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Creative Spaces: Where the Wild Things Should Be

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When it comes to keeping pets, I'm pretty much a failure. When I was young, we got a chocolate lab puppy. We just had time to give him his name -- Lucky, ironically -- before his luck ran out. A school bus ran him over, the same day that we brought him home. Later on I got a goldfish, but he was eaten by my cat Hugo -- who himself was attacked by a neighborhood dog while I was standing up at my best friend's wedding. My neighbors made the decision to put him down while I was literally walking down the aisle. I do love animals, however, and I have learned a lot about animal welfare from curators, veterinarians and animal keepers.

Though usually unintentionally, humans pose the number one threat to animals through habitat destruction. The purpose of zoos is to educate, conserve and "showcase" some of the amazing creatures that share our planet with us. The [American Zoo and Aquarium Association](#) has extensive [criteria](#) that must be met before it grants a zoo or an aquarium an accreditation of good standing. Most circuses and roadside attractions, in contrast, use animals strictly to make a profit. They are not subject to the high standards that zoos are, and it shows in the appearance and behavior of their animals. Since I have worked for both a zoo and a circus, I have seen the disparity firsthand.

My former colleague, and one of the world's leading experts on animal welfare, created an international news [firestorm](#) when he voluntarily decided to relocate the Detroit Zoo's elephants to a better home, a sanctuary in California. [Ron L. Kagan](#), director of the Detroit Zoological Society, said, "We are obligated to give animals an environment that meets their natural physical, social, behavioral and emotional needs. An enriched and vibrant setting, one that mimics their surroundings in the wild will help ensure animals thrive."

How exotic animals experience life in captivity is determined by the home that zoos give them. Some of the things that make for a great animal enclosure include the following:

1. **Lots of trees and plants for most species.** While some visitors might not like having to look so hard to spot the monkey or tiger, trees and plants are not only important for shade and privacy, but are also great places for animals to explore, and for keepers to hide food, so animals can stay active longer. Though it's not possible to do so in all climates, offering vegetation that's similar to what's found in the native region of the species is important.

2. **Water.** Just as humans need water to survive, so do animals -- and not just to drink. Whether it is a hot tub for snow monkeys to dip into on a cold winter day, as they would in hot springs in

their natural habitat in Japan, or thousands of gallons of salt water for polar bears to dive into and swim as they would in the Arctic, water is a critical feature for many habitats.

3. **Tools and toys.** Apes are not the only species to use tools in the wild to forage for food and make things, but they do seem to be the best at it (and at making the tools too). Having objects like sticks in an enclosure can help keep animals active and engaged.

4. **Enrichment.** Whether it is a watermelon that elephants can toss about with their trunks, an ice block with a fish frozen in it for polar bears, or honey at the bottom of a termite mound for chimps to dig to, enrichment is a way to keep animals challenged and stimulated. It is as critical to an animal's well-being as having the right food and medical care.

5. **Numbers -- solitary or packs.** Animals should be neither lonely, nor overcrowded. Whether it is a male tiger who is solitary in the wild, or gazelles and zebras that travel in herds together in the African plains, the animals' natural social environment should be mimicked as accurately as possible.

6. **Space.** Animals need the right substrate and enough room to run, frolic, dig, leap or gallop. Generally open range enclosures are not only much better for the animals but have a profound impact on visitors. No one feels good seeing a majestic exotic animal confined behind bars or in a small cage.

7. **Heat and Light.** Nocturnal creatures need dark while some reptiles and amphibians need hot lighting. Getting temperature and lighting right are key to an animal's physical and emotional well-being, reproduction and survival.

From desert plains to the wild jungle, we scoured the US in search of some of the best AZA accredited animal enclosures. This slide show will show you some stars.

Gorillas of Cameroon, Zoo Atlanta, Atlanta, Georgia



Based on extensive research by Jon Coe and Dr. Terry Maple, and a research safari to Korup National Park and Campo Forest Reserve in Cameroon led by Zoo Atlanta curator Detrich Schaaf, the Gorillas of Cameroon features four naturalistic landscape habitats separated by moats. Visitors can observe the members of four gorilla troops, up to 14 at a time.

Photo credit: flickr user UGACDAWG

Bighorn Sheep, Living Desert Museum, Palm Springs, California



Peninsular bighorn sheep are native to the dry, rocky low elevation slopes and canyons around Palm Springs, California. Unfortunately, they are increasingly rare in the US, which makes the Living Desert Museum's Bighorn Mountain display not just a popular zoo attraction but a vital resource for animal conservation.

Photo credit: flickr user caitlinefa

The Arctic Ring of Life, The Detroit Zoo, Royal Oak, Michigan



A \$15 million, 4.2 acre exhibit with tundra, ice flows, and over 300,000 gallons of chilled sea water in which polar bears can hunt trout, the Arctic Ring of Life provides a strikingly true-to-life Arctic environment for the polar bears, seals, and arctic fox that inhabit it. Kagan and Zoo staff traveled to within a few hundred miles of the North Pole to experience the environment for themselves while they were designing it.

Photo credit: Mark M. Gaskill, Phoenix Innovate

Gelada Baboon Reserve, Bronx Zoo, New York



Designed to simulate the Afro-Alpine region of the Ethiopian highlands, the artificial landscape includes a kopje (an isolated rocky hill), a steep grassy slope, and a meandering watercourse, where geladas (close relatives of baboons) live alongside Nubian ibexes, rock hyraxes, and a variety of African waterfowl.

Photo credit: flickr user Nicole Marti

Amazonia, National Zoo, Washington, DC



Beneath a high dome, visitors can explore a 15,000 square-foot artificial rainforest, complete with a river and a 55,000 gallon aquarium. Toads and tanagers, hummingbirds, titi monkeys and two-toed sloths live in a habitat that includes more than 350 species of plants, from 50 foot tall trees to vines and epiphytes.

Photo credit: flickr user Mr.J.Martin

Kilimanjaro Safari, Disney Animal Kingdom, Orlando Florida



Visitors take a bumpy drive through a 100 acre recreation of an African savannah in an open air vehicle.

Some of the animals they're likely to see are antelope, baboon, black rhinos, cheetah, crocodile, elephants, flamingo, gazelle, giraffe, hippopotamus, lion, okapis, ostrich, warthog, White rhino, wildebeest, and zebra. It's easy to forget you're in Florida.

Photo credit: flickr user dhcalva

Northern Trail, Woodland Park Zoo, Seattle, Washington



Stunning recreations of Alaskan Tundra, Taiga and Montane habitats feature gray wolves, arctic foxes, grizzly bears, mountain goats, bald eagles, and Roosevelt elk.

Photo credit: flickr user SuperGregN

Regenstein African Journey, Lincoln Park Zoo, Chicago, Illinois



Four distinct habitats are featured, homes for armadillos, Abdim's stork, spoonbills, wild dogs, giraffe, colobus monkeys, dwarf crocodile, ostriches, and Eastern black rhinoceros, among many other animals.

Photo credit: flickr user Tiger_Jack

The Lost Forest Hippo Exhibit, San Diego Zoo, San Diego, California



Special underwater viewing windows allow visitors to view pygmy and river hippos both in and out of the water. The hippos share their enclosures with Wolf's guenons monkeys—and Tilapia keep their water clean.

Photo credit: flickr user tomfs

National Amphibian Conservation Center, Detroit Zoo, Royal Oak, Michigan



Indoor and outdoor displays include a cypress swamp and a restored two-acre wetland outdoors.

Teeming with bullfrogs and other wildlife, it is the home of the National Amphibian Conservation Center (NACC). The Wall Street Journal called it “Disneyland for toads.”

Photo credit: Mark M. Gaskill, Phoenix Innovate

World of the Insect, Cincinnati Zoo, Cincinnati, Ohio



The 66 displays feature everything from foot-long giant centipedes and fierce Peruvian bullet ants (their stings are thirty times more poisonous than a bee's) to passion flower butterflies, which flutter about in a climate controlled aviary.

Photo credit: flickr user zhand38

Congo Gorilla Forest, Bronx Zoo, New York



Also in the Bronx, six and a half acres of mist-enshrouded Central African rainforest, where 400 animals of 55 species live, including two troops of Silverback gorillas, okapi, colobus monkeys, and red river hogs. The exhibit features more than 14,000 plants of 400 species, from tuliptrees, African oil palms, and Ensete, a wild banana, to Draceanas, a common houseplant that's native to Central Africa.

Photo credit: flickr user Thewentworths1

African Savanna Exhibit, Woodland Park Zoo, Seattle Washington



Giraffes, zebras, gazelles, oryxes and ostriches share what looks like a continuous landscape (but the enclosures are separated by moats). Lions and wild dogs can be seen in contiguous exhibits. Visitors enter through a model African village, which includes displays about African culture as well as ecology and conservation.

Photo credit: flickr user Shutter.shot