

Polar Bears

The declining population of polar bears within their natural habitat has sparked debate about the effectiveness and morality of zoos, as well as their ability to preserve populations. There are between 20,000 and 25,000 polar bears left on earth and scientists are predicting their extinction within 70 years. Some zoos are proposing to save the polar bear by increasing polar bear exhibits. The St. Louis Zoo, for example, is completely redefining captivity for the bears and has invested \$20 million to recreate the natural habitat of the animal, which includes designing saltwater pools and ice-like cliffs.

Those who support increasing polar bear exhibits recognize it is not an ideal solution but feel that it will ensure the preservation of the bear. Juliet Eilperin states, "In a worst-case scenario, a remnant group of bears would survive in captivity." Captive breeding is not a new concept, and the process has helped save species such as the Guam rails, black-footed ferrets, and California condors from extinction. Some of the saved species are even reintroduced into the wild in hopes that they can repopulate in the future. In many cases, captive breeding gives experts time to assess the habitat of endangered animals and explore reasons and solutions for the decreasing population. This process can give the species time to repopulate in captivity while their habitat is improved.

Although captive breeding has been an effective solution for some species, opponents point out the difficulties of using this method for polar bears. Ronald Sandler, associate professor of philosophy at Northeastern University, believes polar bears are, "one of the worst candidates for captivity." He explains that their natural lifestyle includes roaming for thousands of miles through arctic conditions, a routine which cannot take place within the confines of a zoo exhibit. He also argues that polar bear advocates should be more concerned with global warming, a process which is destroying the habitats of these bears and consequently decreasing their numbers. Other opponents argue against reintroducing captivity-bred animals into their natural habitats: they question the animals' ability to adapt after confinement.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Is increasing the number of polar bear exhibits in zoos an ethical way to attempt to save them? Would this strategy be ethical if used to save a physically smaller species?