

BETWEEN A MEME AND A HARD PLACE: HOW ACCREDITED ZOOS COULD TURN A CONFLICTED MILLENIAL MARKET

BY SARAH NASON

IT'S OCTOBER 2017 AND THERE'S A PARTY IN MY MONTRÉAL APARTMENT. I share the floor above a restaurant (well, with an inscrutable downstairs neighbour in between; George goes from blaring techno one night to telling us we “walk too loud” the next) with three other university students. Our unusually nice sectional sofa, way past our pay grade and inherited from an old roommate, is overcrowded with a variety of our friends. Medical students, young professionals, and other graduate students all crowd around a coffee table struggling to contain an assortment of empty bottles. Somehow, the conversation turns towards zoos. Maybe someone joking “RIP Harambe” prompted it: referencing the shooting of this silverback gorilla at the Cincinnati Zoo [has become oddly commonplace for Millennials](#). In any case, one of my roommate's friends is soon lamenting the captivity of zoo animals: “I just can't stand how sad they look,” she sighs.

This is a familiar conversation for me. When it comes to zoos and aquariums, the millennial perspective is often coloured by feelings of guilt for enjoying the experience. “I always feel about 25% bad when I go,” admits Lauren LaBossiere, 24. “You wonder if the animals are being treated well.” Or as one anonymous survey respondent [a graduate student in their early twenties] put it, some zoos can be “hella depressing.” Such feelings of conflict are typical and make for successful internet trends. For example, [a video of Pam Beesly from NBC's The Office](#) looking emotionally tortured with a lengthy caption expressing her hypothetical conflict over going to the zoo had been viewed over 14 million times at the time of writing this article. It's a strange milieu to navigate, because internet culture is equally (if not more) obsessed with cute and funny animal videos. [The immense social media celebrity of Cincinnati Zoo's prematurely-born hippo, Fiona](#), is a case in point: the zoo's videos of Fiona have garnered millions of views on Youtube.

This is commonly the plight of the Millennial: people born in the '80s and '90s grew up in the Information Era, characterized by a steady and overwhelming flow of unfiltered information online. With one scroll of a mouse through their Twitter feed, a person can navigate from a seemingly apolitical video celebrating the birth of a hippo to a hardcore thinkpiece arguing all zoos and aquaria should be shut down. The Pew Research Institute coined the term “[Always-on-attention-deficit-disorder](#)” to describe this aspect of the Millennial experience: we are highly

connected to a huge quantity of information, and in order to not be drowned by it, we must constantly make quick decisions about whether to engage with online content. Perhaps this is a reason for the rise of memes, which can typically be consumed quickly and “get straight to the point” when it comes to making social commentary.

The word “meme” was originally invented by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene* (yeah, I didn't know that either). He described a meme as a piece of cultural information that is transmitted by replication and imitation, much like a gene. This is exactly how the Harambe phenomenon occurred: starting with [fake funeral programs](#) for the fallen gorilla, which were then transmuted into other tongue-in-cheek [tributes](#) and [shrines](#). As an article in the Washington Post put it, “for millennials, memes form the backdrop of life.” If you want to take the Millennials' temperature on a social issue, memes will give you the answer. This is why, even though it may seem like an inconsequential internet joke, that popular

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video of Pam Beesly is so important: the fact that people engaged so strongly with that meme gives a good sense of how Millennials feel about zoos and aquaria.

Millennials are also on track to be the most educated of any generation, staying in school longer due to depressed job markets and taking advantage of unfettered access to information found online in Netflix documentaries, Youtube videos and increasingly subscription-free news articles. Combined with their tendency towards seeking social justice, it should be unsurprising to hear that Millennials are aware of the controversy surrounding



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the ethics of captivity. This is the generation that only a few years ago was audience to the viral success of the documentary *Blackfish* that spurred a movement challenging the captivity of cetaceans. Recent media sensations like *Blackfish*, *Food, Inc.*, and even the *Madagascar* franchise have pushed the ethics of captivity to the surface of all our collective consciousness, causing many to question the usefulness of zoos and aquariums. Many now argue that [technology should act as a stand-in for the zoo experience](#). As *New York Magazine* writer Benjamin Wallace-Wells [observed](#), "my daughter has seen more of the savannah, via National Geographic's website, than I did in the 30-plus years before she was born."

Perhaps the scientific and zoo communities (that's us!) have been historically stunted in thinking about such issues as the emotional and psychological experiences of animals in captivity. It was long considered fact that animals do not experience emotion; as *New York Times* author Alex Halberstadt noted in [his profile of animal behaviourist Dr. Vint Virga](#), "the notion of animals as unthinking automatons has enjoyed curious staying power." Despite our considerable advancements past these antiquated views, only recently have we come to a generalized acceptance that [fish experience pain](#). On top of this, the scientific community [remains split](#) about the usefulness of zoos towards animal conservation. As recently as 2016 emeritus professor Dr. Marc Bekoff wrote [a piece for Scientific American](#) advocating for zoos to either close or transition to being sanctuaries. With such current debate and problematic history, it may be difficult for the public to come to an understanding of what an accredited institution's ethical position is.

The good news about this for accredited zoos and aquariums is that the Millennial market is at a position where it can be turned. Many Millennials are conflicted between appreciating the zoo experience and feeling uncertain about the ethical consumption of that experience. And experiences are important to Millennials: many call our corner of the market the "experience economy" because we value experiences more than possessions and [rely strongly on reviews and personal testimony](#) on social media. The Millennial generation is also characterized by a strong interest in justice for social causes, which likely makes us well aligned with the conservation rhetoric of accredited institutions. This is likely especially true for those institutions that also invest in collaboratively supporting the human communities

where on-the-ground conservation work is carried out. In fact, market research by PGAV Destinations, a firm that designs zoos and aquariums, found that Generation Z (the subset of Millennials born in the '90s) is particularly influenced by messages about conservation. As Pittsburgh Zoo communications manager Laura Gething put it, "it just so happens that [the zoo's mission of conservation] tends to resonate with millennials. There's a really great intersectionality."

It is also clear that Millennials sense that not all zoos are equal, but are generally unaware of what accreditation is. When asked about whether zoos are ethical, another anonymous survey respondent [a graduate student in their early 30s] responded: "some of them. There are some exceptional examples, but also some deplorable ones." At the same time, [a survey carried out for CAZA](#) by Abacus Data in 2016 detected no major difference in approval ratings between accredited and non-accredited institutions for any age group of respondents. Georgina Allen wrote for *The Dodo* that zoos of poor repute "may not be part of the accredited zoo community[...]but the public don't know or care about that." An important step forward for the CAZA community will be to connect more effectively with Millennials about accreditation as well as its implications for animal welfare and conservation. Accredited institutions should clearly set themselves apart, and should not hesitate to criticize unethical practices and advocate for higher standards. Establishing a clear public understanding of the goals and effects of accreditation should be a strategic priority for CAZA.

For Millennials to engage positively with accredited zoos and aquariums, and particularly for them to approve of them ethically, institutions will need to transparently address issues of conservation, social justice, and the controversies associated with captivity. The [recent decision of the Vancouver Aquarium to cease housing cetaceans](#) exemplifies an opportunity to perform this type of outreach: I suggest that we take these moments to communicate openly and honestly about the pros and cons of captivity. While it is easy to suggest that the Harambe meme is mean-spirited or devoid of meaning, the reality is that tributes to Harambe spread in large part due to real compassion for his untimely death. Aja Romano, who reported on the Harambe phenomenon for *Vox Media*, [put it well when she said](#): "if you were among the many, many people who were genuinely sad about Harambe's death, the meme gave you a way to honor his memory." Millennials will respond to a transparent, compassionate approach that puts animal welfare, conservation, and social issues at the forefront, and they will expect this to be corroborated by a broader community online. 🐦