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Animal Concern incorporates the Scottish Anti-Vivisection Society which has been Campaigning for animals since 1876
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Nicola Sturgeon MSP.
The First Minister,
The Scottish Government,
Holyrood,
Edinburgh

Dear First Minister,

Animal Concern has supporters in every constituency in Scotland and I am writing to you on behalf of those supporters to ask you to consider making changes to the law governing zoos in Scotland.

Over the last two years several situations have arisen which indicate that the Zoo Licensing Act is not being properly policed and the Act itself needs brought up to date.

In 2013 I had to ask the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR) to intervene when the owners of the Fife Animal Park tried to sell the Park (including the animals within) in a commercial deal despite the animals being owned by a charity. OSCR immediately halted the sale and called in the local Council which had granted the Park a Zoo Licence. The Council then brought several charges of animal cruelty and neglect to which the owner eventually pled guilty in court.

What concerns me is that it appears the Council only acted after I asked OSCR to intervene. This was despite the Council having received several complaints, including some from Park staff, about the welfare of the animals over a period of at least 18 months prior to the OSCR intervention.

Last October I asked Highland Council to take action against the Black Isle Wildlife Park after I received complaints over animal welfare and public safety at this mini zoo. As a result the Council have ordered the owners to make numerous improvements both to the infrastructure of the zoo and to the feeding and environmental provision for the animals. To be blunt Highland Council granted a Zoo Licence to someone who did not understand that reptiles needed heated accommodation and did not know how to meet the nutritional needs of donkeys and goats.

The main reason for writing is the current situation within the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland (RZSS). At Edinburgh Zoo it is not the first cuckoo call which heralds the coming of spring. It is the annual panda breeding bacchanalia. This has gone beyond a simple will-she-won't-she waiting game and has become a sick circus of publicity and exploitation. The animals are subjected to dangerous general anaesthetics to facilitate so far unsuccessful artificial insemination procedures.

The panda breeding initiative is financially and politically motivated and inherently flawed. The animals are kept in totally unnatural conditions. Wild male and female pandas only meet to mate for a few days each year. In their unnatural habitat at Edinburgh Zoo they are kept in inadequate, small, adjoining enclosures where the male is extremely stressed and frustrated as he can see and smell the disinterested female almost 24/7.

Zoo bosses must realise they have not got it right. Or do they really think wild pandas have teams of artificial inseminators using dangerous general anaesthetics to help them do the business? If the Zoo does manage to force the pandas to procreate there is not much of a future for any cub created. Once it outgrows the cute and cuddly baby stage it will be taken back by its Chinese owners to be leased to another zoo in a new lucrative financial and political deal.

The RZSS have created a similar exploitive situation at their Highland Wildlife Park near Aviemore which has provided an excellent sanctuary for two male polar bears.

The RZSS have now brought in a female polar bear to breed with one of the male bears and produce some cute, cuddly, commercially valuable cubs in time for Easter 2016. They should have no problem breeding polar bear cubs. The problem will arise in a couple of years' time when the cubs have to be rehomed. Any cubs are very likely to be sold or given to bear parks in Japan or China as no British and few European zoos will take polar bears as it is almost impossible to provide them with adequate facilities.

When the last polar bear bred at Edinburgh Zoo outgrew his commercial cuteness he was shipped off to a Victorian era concrete enclosure at Antwerp Zoo. A few months later I filmed him there. He was already exhibiting the stereotypic pacing and head swaying seen in polar bears driven mad by confinement. A few months later he died at the age of just four years old.

I have no doubt that zoos are breeding animals for commercial reasons without adequate consideration for the future wellbeing of the animals. Sadly the current Zoo Licensing system has no safeguards to protect animals from this sort of dangerous exploitation.

I urge you to take action to update the Zoo Licensing Act to protect animals from commercial exploitation and greatly increase the minimum habitat and welfare standards which zoos have to provide for animals in their care.

Yours sincerely,

John F. Robins,
Animal Concern

PS Has your Government got any further with the animal act circus situation? The Chipperfield big cats are still in tiny cages on a croft in Aberdeenshire and are likely to stay there for the foreseeable future as I understand the owners have not secured a booking for the forthcoming season. We urgently need legislation to liberate animals from circuses and to make it illegal to keep animals under the sort of condition the lions and tigers are enduring at Cairnglass Croft.