

Book Review *Thought to Exist in the Wild: Awakening to the Nightmare of Zoos*, written by Derrick Jensen with photography by Karen Tweedy-Holmes.

Book Review by Carl Donohue. Text copyright © Carl Donohue and images copyright © Karen Tweedy-Holmes. All rights reserved.

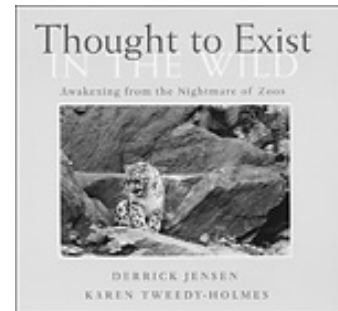
Derrick Jensen has written a compelling essay on zoos; their function, how they work, why they exist, and why he doesn't like them. He tackles the myths we create to perpetuate these institutions, and tears at them like a bear might tear at a stump searching for grubs - following his nose. Jensen unearths the truths behind many of these fables, always writing with an authenticity that is paramount, today more than ever, and it's his honesty that makes his words most compelling. He tells it how he sees it, which to me is the hallmark of any artist. The essay is accompanied by the photography of the New York-based photographer, Karen Tweedy-Holmes. Her work brings a fresh perspective to the captive animal photography debate and could do much to change the way people feel about keeping animals in captivity. Together, the two make a powerful statement on the stark reality of zoos.

Tweedy-Holmes' photography is an evocative and sincere response to her experiences in a number of zoos across the United States. The choice of black and white toning works well for the story she tells. It's a flat, unglorified presentation but it plays second fiddle to the emotional content of the images. She misses critical focus with some of her images, while others have a cropped-off foot or a tail. None of this matters, however, since the all of the images drip with emotion. These photos depict the reality of caged animals. After an initial, cursory study of this portfolio, I was struck by the imagery. "Something is missing," I thought. "These photos are somehow incomplete." Spending a little more time with the image collection finally bought it all together. Something *is* missing in each of these photographs, and this is precisely what makes the collection so complete, so pervasive. The place, landscape, and home of these animals are what is missing. I'm not talking about a photo that shows habitat, a wide-angle lens capturing the background, a tree or a mountain; it's not a function of Tweedy-Holmes' lens choice or a technique or composition. It's the landscape that resides within the animal, the expression of the wild that is missing in the countenance of each and every subject.

Some of Tweedy-Holmes' highlights include:

- The cover photo, a desolate snow leopard, sitting on a slab of rock, head down, lost, with no sense of who, or even what, he is.
- The inside cover shot of an orangutans's hand, clenched around one of the cage bars that keep freedom from his grasp.
- The white rhinoceros on page 31, lying on the bare ground against a brick wall, chin resting on the ground, defeated and devoid of all Life.
- The polar bear on page 58, lying on his back in a pool, a white plastic bucket between his forepaws, looking despairingly toward the photographer.
- The western lowland gorilla on page 69, sitting on his haunches, backed against a brick wall, his hands pulled up to his head. I defy anyone to look at this image and argue that captive animals do not experience their captivity as captivity, as confinement, as something against their will.

Do I sound anthropomorphic here, like I'm projecting human experience and emotion on these animals? You bet I do! Jensen says that we are constantly told by defenders of zoos that we must never anthropomorphize or "attribute human characteristics" to animals. Yet zoos will display signs telling us the bears are eagerly awaiting us in their "habitat." Jensen writes, "We must do everything within our power to blind ourselves to their intelligence, their awareness, their feelings,



their joys, their desires. It means we must blind ourselves to their beingness, their individuality, to them, to who they are, and to their value entirely independent of our own uses for them. It means we must blind ourselves to their suffering."

The photography is engaging, not overly aggressive, and subtle in detailing each subject. Having been familiar with much of Jensen's writing and unfamiliar with Tweedy-Holmes' photography, my expectations were for imagery akin to Jensen's style, which is uncompromising and overt. Tweedy-Holmes hasn't gone for the overt at all here. This portfolio expresses her theme through understatement. These portraits of fractured, incomplete animals is very moving. Only a single male lion, lying on a rock facing the camera, alert and curious, maintains a regal, undamaged, appearance. The theme comes together when Jensen writes a powerful passage about place.

"We should never let zoologists define for us what or who an animal is," Jensen writes. "A sea lion is her habitat. She is the school of fish she chases. She is the water. She is the cold wind blowing over the ocean. She is the waves that strike the rocks on which she sleeps and she is the rocks. She is the constant calling back and forth between members of her family, this talking to each other that never seems to stop. She is the shark who eventually ends her life. She is all these things. She is that web. She is the process of being a sea lion, in place. She is her desires, which we can only learn by letting her show us, if she wants; not by engaging her."

The commentary Jensen brings to the debate over captive animals is disconcerting and will obviously be resisted by many readers. Jensen doesn't point his pen exclusively toward the zoo, the zoo keeper, or government officials. He goes beyond that, examining who we are and why we need spectacles and entertainment in the first place. Frequently, this can be hard to swallow because of its veracity.

Some standout passages debunk the arguments that support zoos and keeping animals in captivity include:

- "The truth is that zoos consume time and money that could be used more effectively to save more creatures by protecting habitat. Zoo supporters then argue that this comparison is unfair, because the money that goes to zoos would not otherwise go toward protecting the wild. They're right. But, as writer Mike Seidman noted sardonically, "Such is the depth of our society's commitment to conservation - not to mention our love of nature - that we will gladly donate vast sums to keep animals in elaborate cages but not to let them live in the wild."
- "The people who run these habitats are trying to answer the same question. To rephrase Sigmund Freud: 'What do grizzlies want?'"
- "Accredited zoos and aquariums produce eight thousand surplus animals a year. Now consider that accredited zoos make up a fraction of all zoos - 10 per cent of the fourteen hundred licensed - and it's easy to figure that eighty thousand animals could be considered surplus each year. That's just in the United States."

Another critical element in the book is Jensen pointing out the language we use to cover our tracks. For example, terms like "habitat" replace "cage" and "enrichment" replace "toys."

This book should be read by every nature photographer, particularly those who support, condone, and engage in photography of game farm and zoo animals. Jensen's cohesive, yet enthralling writing make powerful arguments and his thought-provoking commentary brings an insightful examination to this subject matter. He presents not only his own ideas, values, and experiences, but also a wealth of factual information, quotes, historical accounts, and other anecdotes from zoos, zoo keepers, writers, and scientists. Some of this stuff *will* rattle your bones. Naturally, not everyone will read this book and draw the same conclusions. But if we continue to live as we have lived and are living, we will only continue to foster the same repercussions that we currently witness.

Comments on NPN nature photography articles and book reviews? Send them to the [editor](#).



Carl Donohue is a passionate wilderness advocate, and this love of the wild has taken him from the outback of Australia to the mountains of Alaska to the rivers of Patagonia. His photography reflects this passion, and his love of nature is expressed with his camera. Carl's writings and images have been published both online and internationally in print, including backpacker magazine and National Geographic. His photographic endeavours have won competitions locally with the Southeastern Photographic Society, and nationally in Hooked On The Outdoors magazine. He is currently living in Alaska, working on his first book, a look at Wrangell St. Elias National Park. The rest of the year finds Carl guiding exciting backpacking trips into some of the most remote and pristine wilderness areas in North America. Visit www.alaskanalpinetreks.com for more information on guided backpacking and hiking trips in Alaska, particularly Wrangell – St. Elias National Park. For a comprehensive collection of his stock nature, travel and adventure photography, visit his website at www.skolaiimages.com.



[Site Map](#) • [NPN Membership](#) • [Front Page](#) • [Reader's Forum](#) • [Links](#) • [Gift Shoppe](#) • [Terms of Use](#)

Copyright 2000 - 2008, Nature Photographers Online Magazine, Inc. All rights reserved.