are now worried that Malakai has a blockage in his intestines from the dog toy. Staff are hoping to add cameras to the wolf exhibit soon for better surveillance.<sup>8</sup>

Second, despite signage around the zoo displaying instructions like never crossing fences or barriers to get closer to the animal exhibits, we observed a young child crawl underneath a rope barrier to get closer to the emu enclosure, which put the child and the emu in a potentially dangerous situation.



Lastly, we observed confused visitors at one of the leopard exhibits due to one of the signs placed there. The sign in front of the snow leopard enclosure had information about both snow leopards and amur leopards on it, which led visitors to believe that animals from both species lived inside the same exhibit, but this was not the case; they were kept in entirely different exhibits. We heard several visitors attempting to find both leopard species in the exhibit, sounding frustrated when they could not locate the second species.



In terms of visitor engagement with the animals and their exhibits, we discovered that visitors spent an average of just one minute and nineteen seconds viewing some of the most popular animals at the zoo, including the elephants, orangutans, leopards, lions, and gorillas (range: the minimum amount of time visitors spent at the enclosures overall was nine seconds; the maximum amount of time spent was three minutes and 43 seconds).

Visitors spent the least amount of time observing the orangutans at the Cheyenne Mountain Zoo, with an average time of one minute and four seconds (range: .09 to 2.54), then at the lion and gorilla enclosures with an average time of one minute and fourteen seconds (lion range: .14-2.42, gorilla range: .16-3.43), then at the leopard enclosure with an average time of one minute and 28 seconds (range: .54-2.38). The longest amount of time visitors spent at an enclosure overall was at the elephant enclosure, with an average time of one minute and 34 seconds (range: .16 to 3.43).

We found it a bit surprising that even with the newborn baby gorilla that had just been born at the zoo that month (which seemed to be one of the main reasons most visitors wanted to observe the gorillas that day), the average amount of time the visitors spent looking at the gorillas was less than one and a half minutes. The crowding of the exhibit from so many people attempting to catch a glimpse and/or photos of the baby may also account for this short amount of time; perhaps people did not wish to stand so close to each other to see the baby, and once they realized they could not get a good vantage point, they simply gave up and left.



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# ANIMALS OBSERVED AND ENCLOSURE NOTES



We observed the same five species in depth to further scrutinize their individual environments and welfare states: gorillas, orangutans, leopards, elephants, and lions. There were three adults in the gorilla enclosure, including two males (Goma and Kwisha) and one female (Asha), who just had a baby five days prior to our visit. Despite signs designating the ape house as a “quiet area” due to the newborn gorilla baby, the space was loud and chaotic throughout our entire observation time, with most visitors clamoring over each other to catch a glimpse and snap a picture of the new baby. While several zoo docents were present in the ape house at various viewpoints of the animals, we never heard the docents tell any of the zoo visitors to adjust their volume level. The gorillas had access to three separate rooms (two indoor and one outdoor), each with large windows that allowed visitor viewing. Goma and Kwisha were resting on opposite sides of the indoor room for most of our observation period, whereas Asha and her baby were either out of sight in an off-exhibit room or actively moving around the enclosure while visitors attempted to follow them with every move.



The orangutan exhibit housed six individuals, including two family groups. The first was made up of female, Hadiah, male, Tujoh, and their child, Ember. The second was made up of female, Sumagu, male, Bakakeri, and their child, Kera. The adult males were always separated from the rest of their families. This social structure would likely be stressful for the orangutans here; adult male orangutans are typically solitary in the wild, and although they were not permitted physical interaction with the others in the group, their presence may cause the others stress or increase the males' frustration levels, as they can only indirectly interact with the others via sight, sound, or smell.



The orangutan exhibit was composed of four small indoor rooms and one outdoor room (which each had large windows for zoo visitors to view them through), though because of the ways that the groups and families were separated, no orangutans could access all rooms at one time. During our observation period, it seemed that one male had access to the outdoor yard, while all other individuals were contained inside. One female orangutan was extremely fixated on the human visitors and remained right next to the glass window the entire time we spent in the ape house (~one hour) interacting with them. We observed her put various objects on her head, like straw and a blanket, while the human visitors seemed to encourage these behaviors by mimicking her and engaging with her verbally. Still, the visitors ended up spending just over one minute at this enclosure, barely glancing at the signage to learn more.

**Visitors spent the least amount of time observing the orangutans at the Cheyenne Mountain Zoo, with an average time of one minute and four seconds.**



The giraffe enclosure measured about half an acre (22,000 sq ft) in size, and housed sixteen giraffes: four males and 12 females. All giraffes except one (a Rothschild giraffe) were reticulated giraffes. A zookeeper informed us that they keep the one in-tact breeding male separate from the herd, typically in a smaller outdoor yard by himself. The keeper went on to reveal that the breeding male currently only had outdoor access at night, as another giraffe broke the entry to the smaller outdoor yard that the breeding male usually occupied during the day. As a result, the breeding male was confined indoors in a tiny barn all day long, with very minimal social, locomotory, or mentally stimulating opportunities. The youngest giraffe in this group was two years old, and the oldest was 27 years old.





We observed that the giraffes did not have access to any leaves or other natural foliage inside or near the enclosure perimeter; all these branches were completely bare, which forced them to rely on the visitor feeding “experience” to get any fresh greenery. Visitors could purchase lettuce to feed the giraffes by hand. While keepers were present during the giraffe feeding, it seemed that there were very minimal restrictions or rules the guests needed to follow; we saw visitors and their young children petting the giraffes on their faces, screaming at them, and feeding them as much lettuce as they could at one time.



Two amur leopard brothers, named Mango and Basha, were kept in extremely small enclosures next to one another, which may have caused or contributed to stress for these typically solitary animals. Both leopards paced along their respective fence lines during our entire observation period (~10 minutes). The zoo plans on moving the leopard brothers to separate zoos based on future breeding recommendations as part of the Amur Leopard Species Survival Plan.

Amur leopards are widely known as some of the rarest big cats on the planet; only around 100 individuals remain in the wilds of Eastern Russia and China, and while Cheyenne Mountain Zoo proudly states on their website that their Amur leopards to date represent four percent of the wild population, none of these leopards will ever be released into the wild to contribute to the recovery of this increasingly fragile species.<sup>9</sup> As stated by the AZA website itself, the mission of the Species Survival Program (SSP) is “to manage an ex situ species population with the interest and cooperation of AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums, Accredited Related Facilities (ARFs), and Sustainability Partners...and develops a Breeding and Transfer Plan that identifies population goals and recommendations to manage a genetically diverse, demographically varied, and biologically sound population.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore, despite such few living individuals left in the wild, the AZA continues to put resources into ensuring that these animals remain in captivity. The only enrichment we observed in the leopard enclosures was climbing structures and trees; we did not see any other enrichment like larger water features, toys, puzzle feeders, olfactory items, ropes, swings, tires, or fire hose. They had a couple of perching opportunities, but neither were very high nor hidden from the public view or the other leopard.



**Both leopards paced along their respective fence lines during our entire observation period.**



The elephant enclosure contained five females: Kimba Lou, Jambo, Lucky, Kimba, and Missy. According to a sign near the enclosure, all elephants were captured from the wild between 1969-1983. None of them were related, despite African elephants living in a matriarchal society, with family units centered around a female leader and consisting of her female relatives and their calves in the wild. The only substrates available to the elephants were packed dirt in the outdoor yards and concrete or sand in the indoor barn, both of which would be hard on the elephants' musculature and potentially cause long-term foot issues. Hard surfaces, such as concrete floors, can cause cracks and infections within the fat pad of elephants' feet. Fat pads that are cracked or infected cannot effectively absorb pressure, which makes the outside of the foot and nails more prone to disease, bacterial inflammation, and painful foot problems such as pathological lesions in the pads and nails, abscesses, overgrown cuticles, split nails, torsion, and ulcerations.<sup>11</sup> While there were structures that provided some shade in the yards, we did not observe any hiding opportunities in either the outdoor yards or indoor barn. The elephants did not have access to natural foliage; all trees within the yards were fenced off, so the elephants' only opportunity to forage was with hanging enrichment barrels or the grass growing outside of the enclosure perimeter fencing, which they occasionally reached underneath the fencing with their trunks to access.

During our observation period, three elephants were undergoing training in the indoor barn and two were in the outdoor yard together. According to a keeper, they only put two or three elephants together at one time, as all five "do not get along well together." During observation, one of the elephants in the indoor barn swayed for several minutes at a time. Another elephant in the outdoor yard kept raising one leg and rotating it in circles in the air and on the ground for several minutes at a time. While we remain unsure of what exactly this behavior could mean, the elephant may have been performing one of their trained behaviors excessively and randomly, as it seemed to be an unnatural, repetitive, and functionless movement.





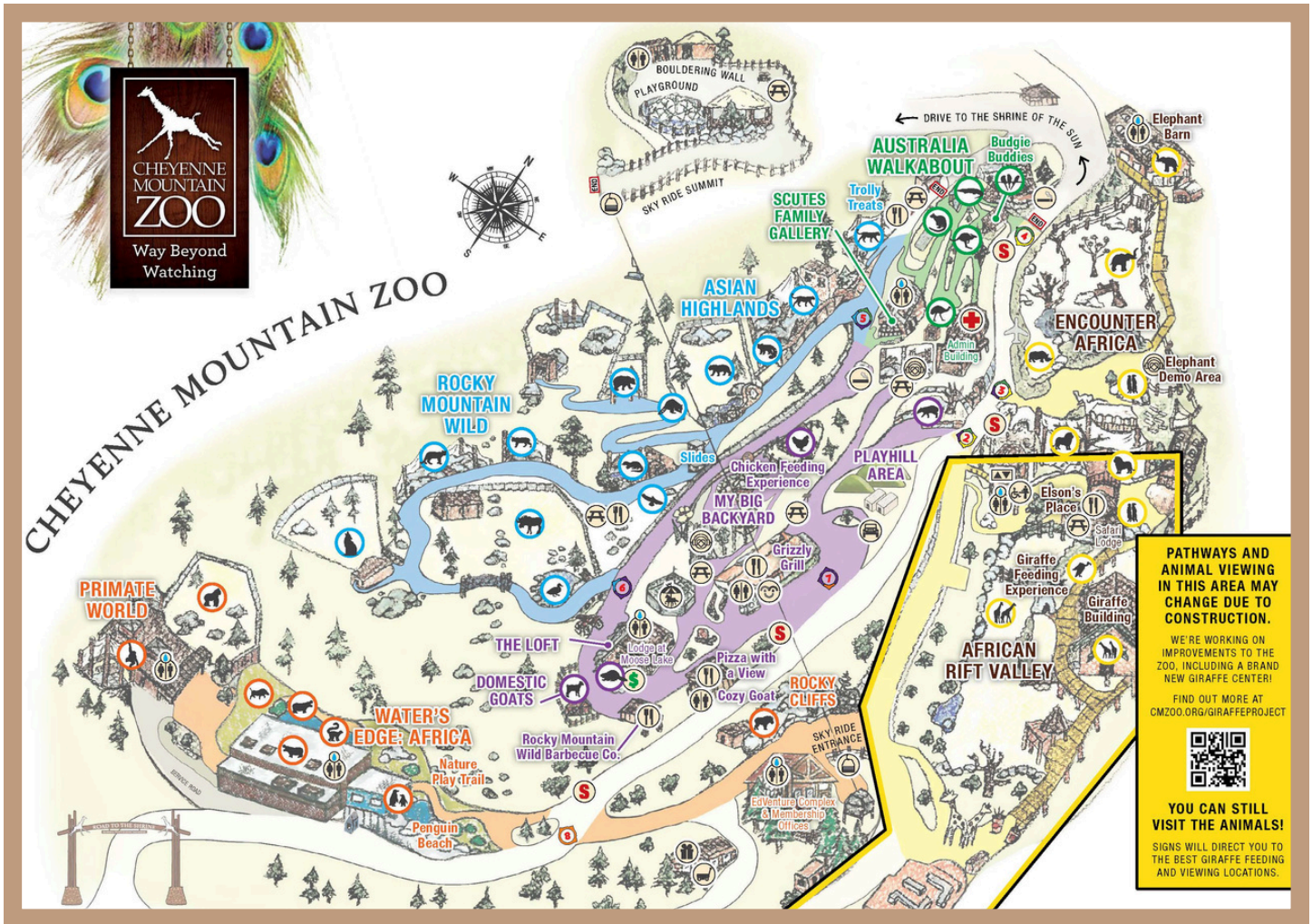
In the African lion enclosure, three lions (one male and two females) had access to one indoor room and one outdoor yard. A strange life-size metal statue of a water buffalo stood in the yard, which seemed to serve no purpose to the lions. While the exhibit overall demonstrated a variety of enrichment (including trees, water features, toys, and puzzle feeders), the available perches were not very high or numerous enough for all animals if they were out in the yard at the same time. We also noticed very little usable area in the yard available to the lions; several very large rocks and a steep slope substantially decreased the area available to them to walk or run.



The reptile house was extremely bright and noisy. The snakes and lizards kept in this facility had very minimal or no hiding opportunities; many of the tank walls were made of clear plastic or glass and positioned in the middle of the room, which enabled visitors to surround the enclosures from all angles.



Most of the animal exhibits we observed demonstrated problematic predator and prey animal placement, which would cause all animals to experience a heightened level of stress and anxiety. For example, in the “Asian Highlands” section of the zoo, the red panda and raccoon exhibits were placed on either side of tiger enclosure, with the grizzly bear exhibit being close by. Similarly, the red panda exhibit was 100 ft away from the amur leopard enclosure, with both the clouded leopard and amur tiger within smelling and hearing distance. In the “African Rift Valley” section of the zoo, the meerkats, giraffes, and colobus monkeys were placed right next to and opposite from the lion enclosure.



By design, and largely for what are intended to be “educational” purposes, zoos often group animal exhibits based on shared geography, oversimplified versions of similar climates, and/or comparable distribution of animals.<sup>12</sup> For example, many zoos have areas entitled “African Savannah,” “Asian Rainforest,” or “South American Jungle” but these are little more than design themes which bear no meaningful resemblance to the areas they claim to replicate. Additionally, designing a zoo in this way negatively impacts animal welfare, as the nature of these broadly themed exhibits requires predominantly solitary, predatory, and prey species to coexist in unnatural ways that conflict with their many evolved behaviors to thrive in these roles in the wild.

**Most of the animal exhibits we observed demonstrated problematic predator and prey animal placement.**

There is the assumption in the zoo industry that predator and prey species (or multiple territorial predator species) will habituate to each other over time in a captive setting. In a study that tested prey species' awareness to a predator in a zoo by studying an exhibit with five species of African ungulates separated by a dry moat from their natural predator, the African lion, the researchers measured the ungulates' activity budgets in response to various lion behaviors. The results indicated that ungulates spent significantly less time in seven behaviors (including lying down, feeding, drinking, sniffing the ground, sniffing each other, defecating, and urinating) when the predator was visually present than when the predator was visually absent. The authors concluded that the changes in ungulate behavior indicated an awareness of the predator; for example, the prey spent less time with their heads down (engaging in feeding, drinking, and sniffing the ground behaviors) when the predator was present, allowing more time for predator surveillance. These results indicate that the ungulates in this zoo exhibit modified their behavior when a lion was visually present, potentially also indicating increased stress levels because of more time spent in a vigilant state.<sup>13</sup>

This predator/prey dynamic that negatively impacts animal welfare in captivity holds true even for animals that do not share a recent evolutionary history or captive-raised animals that were never taught predator-avoidance fear or behaviors from parents or conspecifics. For example, one field study<sup>14</sup> investigated the ability of mule deer to discriminate among familiar predators including coyotes and mountain lions versus an evolutionary relevant yet unfamiliar predator with whom mule deer had no recent exposure: locally extinct wolves. They discovered that the mule deer not only responded to each of the predator sounds but discriminated between each predator individually, including the wolves extinct from the study area since the early 1900s. As highlighted by these results, the fear and avoidance behaviors demonstrated by prey species are genetically engrained in these animals, and likely do not diminish in intensity or disappear completely based on the adaptivity of animals to unnatural captive settings.

In the same ways big cats have evolved to use scent marking and vocalizations to establish their territory to warn other big cats, prey have simultaneously evolved to detect these chemical warnings to avoid such spaces. Research confirms that the presence of predators can induce extreme stress and powerful physiological responses in prey, including the following distinctive behavioral effects: inhibition of activity; suppression of non-defensive behaviors like foraging, feeding, and grooming; and movements to locations where such odors are not present. Further, predator odors can have profound effects on the endocrine system of prey animals by suppressing testosterone and increasing levels of stress hormones including corticosterone and Adrenocorticotropic hormone (ACTH).<sup>15</sup>

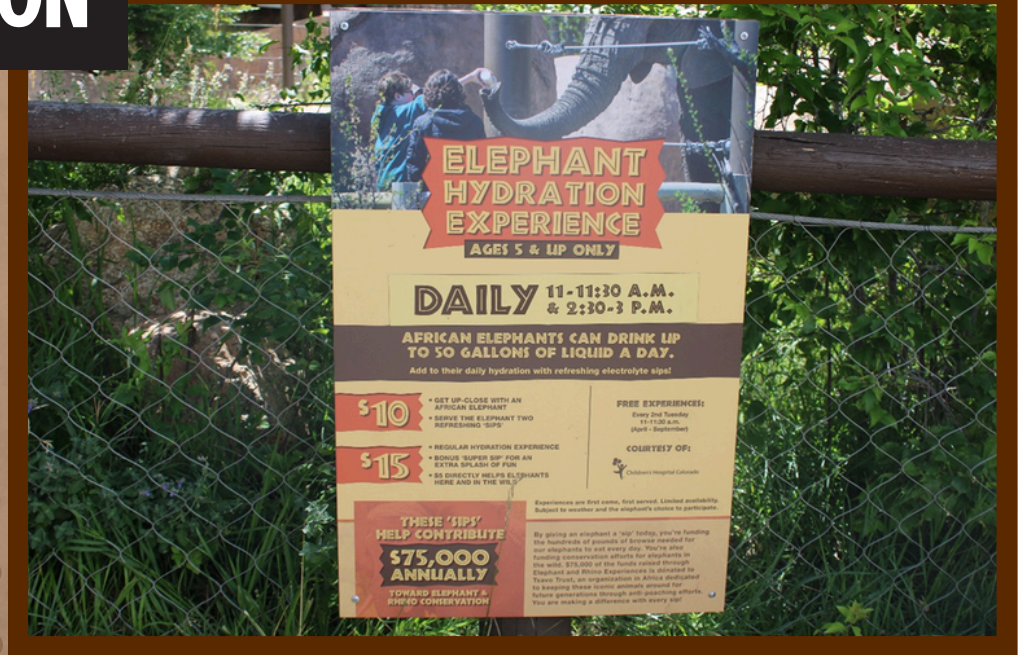
<p><b>PRIMATE WORLD (PW)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Bornean Orangutan</li> <li>Naked Mole Rat</li> <li>Sumatran Orangutan</li> <li>Western Lowland Gorilla</li> </ul>	<p><b>PLAYHILL AREA</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mountain Tapir</li> <li>Okapi</li> </ul>										
<p><b>ROCKY CLIFFS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Rocky Mountain Goat</li> </ul>	<p><b>DOMESTIC GOATS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Domestic Goat Experience</li> </ul>										
<p><b>WATER'S EDGE: AFRICA (WEA)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>African Crowned Crane</li> <li>African Penguin</li> <li>Common Warthog</li> <li>Guinea Pig</li> <li>Nile Hippopotamus</li> <li>Pink-Backed Pelican</li> <li>Ring-Tailed Lemur</li> </ul>	<p><b>LOFT</b></p> <table border="0"> <tr> <td>American Beaver</td> <td>Snakes</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Black-Footed Ferret</td> <td>Three-Banded Armadillo</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Chinchilla</td> <td>Tortoises</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Lizards</td> <td>Wyoming Toad</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Skunk</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	American Beaver	Snakes	Black-Footed Ferret	Three-Banded Armadillo	Chinchilla	Tortoises	Lizards	Wyoming Toad	Skunk	
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<p><b>ASIAN HIGHLANDS (AH)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Amur Leopard</li> <li>Amur Tiger</li> <li>Red Panda</li> <li>Snow Leopard</li> </ul>	<p><b>MY BIG BACKYARD (BBY)</b></p> <table border="0"> <tr> <td>Amphibians</td> <td>Koi</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Chicken Feeding Experience</td> <td>Patagonian Mara</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Honeybee (seasonal)</td> <td>Rabbit</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Invertebrates</td> <td>Rooster</td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td>Tarantula</td> </tr> </table>	Amphibians	Koi	Chicken Feeding Experience	Patagonian Mara	Honeybee (seasonal)	Rabbit	Invertebrates	Rooster		Tarantula
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<p><b>ROCKY MOUNTAIN WILD (RMW)</b></p> <table border="0"> <tr> <td>Alaska Moose</td> <td>Mountain Lion</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Bald Eagle</td> <td>North American River Otter</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Canada Lynx</td> <td>Raccoon</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Grizzly Bear</td> <td>Rainbow Trout</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Mexican Wolf</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	Alaska Moose	Mountain Lion	Bald Eagle	North American River Otter	Canada Lynx	Raccoon	Grizzly Bear	Rainbow Trout	Mexican Wolf		<p><b>AFRICAN RIFT VALLEY (ARV)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>African Lion</li> <li>Cape Griffon Vulture</li> <li>Colobus Monkey</li> <li>Meerkat</li> <li>Reticulated Giraffe Feeding Experience</li> </ul>
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Legend from Cheyenne Mountain Zoo map. Exhibit placement at the zoo often puts predator and prey species in close proximity.

The zoo kept all ambassador animals (animals that serve as “mascots” representing their species in the wild, who have been habituated to humans and trained to participate in “educational” programming) in a building called “The Loft,” which contained numerous small enclosures that resembled those in laboratories or cages these animals may be kept in as pets in private homes. These animals included mostly small mammals, reptiles, and one sloth. The keepers here stated that they let most of the ambassador animals outside for exercise and sunlight one to two times per week. They also take these animals off-site to children’s birthday parties, schools, and other events, which puts both the humans and nonhuman animals at these events at risk due to the potential transmission of zoonotic diseases.



# CONCLUSION



Our conclusions from visiting the Cheyenne Mountain Zoo in Colorado largely echo those of our other zoo investigations thus far: the animal demonstrations often showcase animals in unnatural environments or demonstrating abnormal behaviors that make light of their stressful, sometimes harmful lives in captivity; the signage is rarely read in full and thus ignored and/or misunderstood by most zoo visitors; good animal welfare cannot possibly be achieved under the observed spatial, social, and behavioral limitations present at this zoo; and most visitors did not see the need to spend longer than one and a half minutes at even the most popular and charismatic animal exhibits. All these points highlight the entertainment-oriented nature of zoos, going for cheap laughs over valuing the animals for the complex, sophisticated lives that their counterparts demonstrate in the wild, which mostly cater to the short attention spans of the public and thus render the zoo “education” argument entirely moot.

Although we did observe a few signs that hinted at conservation work with animals like elephants and lions, most of these signs required visitors to participate in an exploitative activity with the animals to contribute anything to protecting them in the wild. For example, visitors could offer cups of water for elephants to drink through the fencing for \$10-15 to help support elephant and rhino conservation.

Similarly, the giraffe feeding experience mentioned in the earlier section required payment to interact directly with the animals by paying to feed them lettuce, but failed to communicate what, if any, conservation benefit partaking in this activity offered wild giraffes.

We hope that, with this series of investigations, we reveal that zoos do not significantly contribute to the very things they use to justify their existence to continue breeding and keeping wild animals in captivity in perpetuity: promoting visitor education, supporting animal conservation, and improving animal welfare. After investigating the Cheyenne Mountain Zoo, we believe that this zoo works against much of the genuine conservation work that legitimate in situ organizations are working for. If our investigations have helped move your inner compass closer towards supporting only ethical, compassionate conservation that truly makes a difference for animals in the wild, we urge you to stop visiting zoos and aquariums to show the zoo industry that the public wants the funding and resources to go towards actually saving animals in the wild; not perpetuating a harmful cycle just to line their pockets.



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