

THE ROLE OF ZOOS IN CONSERVATION: SHIFT OF PARADIGM

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Zoos are in the process of gradually transforming themselves from amusement parks and unsustainable wildlife consumers to environment education and conservation centers. This transformation remains underway, with some zoos moving further along the transformation than others, yet overall the zoo community plays an active and increasing role in conservation, both locally and internationally.

According to global and regional zoo strategies, modern zoos have four main functions: education, wildlife conservation, research, and entertainment. All these functions can be, and often are, integrated for better protection or restoration of wildlife. During the late-twentieth century, zoos primarily focused on *ex situ* activities as a means of maintaining an “Arc” to hold animals into the future when, hopefully, the environment can be restored and species reintroduced. That approach gradually shifted to a new focus on environmental education and *in situ* conservation actions.

Regional and global zoo organizations offer an increasing opportunity to use more effectively human and financial resources for conservation, but also to influence global, regional, and national wildlife conservation policies.

Joint programs with universities are opening new perspectives and opportunities for conservation research both *ex situ* and *in situ*.

In our talk we will review the gradual shift in zoos’ paradigm, their current contribution to the conservation of wildlife, and increasing focus on research and environmental education. We end our talk with two case studies: conservation in Tallinn Zoo (Estonia) and Denver Zoo (USA).