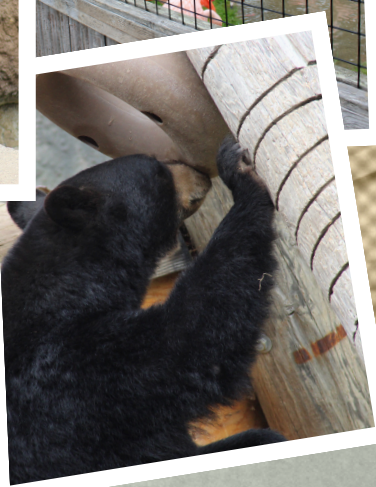
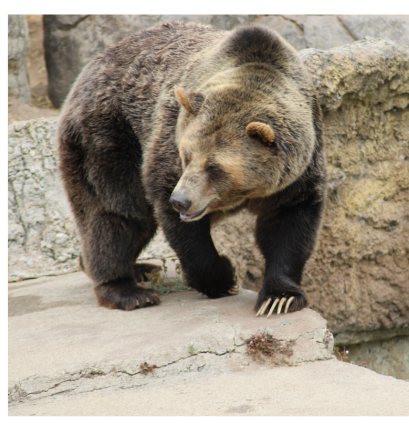




INVESTIGATES 🔍



SAN FRANCISCO ZOO

San Francisco, California

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



This report is one of a ten-part investigative series into the United States' zoo industry. Our experts have visited some of the highest-ranking zoos in the country to gather evidence on animal welfare provision, conservation efforts, and education offerings. This project will culminate in a final body of work which seeks to answer important questions around the zoo industry and, in particular, whether the lifelong captivity of zoo residents can be justified.

Our team visited San Francisco Zoo in the fall of 2025. Below are our key findings:

- San Francisco Zoo has come under significant scrutiny in recent years, with the San Francisco Animal Control and Welfare Commission stating that “the establishment fails in animal enrichment due to outdated enclosures,” further describing the zoo as “dilapidated,” and saying that it was “unsafe for the animals and visitors.”
- A 2026 poll found that 76% of San Franciscans say that they wanted to see the zoo “reimagined.”
- In 2012, a child was killed by a tiger who escaped her enclosure. The subsequent press coverage of the tragedy saw the zoo blaming the victim; arguing that he “taunted” the tiger. This shows a shocking lack of accountability for its own failure to keep visitors safe. The same tiger had attacked a zookeeper the year before during a public feeding display.
- Average viewing time at animal exhibits was just 2 minutes 17 seconds. The guests’ lack of interest in spending time observing the animals begs the question: what can people possibly learn at the zoo given their apathy towards the animals held captive there?

- Animals were seen performing stereotypies, which are stress related behaviors such as obsessive pacing. One of the wolves paced for our full ten-minute observation period. Visitors interpreted this worrying behavior as “cute” as children raced alongside the distressed animal while laughing.
- Animal living spaces were many magnitudes smaller than the animals' natural ranges. For example, orangutan natural ranges are between 764 and 1,999 acres larger than the zoo provides. Giraffe natural ranges are between 20,904 and 370,568 acres larger than the entire acreage of the San Francisco Zoo.
- Evidence gathered at the San Francisco Zoo adds significant weight to the argument that the zoo industry cannot justify holding thousands of animals captive for their lifetimes under the guise of education and conservation. Claims made by the zoo industry that visitors are inspired to support conservation efforts following their visit to the zoo are difficult to believe when the animals can barely hold the interest of zoo visitors for more than 2 minutes.



INTRODUCTION



In August 2025, our team visited San Francisco Zoo as part of our ongoing Born Free Investigates project.

During our visit, we assessed the accuracy and efficacy of major aims 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, with providing data from some of the top AZA-accredited zoos in the U.S.¹ – often considered the 'gold standard' of the zoo industry – that we illustrate a more accurate picture and scrutinize what these facilities offer the animal inhabitants and human visitors.

We then explore whether zoos can justify keeping wild animals in captivity based on our findings. We will only analyze zoos that are largely considered to excel in the fields of animal care and facilitate meaningful interactions between animals and human visitors. This research forms part of a wider project which will investigate ten of the country's highest-ranking zoos between 2025 and 2027.

Background

San Francisco Zoo was founded in 1929. Since that time, it has grown into a major tourist attraction set on a 100-acre site with thousands of animals. In 2024, the zoo was subject to significant criticism from the San Francisco Animal Control and Welfare Commission, which stated in press that “the establishment fails in animal enrichment due to outdated enclosures,” further describing the zoo as “dilapidated,” and that it was “unsafe for the animals and visitors.”²

Further reports published in early 2026 suggested that zoo visitors were down 40% since 2019.³ The zoo has reported financial deficits for the last three years, with the income/expenditure gap sitting at

\$6.35 million dollars in 2025.⁴ Income includes a \$4 million annual “management fee” paid to the zoo by the City of San Francisco, meaning that taxpayer dollars are propping up the failing facility. A poll published in early 2026 showed widespread opposition to the current facility, with 76% of polled San Francisco area voters wanting the zoo “re-imagined,” 57% opposing animals being kept in captivity, and 59% opposing the proposed import of giant pandas.⁵ With regard to any conservation contribution the zoo may make, it is notable on its accounts that no expenditure is assigned to conservation efforts.

On the two days of our visits to the zoo, there were few visitors, despite our visit being during peak tourist season. The zoo’s allegedly dire conditions – both practically and financially – is of particular concern to local San Franciscans because it is located on public-owned coastal land that is both valuable real estate and also important ecologically.⁶

According to the “By the Numbers” page on its website,⁷ the San Francisco Zoo is home to 5,901 individuals belonging to 266 species. Both numbers are reported on the same page of its website so which, if either, number is correct is unknown. Data on the conservation threat facing the species cared for at the zoo is also unclear from their website. The zoo claims that it cares for 60 species appearing on the IUCN Red List (though the specific number listed above that was 59). In the same section of their website, they say that 37% of the species held captive there are on the IUCN Red List (n=60). If the number of species held is, in fact, 266, the percentage of listed species is just 22%, meaning that 78% of all species at the zoo are not threatened in the wild. In addition to confusing data relating to animals and species, the zoo claims that 22% of its individual inhabitants were rescued but, at the same time, states that only 60 individual animals had been rescued. This represents 1% of the whole, not 22%. With the foregoing in mind, how many animals, species, and rescued animals are living at the zoo is unknown.



ANIMAL DEMONSTRATIONS



An organized show in the designated Wildlife Theater area was carried out using three animals during our visit: a blue-tongued skink, a tortoise, and a ball python. The theme of the demonstration was the animals' "superpowers," with interesting characteristics of the animals being pointed out by staff. A lead member of staff presented all the animals who were being held by volunteers. The volunteers then walked among the audience with the animals so that people could get a closer look at them. At the end of the show, people were invited to the front of the outdoor theatre space to look more closely at the animals. The number of people made it so that the animals were surrounded during this section of the show that the zoo called the "meet and greet." We were pleasantly surprised that there was no touching of the animals that we saw during the meet and greet section.

The zookeeper presenting commented that the animals used in the show were "rescued" either as donated ex pets or "rescued from the wild" because they would not survive there. The animals used in the show were some of those housed in the zoo's "Arc" facility. According to the zoo's website, the Arc Center's primary role at the zoo is educational and houses the "ambassador animals", most or all of whom are rescued.⁸ The website further states that there are around 60 animals housed at the Arc Center. It is assumed that these animals are those referred to on the "By the Numbers" page mentioned above.

It is unclear why wild animals rescued from the pet trade or animals unfit for release would be considered more suitable than others to be handled in this way and used as "ambassadors." If anything, vulnerable animals such as those who have been exploited in the pet trade, or injured in the wild, would be particularly poorly suited for public interaction.

The zoo also advertises many other "connection" activities on a regular schedule. Not all include direct or close up interactions with the animals, except for the penguin feeding, which happens daily.

SIGNAGE, STAFFING, AND VISITOR ENGAGEMENT



The signage at the zoo was relatively comprehensive and, unlike some other facilities visited as part of this project, signage tended to acknowledge local people in conservation efforts.



Some signage around the zoo was presented in multiple languages. While English was the default, some signage was also partially translated into Spanish and Chinese. However, where signage was presented in other languages, only partial translations were provided with some text in English omitted from the translations. It was unclear how signage was selected for translation as the use of languages other than English seemed sporadic and only present at a small number of exhibits.

There was minimal staff presence around the site, with very few employees seen on either of the two days we visited. On the second day, there were two volunteers stationed near the lions with a cart containing skins of big cats that they were encouraging people to touch. When we asked where the skins came from, they told us that they were from cats at the zoo who had passed away. They told us all the big cats died from natural causes and are buried when they died, then later dug up to retrieve the bones and fur. They told us that this meant the “cats are continuing to educate people after their deaths.” The idea that the big cats’ body parts would be dismembered and their skins used by the zoo after their deaths seemed to us both macabre and disrespectful.



Case Study: Tatiana the Tiger Kills Child in 2007

The volunteers also told us about an escaped tiger in 2007 who had killed a visitor. They were referencing the death of Carlos Souza, a 17-year-old child who was killed after a tiger, Tatiana, escaped her enclosure. The enclosure was later found to have walls four feet lower than recommended by zoo standards. Tatiana attacked three visitors and began to approach police officers before being shot to death.

After the incident, dispatcher and fire department recordings were released which saw a zoo employee calling 911 but saying of the victims: “I don’t know if they are on drugs or what, they’re screaming about an animal who attacked them, but there’s no animal out.” Reports further state that it was six minutes before it became apparent that the zoo employees believed what was happening. First responders were then refused entry to the zoo for five minutes because of protocol for an escaped animal, even though the first responders had been called to deal with that very situation. Appallingly, when the other two victims, brothers Amritpal and Kulbir Dhaliwal, tried to enter the zoo café to get out of harm’s way, they were refused entry. By the time the first responders were able to gain access, 23 minutes after the initial call was made, they found the tiger attacking the brothers again. By this time, Carlos was already dead.

The zoo was fined a mere \$1,875 for the flaws in the tiger enclosure. The Sousa family settled the wrongful death suit for an undisclosed amount, and the Dhaliwal brothers received a settlement of \$900,000.⁹

The media coverage following the incident saw the zoo and others appear to direct blame towards both the AZA and Sousa and his friends. The zoo manager at the time said it was “amazing” to him that the tiger had been able to jump that high and that they had been inspected by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, which had “never noticed a deficiency” in the height of the wall. The now disgraced Columbus Zoo boss, Jack Hanna, also weighed in, telling press: “I think it could be feasible for a cat that has been taunted or angered [to attack a person],” ... “I don’t think it would ever just do it to do it.”¹⁰ These sentiments were echoed by federal investigator, Laurie Gage, who said: “With my knowledge of tiger behavior I cannot imagine a tiger trying to jump out of its enclosure unless it was provoked.”¹¹

These grossly misleading – and offensive – statements not only placed the blame on the victims but are also far from the truth. Tatiana herself had injured a zoo employee during a public feeding event the year before. She had pulled the zookeeper’s arm through the caging and bit her. The zookeeper required surgery and was only able to avoid more serious harm because her colleagues pulled her away from the tiger’s grasp.¹²

As an apex predator, it is entirely predictable that a tiger would attack. Indeed, there have been enough prior instances of people being killed by big cats in zoos that to suggest the incident was some kind of aberration is disingenuous. In 2025, a man was killed by a tiger at an Oklahoma zoo;¹³ in 2020, a zookeeper was killed by a tiger at Zurich Zoo;¹⁴ in 2017, a

zookeeper was killed by a tiger at a UK zoo,¹⁵ four years after a similar incident occurred at a different English zoo;¹⁶ in 2016, a zookeeper was killed by a tiger at Palm Beach Zoo in Florida.¹⁷

Further press – including statements from the zoo itself – highlighted that the boys had consumed alcohol and marijuana prior to entering the zoo and had stood on top of a railing and shouted at the tiger. Zoo spokesperson said: "Those brothers painted a completely different picture to the public and the press," "Now it's starting to come out that what they said is not true." PR specialist for the zoo, Sam Singer, made perhaps the most repulsive comment, apparently attempting to be humorous, by saying: "There is a lesson to be learned from this terrible tragedy...Don't drink alcohol, don't smoke marijuana and don't taunt man-eating animals."¹⁸

While the visitors' behavior was disrespectful, visitors taunt animals in zoos every day and it is the responsibility of the zoo to keep both animals and visitors safe. To use the tiger potentially being taunted as an excuse for a dangerous wild animal to escape and kill a child is shocking.

NATION-WORLD

As more details emerge, family mourns teen killed by tiger that escaped at San Francisco Zoo

RON HARRIS

Dec. 30, 2007, 11:00 p.m. ET



ANIMALS OBSERVED AND INDIVIDUAL WELFARE ASSESSMENTS



Animal enclosures at San Francisco Zoo were largely typical with carnivores such as bears, wolves, and lions housed in traditional, small “grotto” style enclosures, where living spaces were set against a stone wall backdrop, and moat and/or glass barriers were between the animals and the visitors.

At the wolf enclosure, one wolf was obsessively pacing the same track for our entire ten-minute filming period. During this time visitors – children in particular – were running alongside the wolf and laughing. We heard an adult who passed the enclosure when no children were there tell his friend “There were kids running down this line here and the wolves were running with them. It was really cute.” The obsessive, repetitive behavior of the wolf was a clear indicator that they were severely stressed, and yet the behavior was misinterpreted as funny or “cute” by the visitors. Too often, abnormal behaviors of wild animals in zoos are misunderstood by those watching them. It begs the question of whether zoo visitors would better understand how poorly suited to captivity wild animals are if they were able to properly interpret animal behavior.

We observed the following animals in detail: chimpanzees, orangutans, lions, black bears, and giraffes.

The orangutan enclosure appeared to be made up of two separate island type enclosures, both with small climbing structures in them. Each island comprised approximately 0.07 acres, and only one was accessible by the orangutans during our visit. The indoor space was off view. The exhibit used to house chimps before they were moved to their current enclosure. Since our visit in August 2025, the zoo announced that it was moving its chimpanzee group to a different zoo to focus on other great apes, and the orangutans will move into the current chimp space.



Orangutans have varying home ranges. Females are documented as having home ranges between 864 – 1,484 acres (1.35 – 2.32 square miles) in Borneo and around 2,099 acres (3.28 square miles) in Sumatra. Male home ranges are larger than females' but are less studied so there is little data to confirm sizes. One study examining orangutan ranges in a particular Sumatran swamp forest found that males had home ranges of up to 6,167 acres (9.65 square miles).¹⁹ While the size of the orangutan living space at the zoo is not publicly documented, natural orangutan ranges are between 764 – 1,999 acres larger than the entire acreage of the San Francisco Zoo.

A spokesperson from the zoo said that, by breeding the orangutans they "... are doing a last-ditch effort to try and save the species."²⁰ Despite these lofty claims, the IUCN committee on great apes (the International Union for Conservation of Nature [IUCN] Species Survival Commission Primate Specialist Group) have been clear that any translocation of great apes from zoos would serve no conservation purpose which, in turn, means that zoo breeding cannot be considered a tool in preserving great ape species in the wild as is claimed by the zoo.²¹

During our observation period, the orangutans were largely inactive. The female seemed to be somewhat avoidant of the male and would move out of his way if he approached her. The male had bald patches on his head, indicative of overgrooming and sign of a possible stereotypy.²² The climbing structure and overall small size of the enclosure provided no opportunity for brachiation and contained no natural elements such as trees.

The exhibit was of little interest to visitors, with only 16 people stopping to look at the orangutans during our ten-minute observation period. The average amount of time spent was just 1 minute 11 seconds, with the longest viewing period 1 minute 39 seconds and the shortest 11 seconds.



The chimps were housed in what used to be the elephant enclosure, which was repurposed around 2019 so that the chimps could be moved to make way for the orangutans.²² The chimps had one outdoor space that was visible to visitors, and a glass fronted indoor space where visitors could see them. It appeared that the chimps had access to out-of-sight indoor spaces, accessible through the public viewing room, but the dimensions and adequacy of that space were not assessed. The outdoor space had one high platform and some permanent enrichment items but no dynamic elements. Some small, wilted branches had been placed for (we assume) enrichment. The enclosure had patchy grass substrate. There were no trees.

The size of the chimpanzee enclosure at the zoo is not publicly documented. In the wild, chimpanzees have large variance on home range across countries and communities, with the smallest recorded range 1.1 sq miles in Ivory Coast to 24 square miles in Senegal.²³ This is between 600 and 15,260 acres larger than the entire San Francisco Zoo.

Both chimps were relatively inactive during the observation period, only moving around on the platform, with one eventually moving into the indoor room. One briefly groomed the other. There was a sign on their enclosure that asked visitors to “be respectful” of the “chimp troop” (2 individuals on view) as they were “going through their time of mourning” for a companion who had passed. It was unclear what “being respectful” meant in this context, though it was interesting that the zoo recognized that visitor behavior might impact the chimps while they were grieving, and yet they remained on display.



The chimps were by far the least popular exhibit based on visitor view time, with just seven people stopping to look at them during the ten-minute observation period and an average of 11 seconds spent there (high = 15 seconds, low = 10 seconds).

Orangutans and chimpanzees in their natural habitat form what are known as fission-fusion societies. This means that, while they form part of an overarching community, they split and merge into subgroups and move between them. The splitting and merging of groups are influenced by various factors including personal relationships and hierarchies, family ties, conflicts, resource availability, and habitat fragmentation. Inherent in a fission-fusion society is individual choice. This dynamic social structure simply cannot be replicated in captivity, with San Francisco Zoo being an example of zoos' failure in this regard.



Another sign in the great ape area stated that the gorillas were off show because they were introducing a new adult male to the group. This appears to be recognition again that visitors could negatively influence the animals when they were on view.

The giraffes were housed in a mixed-species exhibit with zebras and ostriches. The substrate was largely packed dirt, with some grass covering perhaps 40% of the enclosure. The giraffes had been given browse, which was tied high up, but the browse had already been stripped clean twenty minutes after the zoo opened. It is unknown whether this kind of enrichment was provided multiple times a day or just in the mornings. One giraffe continued to chew on the stripped hanging browse and did so for the whole ten-minute observation, suggesting a potential stereotypy.²⁴ The activity of the giraffe was directly related to the location and availability of browse.

Giraffe home ranges in the wild range from 32.8 square miles to 579.15 square miles.²⁵ This equates to between 21,004 acres to 370,658 acres. The considerable difference in range depends on multiple variables including climate, seasonality, and food abundance or scarcity, among others. The size of the giraffe living space at the zoo is not publicly documented, but natural giraffe ranges are between 20,904 and 370,568 acres larger than the total acreage of the San Francisco Zoo.

There was an indoor barn for the giraffes that appeared to be closed during our observation. As with other exhibits we observed, people appeared to have little interest in animals, with just eight people stopping to view the giraffes, zebras, and ostriches. The average observation time was 2 minutes 17 seconds (maximum: 2 mins 44 seconds; minimum: 3 seconds).

The chimps were by far the least popular exhibit based on visitor view time, with just seven people stopping to look at them during the ten-minute observation period.



The lions were housed in a grotto-style enclosure as described above for the wolves. Their indoor space was off view and could not be assessed as part of our visit. Both lions – one male and one female – were inactive during our observation period. The enclosure had some permanent enrichment such as shelters, climbing platforms, and large plastic drums, but none of these elements were used by the lions during our visit. The lions proved the most popular exhibit we observed with a total of 26 visitors during our ten-minute observation period. Even these majestic animals, however, could not hold visitors' attention for more than a few minutes at a time. The average viewing time for the lions was 1 minute 33 seconds (maximum: 3 minutes 44 seconds; minimum: 9 seconds). The lions were housed directly opposite and in sight of the bongos. While bongos are not typical prey for lions due to differing natural habitats, prey animals such as bongos would predictably be fearful of large carnivores such as lions and the lions would possibly be frustrated by being in such proximity to prey animals.



In the wild, lions have differing ranges dependent on variables such as competition for territory, food scarcity and abundance, water sources, seasonality, human activity, and many others. That said, most recently available data published in 2025 for African lions in Chizarira National Park, Zimbabwe,²⁶ found a core range (the area of intense use where they spent 50% of their time) from 1.575 square miles (1,008 acres) to 50.44 square miles (32,000 acres). Their extended ranges (areas they utilized outside of their core range) were between 19.5 square miles (12,486 acres) and 272.93 square miles (174,676 acres). The size of the lion living space at the zoo is not publicly documented but natural lion ranges are between 908 acres and 370,468 acres larger than the total acreage of the San Francisco Zoo.

The American black bears were housed in a small grotto-style enclosure which featured a small pond. The substrate was composed entirely of concrete and rock. There were some enrichment items in the enclosure including a couple of plastic barrels, a puzzle feeder, a fire hose, and a hammock. During our observation period, one of the bears in the enclosure was engaging with the puzzle feeder and another was lying down. These animals would be solitary in the wild yet were housed in a pair at the zoo. The bear enclosure was one of the first ones that visitors encounter after entering the zoo, so it seemed reasonable to assume that the exhibit might be more popular as people's enthusiasm would arguably be highest as they first come in. However, only 20 people stopped to look at the bears and those who did spent an average of 1 minute and 5 seconds viewing them (maximum: 1 minute 57 seconds; minimum: 16 seconds).

In the wild, black bears are wide ranging, with their specific ranges influenced by food availability and scarcity, climate, terrain, and overlapping territories. Female black bears are reported to have a range of between 1 to 50 square miles. Males can traverse ranges between 10 – 290 square miles.



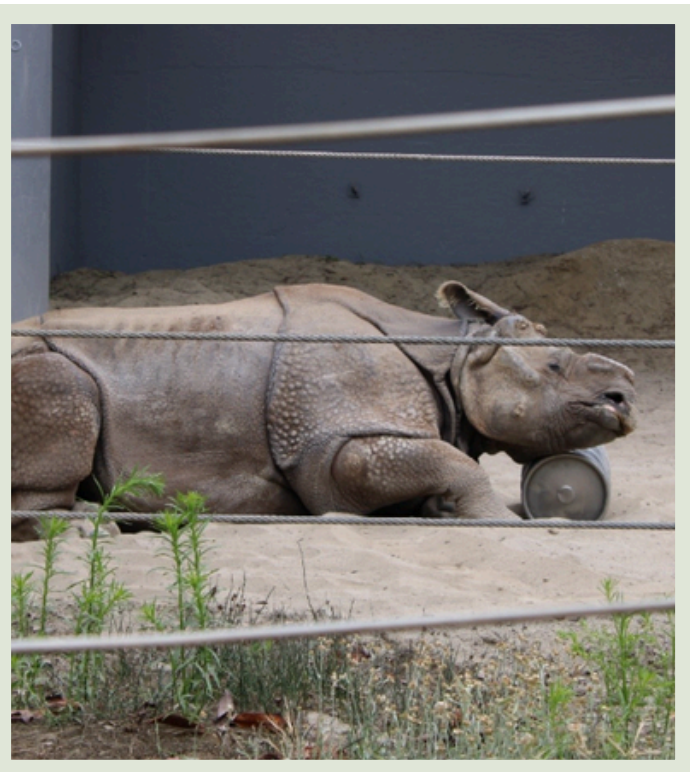
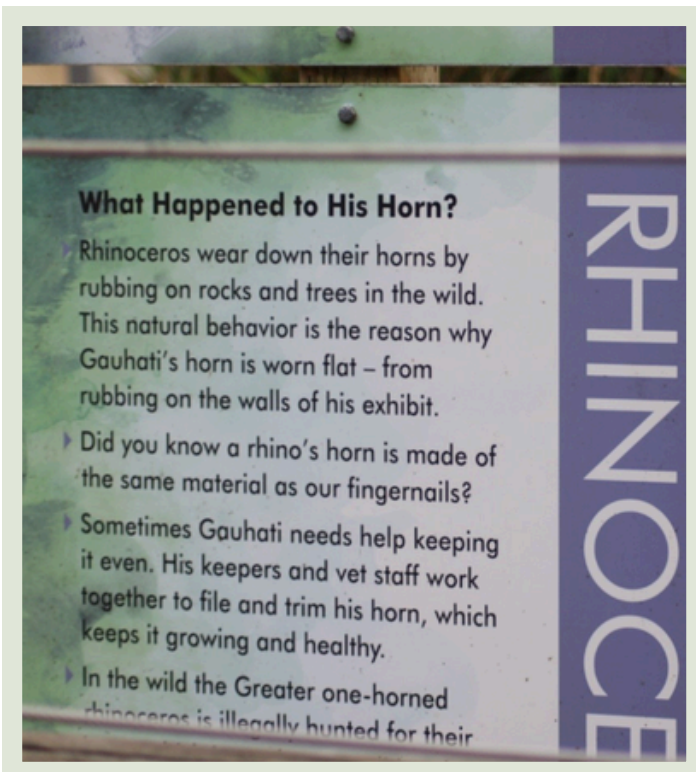
In addition to those animals viewed at length, other species, like birds, are worth mentioning, including flamingos, cranes, and pelicans, who had their wings pinioned. Pinioning is the amputation of the carpal joint to permanently prevent flying and is classed as a mutilation.

A two-toed sloth was asleep in a tiny cat carrier in their enclosure which was otherwise brightly lit and loud, with loud echoes due to the acoustics. As a primarily nocturnal animal, this loud and bright living area is in direct conflict with the sloth's basic needs.

The rhino was lethargic and spent all the time we viewed him lying on the ground with his head resting on a plastic barrel. Concerningly, the rhino's horn was rubbed completely flat. At first, our investigators thought that the horn could have been removed deliberately by the zoo. This has been done in some zoos following a shocking incident when poachers broke into a French zoo, killed a rhino and sawed his horn off with a chainsaw.²⁷



Other zoos chose to remove horns preemptively to avoid similar incidents.²⁸ However, signage at the zoo confirms that the rhino had, in fact, completely worn down his horn from rubbing it on parts of his enclosure. This indicates extreme repetitive behavior resulting in something not known in the wild. Indeed, a rhino's horn is one of their primary methods of defense, so rhinos naturally maintain their horn for that purpose. The zoo signage suggested that rubbing his horn flat was a natural behavior for rhinos, though our investigator could find no other documented examples of this level of extreme horn rubbing.



CONCLUSION



Our visit to San Francisco Zoo found stressed animals housed in ageing and inadequate enclosures and a legacy of damning reports on the facilities, with loud calls for the zoo to be shut down altogether. Recent polls of San Franciscans showed widespread discontent with the zoo and its operation, which is of particular concern because the zoo's operation is propped up by taxpayer dollars and its facility occupies ecologically important and vulnerable coastal land.

Visitors showed little more than a passing interest in the animals, with just moments spent observing the animals per visitor and no meaningful engagement with educational signage noted. While attempts had been made to present interesting and engaging signage for visitors to learn from, the absence of visitors' interest in reading those signs arguably rendered those efforts moot. Failing income²⁹ and plummeting visitor numbers³⁰ reinforce calls for the zoo to wind down operations; making way for a kinder, more environmentally focused future on the coastal site that doesn't hold complex, sentient animals captive for their lifetimes.

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