

# **SAN FRANCISCO ZOO RECOMMENDATIONS**

**REPORT BY**

**THE JOINT ZOO/RECREATION AND PARKS COMMITTEE  
ANIMAL WELFARE ADVISORS**

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**Presented to:**

**Tanya Peterson, Director of the San Francisco Zoo**

**Melinda Dunn, Chair of the San Francisco Zoological Society Board of  
Directors**

**San Francisco Joint Zoo/Recreation and Parks Committee**

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## Report Overview

At the April 19, 2024, Joint Zoo/Recreation and Parks Committee meeting, the Committee responded to an article in the San Francisco Chronicle detailing serious concerns with San Francisco Zoo management and animal welfare issues; the Committee agreed to respond to concerns by contacting Zoo Management.

In addition, Dr. Joe Spinelli and Ms. Jane Tobin, the Committee's animal welfare advisors, committed to researching animal welfare issues by meeting with animal activists who raised concerns. The activists include Justin Barker of SF Zoo Watch, Fleur Dawes and Brittany Michelson of In Defense of Animals, and Taciana Santiago of Panda Voices.

On August 15, Joint Zoo Committee animal welfare advisors Dr. Spinelli and Jane Tobin, Michael Angelo Torres, Chair of the Animal Commission, and Justin Barker of SF Zoo Watch toured the Zoo to visit the areas of concern.

### Animal Welfare Advisors

Dr. Joe Spinelli has a long history with the San Francisco Zoo and has been an animal welfare advisor on the Joint Zoo Committee since 2009. As a veterinarian, Dr. Spinelli has worked with San Francisco Zoo staff veterinarians throughout the years and is deeply committed to the care and environment in which zoo animals live.

Jane Tobin is one of the founders of Friends of San Francisco Animal Care and Control and prioritized fundraising for Behavior and Training programs to support the needs of shelter animals. Ms. Tobin has been an animal welfare advisor to the San Francisco Joint Zoo/Rec and Park Committee since 2015.

As animal welfare advisors to the Joint Zoo/Rec and Park Committee, we believe the following criteria must exist for zoo animals to thrive.

- The enclosure should provide enough room for the animals to exhibit normal behavior.
- It should allow a space for animals to retreat from human view. retreat to an indoor area
- It should be pleasant to the eye of the patrons and allow the patrons an opportunity to see the animals exhibiting natural behavior
- It should provide many opportunities for behavioral enrichment.
- It should be clean and safe for the animals, animal caretakers, and the public.

## Overall Observations from the Tour

### **The importance of animal enrichment and habitat at zoos**

Remember why we do enrichment. In nature, animals spend most of their time looking for food and avoiding being eaten. Animals in zoos don't need to be concerned with either. So, they become very bored and may exhibit stereotypic behavior — a sign of brain damage. Providing them with enrichment is good for the animals and the patrons. It's interesting to watch lions searching for food, lemurs climbing a tree, or dogs romping with an animal hide. Most importantly, adequate enrichment stimulates their senses, helps them deal with boredom, and allows animals to be mentally healthy and live as happily and comfortably as possible in captivity.

### **Thoughts on habitat**

Many of the Zoo's enclosures are extremely outdated and fail to meet the criteria outlined above from an animal welfare perspective. Parts of the Zoo are best described as dilapidated. It looks like an institution that needs a comprehensive strategic re-design plan to modernize the habitats.

From a visitor's perspective, it is uninspiring. For example, we had difficulty locating the lone lion hiding under a concrete table in a WPA-era habitat (90 years old). The safety measures to meet the AZA and USDA enclosure requirements are minimal and even more frightening—unsafe for the animals and visitors.

The Zoo also has an exhibit that should be the standard for habitat redesign. We are including a poorly designed habitat for comparison.

### ***An exemplary habitat is the Lemur exhibit***

Our first stop on the tour was the Lemur exhibit. It is a large swath of land with trees for climbing and enough space for the lemurs to play and explore. A prominent water feature encircles their habitat, which serves two purposes - 1) a natural barrier that feels welcoming and mimics the animals' habitat, and 2) security without chain links.

This exhibit is a model that the Zoo should use in all habitat design and animal enrichment.

### ***A poor habitat is the Langur exhibit***

This exhibit was meant to be temporary until a proper habitat was built. The langur enclosure is a series of chain-link cages with metal bars and doors to move from one side of the cage to another. The cages are imposing and dreadful, making it difficult to see the animals. Even

though the langurs moved about the cages as the enrichment staff hid food, the habitat is a jail from a visitor's perspective. Zoo staff report the cages are also crawling with rodents, posing health risks for the langurs.

Langurs are active and engaging animals. A better, more prominently placed habitat would be excellent for both langurs and visitors. Across from the langur exhibit is an empty, open meadow.

### **Not for lack of space**

The San Francisco Zoo and Gardens is situated on one hundred acres of land. Justin Barker noted the missed opportunities to expand habitats and create enclosures that engage visitors as well as the animals. Even so, zoos with less space have managed to not only meet the animals' needs but also build small and visually pleasing experiences for visitors.

### **Veterinary care and enrichment**

The animals appear to receive appropriate care from veterinary staff (as reported at Committee meetings). We spoke with two women working with the langurs, providing enrichment activities. As noted in previous committee presentations, that program showcased the Zoo's investment in providing captive animals with enough creative activities to remain curious and engaged.

The Zoo [shared the process of creating a giant soccer ball called the Foobler](#) to engage a Black Rhino in his favorite activity—soccer. Visitors enjoyed watching Boone the Rhino and exploring the hidden surprises in the Foobler on World Rhino Day at the Zoo.

Additionally, the Zoo noted a collaborative program in designing zoo animal enrichment activities with Stanford University students. That collaboration no longer exists.

### **Limitations of this report**

The observations are based on limited conversations with staff while we toured the facilities. Justin Barker had conversations with the Zoo staff and previous employees to provide additional details. Although In Defense of Animals and Panda Voices could not attend the tour, the input we received from them is included in the recommendations.

Since Dr. Spinelli and I did not tour behind the scenes, the reported observations are from the perspective of a zoo visitor with a background in animal welfare.

## **Attachment A - Habitat and Safety Concerns**

*Included are areas of concern provided by Justin Barker of Zoo Watch*

### **Kangaroo**

For years, the kangaroo's habitat has lacked running water. Keepers must carry buckets of water for the animals every morning and evening.

### **Gorilla**

The gorilla habitat moat area backs up and fills with water during heavy rainfall.

### **Koala**

The koala habitat can only hold one koala at a time. Currently, the zoo has three Koalas, which means two cannot go outside daily. If it's not warm enough, no one goes outside; instead, they sit in a small, enclosed room with a window.

### **Orangutan**

The orangutan yards reside in a 100-year-old circular concrete circle that's 10x10 and has just a three-level platform.

### **Przewalski Horses**

The Przewalski horses' habitat is an old, dilapidated holding area. The Zoo was unwilling to plan for them properly; they wanted to fill a space.

### **Pygmy Hippo**

The Pygmy Hippo has an extra-large elevated human hot tub that was put inside his indoor holding without planning. His outdoor pool has no heater. They are a western African species that live in a warm and humid climate, not San Francisco temperatures

### **Rhinos (Black and Indian)**

The black rhino exhibit remains completely unrenovated year after year. When there is a viable option to double the habitat size for the current rhino that resides there. It would be a simple fence work project to double that area.

The old sandbox that the Indian rhino lives in a small rectangle with just sand and a pool.

### **Langur**

The langurs live in an old concrete chain-link box. They have nothing natural in their habitat/cages leading to depression.

### **Mandrill**

The Mandrill night house is also falling apart and way too small for the ever-growing family there. Again, they could've turned the empty yard next to them and tripled their space if they planned and invested in retrofitting the available empty yard. Instead, they placed a solo grey fox in the huge habitat.

## **Otter**

The Otter habitat needs to be updated and expanded, and the holding space needs to be bigger and more sufficient for any animal to be housed. Unfortunately, a dropped door killed the penguin in that area. No one from the Bird Management Team or the VP of the Animal Division reached out for any tips, guidance, or knowledge about that area from the curator or carnivore staff who have worked there for years.

There is plenty of space to renovate the otter holding and habitat, but upper management or the director never discuss or are willing to discuss what needs to be done in that area.

## **Jaguar**

The netted exhibit that the jaguar currently inhabits was supposed to be temporary. As noted in the AZA Jaguar Animal Care manual - Primary containment for jaguars should be designed to provide the highest level of security which includes completely enclosing the top of the jaguar enclosure. Although there are options for a lower level open-top approach which include dry moats and minimum vertical height, cantilevered supports, fencing/mesh with hot-wire attachments - this approach would be unsatisfactory considering the Zoo's tiger incident of 2008. Zoo enclosures should always be designed to the highest level of security for the safety of the animals and zoo patrons.

## **Children's Zoo**

Children's Zoo hoof-stock animals live in small, square, dirt-only habitats, with no grass, trees, or other natural options outside.

## **SF Zoo facilities (including safety concerns)**

The entire Zoo perimeter is in dire need of repair and updating.

Inadequate office and workspace for all staff across the Zoo.

The dilapidated zookeeper space (keeper trailer) has water-damaged floors and doors that won't stay shut, allowing wildlife to come inside.

Instead of installing netting over one of the Big Cat grotto yards to potentially house a jaguar, tigers, or any other capable climbing cat, they installed panels to raise the height of the

Perimeter walls and added extra hotwire around the perimeter of the walls. Please note—these designs do not guarantee that the cats can't escape.

These concerns were clearly expressed to upper management and the director from the assistant curator of that area, and they were also addressed at the Zoo safety meetings with other concerned Zoo staff.

The Wildlife Conservation Center holding space is dilapidated and needs updating.

**Recommendations:**

1. Quite a few of the exhibits are close to 94 years old. The only ethical way forward is for the exhibits that have existed since the zoo opened in the late 1920s to be redesigned to fit modern Zoo habitat standards.
2. Have Zoo Management review and report fixes to the issues.



## **Attachment B - Planning**

### **Strategic planning (infrastructure and animal transactions)**

There is no plan for Zoo infrastructure updates, new habitat construction, renovations, or short- and long-term planning.

#### **Recommendation:**

In addition to annual budgets and capital and operating expenses, Zoo management should present long-term and short-term strategic plans and progress reports to the Joint Zoo Committee.

### **Animal transactions**

It is unclear how animal transaction strategic plans are decided (reactive vs. proactive). This leaves the Zoo in the awkward position of taking in animals without a planned/funded habitat for the animal(s). Temporary exhibits are meant to be short-term habitats until the animal exhibit is complete; however, some animals have been in temporary habitats well beyond what is considered temporary. The langurs are just one example of this. We were made aware of an extensive list that was provided to the Zoo by staff. A more comprehensive list of concerns was shared by Zoo staff to Zoo management.

#### **Recommendation:**

When presenting the Joint Zoo/Rec and Park Committee with a list of animals the Zoo wishes to acquire, the animals must have a permanent habitat ready. An animal's acquisition sometimes requires a significant investment in habitat design, veterinary care, and staff support. A financial impact analysis report should be provided so that the committee can fully understand the effect the acquisition will have on care of the Zoo's current animal inhabitants and existing strategic plans. For example, a complete financial impact analysis report would be required for the pandas.

Additionally, the Zoo should provide the complete list of concerns staff noted to ensure the habitat updates are addressed.

## **Attachment C - Joint Zoo/Recreation and Parks Committee & the MOU**

The MOU between the San Francisco Zoo and San Francisco Recreation and Parks, dated July 1, 1993, requires an update every five years. It appears as though it has not been updated recently.

**Recommendation:** Review and update to reflect additional oversight.

### **Performance Audit**

In 2003, the City of San Francisco conducted a performance audit of the San Francisco Zoo pursuant to direction received from the Board of Supervisors under the authority granted by Charter Section 2.114.

It has been over twenty years since that detailed report was provided. In the meantime, activists, zoo staff, and the media have voiced serious allegations about San Francisco management and animal welfare issues.

### **Recommendation:**

We recommend the Board of Supervisors require a current performance audit of the San Francisco Zoo. We will provide the Board of Supervisors with suggestions for inclusion in the project scope.

### **Oversight**

There is limited oversight outlined in the Joint Zoo/Rec and Park Committee as the Committee's role is defined in the MOU:

**16.3 - Joint Zoo Committee:** City and SFZS hereby agree that the standing committee known as "Joint Zoo Committee" shall be maintained throughout the Term of this Agreement, which Committee shall consist of three (3) members of the Commission and three (3) members of the Board of Directors, respectively. The Joint Zoo Committee shall hold regular public meetings at least eleven (11) times per calendar year to discuss and hear public testimony regarding major policies affecting the Zoo, including, without limitation, the setting of fees, new animal exhibits, animal acquisition and disposition policies, land use, and capital and operating budgets. The Joint Zoo Committee shall be an advisory committee and shall not have any legislative authority not specifically granted to it by this Agreement.

### **Recommendations:**

Add to the Committee the two (2) Animal welfare advisors which include a veterinarian and a commissioner from the Animal Commission appointed at the discretion of the Committee and Commission, respectively.

Advisors - remain non- voting so as to remain unbiased in their assessment of animal welfare concerns.

**Funding:**

The MOU notes that the Zoo's funding from the City of San Francisco is capped at \$4 million. This amount was determined in 1993 and has stayed the same.

**Recommendation:**

We are not prepared to recommend funding increases until the City's Budget Analyst conducts a performance audit.

**16.2 Public Access to Records and Information**

SFZS shall provide public access to information concerning the operation of the Zoo at the same extent that such information would have been available to the public pursuant to local ordinances if the Department had continued to operate the Zoo, in the same manner it did prior to the date of this Agreement. In addition, the SFZS shall comply with all state and federal laws, rules, and regulations that govern access by the public to records and information, including, without limitation, the California Public Records Act (California Government Code Secs 6250 at seq.). Without limiting the foregoing, SFZS further agrees that (a) minutes shall be taken at each meeting of its Board of Directors and that the minutes of those meetings shall be considered public documents available for public inspection in accordance with the Public Records Act and (b) all information concerning the status of all animals exhibited or otherwise housed or cared for at the Zoo, shall be deemed public information subject to public inspection under the Public Records Act.

**Recommendations:** The SF Zoo must respond accordingly to requests for public records as outlined in the California Public Records Act and the State open meeting law (the Brown Act). In addition, the SF Zoo should adhere to San Francisco's Sunshine Ordinance, which ensures more straightforward access to public records and strengthens the open meeting laws. The SF Zoo should designate a point of contact within the Zoo to manage record requests.

**Animal Welfare issues**

In the past, meeting attendees shared concerns with the Animal Commission. As a result, the Joint Zoo Committee animal welfare advisors met with zookeepers to discuss concerns. Those discussions with keepers were welcome at first but then appeared to disappear.

**Recommendation:** Zookeepers and Joint Zoo animal welfare advisors should resume regular meetings, the frequency of which will be determined in advance, as will the issue's urgency.

## **Attachment D - Concerns about the Panda Plan**

Please note that we are including this attachment outlining the concerns voiced by animal activists at the Joint Zoo/Recreation and Parks Committee regarding the Zoo's efforts to add two Giant Pandas to the San Francisco Zoo. We recognize that Giant Pandas have not been included as an agenda item in any meetings thus far. Nevertheless, Joint Zoo/Rec and Park Committee members should consider the information included before a future discussion on this topic.

### **From Panda Voices and In Defense of Animals.**

The animal welfare groups In Defense of Animals, SF Zoo Watch, and Panda Voices received almost 14,000 signatures urging the decision not to bring pandas to the San Francisco Zoo and asking for the cancellation of the panda plan. The groups question the sustainability of this plan, its impact on the other animals, and its impact on the zoo's budget, claiming that the zoo must prioritize fixing its extremely critical issues for the sake of its current inhabitants. The concerns regarding hosting giant pandas at the San Francisco Zoo are summarized below.

### **Animal Welfare Crisis**

Pandas require extensive specialized care and housing them in an already crumbling zoo would be both irresponsible and cruel. A disturbing example of pandas suffering from incompetence and neglect is the story of YaYa and LeLe at the Memphis Zoo. LeLe died in 2023 after 17 days of declining health without receiving proper medical check-ups or treatment. This triggered worldwide anger and valid criticism against the Memphis Zoo. Similar neglect could easily befall the pandas in San Francisco Zoo's substandard conditions, given the staggering list of failures and incidents that have taken place at the zoo.

### **Failed Infrastructure & Deferred Maintenance**

The San Francisco Zoo already struggles to retain highly qualified staff. According to the zookeepers, the infrastructure and enclosures are dilapidated and antiquated. Several recent infrastructure projects at the zoo have faced delays or remain unfinished, and some also suffer from design flaws. Some animals have been housed in temporary facilities for years while construction is underway. The arrival of the giant pandas would make the already poor situation of the current animals living at the zoo even worse, diverting attention and resources away from doing basic repairs and building exhibits for other animals. Even more problematic, it is reported that the zoo plans to put pandas in a 90-year-old facility — where their night quarters will be within the sight and smell of African lions. This is inappropriate and shows a lack of knowledge about the species. We must stress that giant pandas are extremely sensitive to smells and noises and cannot be placed near predators like lions. If the zoo cannot afford to

shelter the current residents well and build a panda house properly; there's no reason to import pandas and allow them to suffer from the zoo's substandard conditions.

### **Unsustainable Panda Plan**

The zoo is also not financially prepared to accept these animals. Recently, the Ahtari Zoo in Finland announced they are returning their giant panda couple eight years before the end of the contract due to the extreme cost to host them, and the Edinburgh Zoo decided not to renew its panda contract for the same reason. This shows the huge challenge and the financial issues zoos face when hosting giant pandas. We understand that the mayor and the zoo CEO have their fundraising plan to bring pandas to San Francisco. However, a zoo cannot rely only on donations to raise giant pandas. This is not sustainable. The costs to host these bears are excessively high and permanent. Giant pandas are rare and extremely sensitive animals that demand highly specialized care, qualified and experienced staff, tons of fresh bamboo and bamboo shoots, and substantial financial support. The donations may allow the construction of the panda house, but they will not guarantee that the pandas' expensive demands will be met throughout their stay in San Francisco.

**Recommendation:** In conclusion, we think the San Francisco Zoo is in a poor position to host giant pandas. Other more relevant issues need to be addressed, and a lot of work must be done to improve the zoo's standards before taking on this risky challenge. Incidents with these pandas, like the ones that had already happened at the zoo, resulting in animal deaths, could cause an international crisis and worldwide anger, just like it happened with the Memphis Zoo.

We urge the production of detailed reports on the zoo's infrastructure, financial health, staff qualifications, conservation research, and panda expertise regarding the panda plan, and we highly recommend that pandas not be sent to San Francisco.