

SHOULD WE USE NATURAL BEHAVIOUR TO ASSESS ZOO ANIMAL WELFARE?

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Natural behaviours are defined as behaviours typically seen in the wild, evolved by natural selection and allow an individual to survive more easily in its environment. These include behaviours such as resting, sleeping, foraging, feeding and mating. Any modern zoo encourages the performance of natural behaviours from the animals with naturalistic enclosures and suitable housing and husbandry practices including environmental enrichment programs. However, it is not always safe, ethical or feasible to maintain all natural behaviours in a captive environment. Zoo legislation in the UK for example, discourages the feeding of live vertebrate prey to carnivorous animals. In the wild, the majority carnivores spend a high proportion of their day foraging and hunting – does this mean the zoo carnivores are not provided with positive welfare opportunities related to feeding? The performance of natural behaviours in zoo animals have always been regarded as indicative of positive welfare, with behavioural diversity indices being used as a method to assess this - but do these really work in zoos? The need for and frequency of animal welfare assessments in zoos is on the rise but with the majority of these being resource-based and not focused on the animals behaviour or psychological needs are they really assessing welfare? As you see, the current evidence for using natural behaviours as a means to assess zoo animal welfare is mixed. However, identifying behaviours that are driven by the psychological need of the species as well as focusing on behaviours that are indicative of positive welfare might just enable welfare researchers to assess zoo animal welfare holistically.