



# THE BIG PONDER

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## The Zoo

By Nathaniel Brimmer-Beller

[ZOOKEEPER DESCRIBING HIPPOS' LIFESTYLE TO ONLOOKERS AT THE BERLIN ZOO]

**Nathaniel Brimmer-Beller:** It's an audio format, so I'm going to do my best to describe what's happening in this video. There are these three big, gray, beautiful, hippopotamuses. They're in their semiaquatic enclosure in the Berlin Zoo. It's June 2018, and they're being fed their lunch. I took this video when I was 21 years old. It is the second time in my life that I'd been to the Berlin Zoo. The first time, so my parents tell me, was in 1998, when I was 18 months old. From what I can remember of seeing photos over the years of my trip that day, little Nathaniel – oh, that's me by the way, hello, I'm Nathaniel – little Nathaniel saw a lot of amazing animals. Some zebras, definitely a big beautiful giraffe, I think an okapi, and a baby hippo. Now, from what I have read, hippos can live up to 40 years in the wild and up to 50 in captivity, so there's a very good chance it's the same hippo. Now, I think that's kind of nice. That 20 years apart, I just popped in and checked in on him. Maybe I'll come back in 20 years' time. But even just telling you that story just there I couldn't do it without using the word "captivity," could I? Yeah, that's when talking about zoos becomes more complicated. It seems like since their inception in the 19th century, pretty much until the last couple years, zoos have been for most people, environmentalists excluded, just a bit of family fun. A nice day out, a place to see animals, maybe even learn something, and certainly to understand why caring for our environment and for our fellow living things is important. Positive things. But I think we may all have noticed: Recently, zoos have something more of an ethical question. A multifaceted issue that really has no simple answer. It's harder than ever, maybe, to go to the zoo without feeling slightly complicit in something you're not fully comfortable with. It's harder than ever to go to a zoo and not think: Is it worth it? To have these beautiful creatures – well, trapped in here. What do you think?

[MUSIC]

**Nathaniel Brimmer-Beller:** It's funny because they're so ubiquitous, and you feel so positive about zoos, right? But when you actually think about it for a second, they feel like a thing of the past. I mean, when questioning whether or not it's worth it, in some cases many would argue the answer is: yes. Certain animals, well, don't mind the captivity. They don't mind the proximity to human life or urban settings. They appreciate the regular meals and attention. Others still may be less enthusiastic about zoo life, but sadly have very few safe, habitable environments left in the wild, where they could feasibly be free to roam. And yet, in some

cases, the modern zoo just does not feel like a suitable fit anymore, and many humans want to start looking for alternatives. Now, that's not an easy sell – for so many people, for so many reasons. For me, I count myself lucky to have grown up on zoos. My local was the National Zoo: a sprawling, public, free-entry park in the heart of Northwest Washington, D.C., with 163 acres housing hundreds of marvelous species. Many of my most beloved memories – from my toddler years all the way to my most recent trip home – were made in that zoo. Plus, thanks to the international scope of my family tree and my mother's profession as I was growing up, I was lucky enough to travel around the world with her and my dad, almost always visiting the zoos each new location had to offer: the Cotswold Wildlife Park in Oxfordshire, the Taronga Zoo in Sydney, the BioPark of Rio de Janeiro, the Ménagerie nestled in the botanical gardens in Paris, the Berlin Zoo – twice now. Each one an unforgettable day that brought me closer to the natural world, closer to environmental awareness, and closer to my parents, who never tried to hide their own wonder and joyous expressions when we would behold these magnificent animals together. So, when I was thinking of who to speak to regarding how zoos have shifted in our environmental, ethical, and emotional understandings, I thought: how about the people I share the most zoo memories with? My mom and dad.

**Esther Brimmer:** Well yes, I have many, many fond memories of going to zoos with you, here in our home, Washington, D.C., and around the world. And indeed, it was a very conscious choice about how we introduced the world to you. You know, one of the things that a parent does is to try to help their child understand the wonders of the world around them and feel a sense of a place in that world. Part of that is understanding our connection to the natural world – that while we, of course, are human beings growing up in human society, we are very much part of a world around us, which includes flora and fauna, plants and animals. I think, especially for a young child, because animals move, they're exciting, they're amazing, that seeing live animals helps you understand that they are important parts of our world and that we have a connection to them.

**Steven Beller:** I think I liked showing you, you know, beautiful and new animals that you hadn't seen before, which is why I like going to zoos. So to a certain extent, I was acculturating you to my way of thinking, I suppose. You could look at it that way. But I didn't do that particularly consciously, I just thought you'd like to go to the zoo. You seemed to like "Zoboomafoo" [EDITOR'S NOTE: "ZOBOOMAFOO" IS A CHILDREN'S TV SHOW ABOUT ANIMALS] and stuff on the television.

**Esther Brimmer:** It was very important that the mission of the zoo was to teach you about animals and to teach you about care of animals. So, we would go to zoos because it was fun, but also as you may recall, of course you recall, your first summer camp was zoo camp, so you spent your summers being able to go and hear about animal care. So, the approach was they were letting you see a little bit of how they cared for these amazing creatures. So, these were zoos, where there was a sense of stewardship for the

animals. The other thing is: It's fun! I think learning should be fun. Especially with very young children, you want them to have a sense of joy. You can run around. You don't have to sit and be quiet. There's parkland, there's space. You get exercise because you're moving around. So, there's lots of things happening on multiple levels that make going to zoos fun for families and important to do.

**Steven Beller:** I think part of the attraction of taking children to zoos is to introduce them to other children. In other words, other baby animals. So famously, we saw a baby hippo, and then, I think there was a baby pygmy hippo at some point. In other words, an incredibly cute animal. And there's this aspect, which we do respond to, of young animals, whatever they are – I mean, young elephants, obviously lion cubs, and baby pandas – all of this, you can only really see live, real, baby animals at zoos. I think that's also important for children to see other children, as it were. Of another species.

**Nathaniel Brimmer-Beller:** Why is that?

**Steven Beller:** I think you kind of identify with them. If you see an adult – whatever, they're just like your parents, right? So, you don't identify with them as a kid because they're your parents or they're other parents. I mean, they can be nice or not. But if you see a baby animal, as a child, you can say, oh, that's like me, I think.

**Nathaniel Brimmer-Beller:** It's so intriguing for me hearing my parents describe these diverse reasons for taking a child to the zoo. Environmental awareness, having fun, learning how to even be a child. Senses of connection – across species, across time.

**Esther Brimmer:** It was very moving to me to take you as a small child to see the elephant Nancy. Now, elephants have long lives, and so, I was taking my son to see the same elephant that my mother took me to see when I was little.

**Steven Beller:** My mother – your grandmother – loved giraffes, and I love giraffes because they're such beautiful, gentle creatures, I think. At least to look at.

**Nathaniel Brimmer-Beller:** So, it's no wonder why I have such a soft spot in my heart for zoos. We've got the baby hippo that I've seen 20 years apart. We've got an elephant that three generations of my family have been to visit. We've got the love of giraffes, passed down from my father's mother to my father to me – I love giraffes. I bet everyone listening can think of some time, in some zoo, where you've thought: I'm so glad I had this moment, with this person, at this time, in this place, with this animal. Can't you?

[FENCE RATTLING AT THE EDINBURGH ZOO]

**Nathaniel Brimmer-Beller:** Now, this is audio of a moment I will truly never forget. I have moved away from home to Edinburgh at this point to do my undergraduate studies. This video was taken at the Edinburgh Zoo, and I am in the middle of the birthday gift my girlfriend Laura got me for my 21st: a “Zookeeper for a Day” experience that culminated in me putting a big slab of raw meat on a stick, and then, feeding it to a tiger.

[TIGER EATING]

**Nathaniel Brimmer-Beller:** The video, which again I’m going to describe for you, is, well, just what it sounds like. There’s this gorgeous tiger on the other side of a fence, thankfully, who curiously comes up and eats the meat off the stick. Now, this is just what the zookeepers would have done anyway, it’s not like they set anything up for me that they wouldn’t have just been doing as a routine, but it felt like such an unbelievable privilege to be that close and that, well, tactile, even through a fence, with an animal that’s been my favorite animal since I can remember. What strikes me sometimes when I see that video over and over again – because it’s a pretty cool video, and I watch it a lot – is that I have an expression of complete and utter, well, genuine honesty. It’s truly awesome to me in that moment that I’m near this tiger. And it just reminds you how much zoos will show you about yourself. How in so many ways they’re educating you about the natural world but also about your own humanity, about how you and the people you know and the people you’re watching at this zoo react to the animals before them. Not only that, but the respective selections of animals that you’ll find in different zoos will, in themselves, tell you something about where you are. They’ll tell you something about the human history of that place.

**Esther Brimmer:** As you know, I’m interested in international politics, so it was interesting when we went to the Berlin Zoo to see the same mammals, for example, but different breeds and variations with even different patterns on their coats because they were from slightly different places because, indeed not surprisingly, the European and North American countries tended to get the animals for their zoos from the countries with which they had associations. So, the big empires. The German zoo got its giraffes from areas that were once German colonies. The British zoos got their giraffes from places that were once British colonies. And so, you’d go to a zoo in London and a zoo in Berlin or a zoo in Paris, for that matter, and you’re seeing the same mammal, the same mammal family, but they’re slightly different variations of them. So, you’re reminded again of the intersection between human politics and animals.

**Nathaniel Brimmer-Beller:** So, our experiences at these places in various zoos, wherever in the world you might be, resonate with us in so many different ways. In our relationships and shared experiences with loved ones. Our sense of community. Our sense of humanity. Our understandings of history and geography and ecology. So, why have so many opinions on zoos shifted in recent years?

**Steven Beller:** The zoo developed as an institution by which people could see the rest of the natural world. As a result of that, they got to sympathize with the animals because they're very beautiful, and you know, if you see anything that has two eyes and a nose – well, kind of a nose – and a mouth, et cetera, you sort of identify with them.

**Esther Brimmer:** I think there was a rethinking in the story that was told that the idea of human and nature together was new in the late 20th century. In other words, it was less like a circus, there was a difference. It wasn't "this is a curiosity and a bizarre-looking animal or something strange" to "this is a creature that has its own validity, its own habits, and we want to teach you about that, rather than just have you come and gawk about that." I think that was probably an evolution of what you were doing and what you were seeing and how it was presented.

**Steven Beller:** I suspect the reason that we have a greater consciousness about the natural world is ironically partly due to zoos. But now, that's come back, to say, well, zoos shouldn't be allowed because ... [LAUGHS]

**Nathaniel Brimmer-Beller:** Right, in a way they were so convincing in why we should care about the animals that they were housing that we've said, you shouldn't be housing them.

**Steven Beller:** Yeah!

**Nathaniel Brimmer-Beller:** Obviously, people have questioned the moral justifications of zoos in the past, but it does seem to be gaining more and more traction. I mean, the obvious example is, during lockdown, many of us experienced life trapped in an enclosure, in a confined space for an extended period of time for the first time in our lives. And we thought, this is hell. Well, most of us anyway.

**Steven Beller:** Actually, I quite liked it because we have a nice garden. [LAUGHS]. But then, I'm probably a vole or something like that.

**Nathaniel Brimmer-Beller:** Well, vole or not, Dad makes a good point about the way that zoos have never really been extricable from their more exploitative, abusive progenitors.

**Steven Beller:** But they were also entertainment, of course. One mustn't forget that. That initially at some point, Barnum & Bailey's Circus, right, they always had a zoo to go with it. The relationship between the circus and the zoo is obviously there. Zoos are better than circuses, I think, when it comes to animals, but there is an entertainment factor. I mean, I remember at one point, I mean, they still do: feeding the sea lions at the

zoo, which is basically a circus act. And I think that's the case, they really did have – at Regent's Park Zoo, they used to have a chimpanzees' tea party.

**Nathaniel Brimmer-Beller:** Oh, wow.

**Steven Beller:** And I think they really did do that to entertain the kiddies, right? It was fun, but that's close to bear-baiting, I think, really.

**Nathaniel Brimmer-Beller:** They really did do that. It was only discontinued in 1972, but these are extreme examples. The kind of things that we can pretty easily divorce in our heads from the fond and mostly positive zoo memories that we all have. There are much more pernicious ones, though. And as those come to light, it becomes harder and harder to overlook them. Everything from elephants to orangutans to Komodo dragons, various reports have said, feel acute depression and psychosis in many cases, simply because of their captivity. Now at places like the Edinburgh Zoo, as I was so privileged to learn, there are all sorts of very direct programs that are meant to keep these animals' minds alive, just as much as their bodies – their brains active and their cognition sharp. But many activists and zoologists are not so sure anymore. Regular published reports and opinion pieces, like [Emma Marris's in "The New York Times"](#) in June of this year, shed a harsh light on practices that many of us may not have realized were going on in zoos at all. Things like the amount of antipsychotic medication and antidepressants that are given to animals the world over on a regular basis and have been for decades, simply because they are so acutely miserable in captivity. Not to mention the amount of animals that are culled in all sorts of zoos for convenience's sake and, perhaps more legitimate but still quite upsetting, reasons. Somewhat stranger still is the amount of practices that we're all very aware of. The very concept of captivity, of keeping these gigantic, marvelous, wild animals in enclosures that are designed so that humans can look at them is getting to be less and less acceptable, haven't you found?

**Steven Beller:** There is an edge to going to a zoo now, which ... I mean, when I was a child, I wasn't aware of it obviously because one just isn't about such ethical questions, to the same extent.

**Nathaniel Brimmer-Beller:** While it's still not a completely answered question whether or not keeping animals in captivity is a completely antiquated notion yet, there are plenty of high-profile examples outside of opinion pieces that try to argue against the concept. Take the documentary "Blackfish," which focused on Seaworld and the treatment of its orcas. While it may not be the obvious choice to apply the logic of "Blackfish" to all zoos, it does plant a seed of an idea, doesn't it? And it makes it harder and harder to overlook the parallels.

**Nathaniel Brimmer-Beller:** That's one where – our feelings be damned – Shamu should not be forced – orcas should not be forced – to do tricks for us.

**Steven Beller:** That's a good example. I don't think dolphins do that anymore either, do they? I mean, I remember I always loved watching dolphin shows particularly because they're such incredible creatures. But on the other hand, they're so intelligent, and they really do like roaming the seas, I think, so it's very cruel to give them a life sentence of being in a pond, in a swimming pool, you know, for their whole lives. So I mean, yeah, on reflection, that puts somewhat of a shade on those memories.

**Nathaniel Brimmer-Beller:** It's hard to deny that the animals there are trapped and not always happy. You know, I mean, I remember seeing an orangutan, who was just ... misery. You could see it. There was no way to spin that. I was like that is a miserable animal, and he is trapped here. It was strange because those two things are true at the same time.

**Esther Brimmer:** And it gets even more complicated because, in some places, the natural habitat for these animals is disappearing or is gone. So, orangutans are a good example. They're large mammals that need space. On the other hand, that their habitat is disappearing, so some of their natural cousins are now in situations, where they don't have enough water, they don't have enough access, so that saving the species may have an element of those that are in zoos being a part of that. So, what that looks like is interesting as well.

**Nathaniel Brimmer-Beller:** It's very true that a lot of the ethical concerns of how we house animals inside zoos seem, in some cases, to be outweighed by what might happen to them out there in the wild these days.

**Steven Beller:** It's a bit like the Supreme Court saying, oh well, now that civil rights legislation has worked, now it's no longer necessary.

**Nathaniel Brimmer-Beller:** Right. Well yes, that's actually quite an excellent comparison because you're pretending that – to use an animal phrase – that the wolves aren't there anymore.

**Steven Beller:** Yeah, that kind of thing, yeah.

**Nathaniel Brimmer-Beller:** Not that wolves are bad, but you know ...

[LAUGHS]

**Nathaniel Brimmer-Beller:** But is it also almost an invitation to complacency in a way. I mean, not to be too lofty, you know, but just getting deep into it: do we say, okay cool, you've looked at the hippo, and you agree that it's great and that you don't want it to

have it, you know, lose its habitat, right? So, we're going to go and continue to deforest, but you consider yourself a pro-hippo person.

**Steven Beller:** Well yeah, but you know, it's very important to be more pro-hippo, than to be no-hippo, as it were. So, much like the person who goes to the zoo, sees the hippo, and says, oh, I love hippos, and we really should protect the hippo, right? But then, buys stuff from the countries, which are destroying hippos.

**Nathaniel Brimmer-Beller:** Or the brands that destroy, you know, deforest and so on.

**Steven Beller:** Right, fair enough, but at least he has the idea that we should save the hippo. Yes, there's been huge hypocrisy about the environment. We say we love nature, we say we love animals, and so on and so forth. Like zoos, people go to zoos, and they love the animals, and so on. But they don't do enough in order to save their environments. If you say, oh no, we really love nature, we really do want to protect the earth, we really do want to protect, you know, God's creation, if you're going to go that way. Then do something about it. Then, you open yourself up to the counterargument: well then, do something about it! And if you never had that love for nature, or claimed to have that love for nature, you would say: eh, I don't care.

**Nathaniel Brimmer-Beller:** Exactly and I think that's one of the biggest things about why letting go of zoos feels so wrong, from an environmentalist point of view, is that then, you'll start having generations of people who don't give a hoot, as it were, what any of these animals are or that this thing went extinct.

**Steven Beller:** Right!

**Nathaniel Brimmer-Beller:** It's a balancing act is what it is. Of moral, practical, and environmental concerns. And even if we can't call zoos 100 percent ethically sound, would we lose too much by dismissing them too drastically?

**Steven Beller:** Even though there are obviously very strong ethical arguments, you know, for not having zoos at all, I would be somewhat reluctant to do that.

**Esther Brimmer:** It will be interesting to see if those who do not like zoos prevail. If they push to close zoos, and I think that would be tragic because I do think that it's important for lots of different types of people to be able to see animals. Most of us, you know, will not be able to afford to go to places where wild animals are still prevalent. The fact that it's free is huge. It is true that it is one of the places where you see people from all over Washington. You know, so it's not surprising – the Easter Monday tradition here of African American families going to the zoo – because it's free, and it's something which wasn't segregated or at least not recently segregated. So, that's really



special because there are so many places you go, where you've got to have money to go. And this is some place, where people from all over the city go as families. And that's rare. We're a pretty stratified society, but the zoo is something that belongs to everybody. That's very important.

**Nathaniel Brimmer-Beller:** Well, because zoos were such a valuable part, and such a beloved part of my childhood, for me and so many of my favorite memories with you – even when I've been older, you and I going to the zoo is one of my favorite things to do. It's interesting what parents of the future will do. I'm curious. I wonder what will have changed in 20 more years.

**Esther Brimmer:** Because in so many of our cities, the zoo is part of a park that is really a lung for the city. That's a place, where you can actually get greenery, a little bit of nature. Yes, I hope that parents of the future still have well-run zoos to take their children to and to be as a family. Even now, we see it here, zoos are also a place where older people go and walk. Your grandmother – that was one of the places, where she likes to walk, because there are no cars, it's shady, there's space, people take time with each other, if you walk slowly, it's okay. They're actually sort of – in an odd way – zones of peace, separate from the city. People go to find solace. You're right, it's special on many levels, at least the zoos that we've experienced, especially these zoos in cities.

**Nathaniel Brimmer-Beller:** Yeah, I couldn't agree more. Just add the caveat: where all the animals are more or less happy to be there. [LAUGHS]

**Esther Brimmer:** Right! Right, yes, yes.

**Nathaniel Brimmer-Beller:** So Dad, on your point about hypocrisy.

**Steven Beller:** Right.

**Nathaniel Brimmer-Beller:** So, you're saying: massive hypocrisies in terms of how you treat different animals and so on, that's too bad. But maybe a more compact, manageable hypocrisy? A pygmy-hypocrisy, if you will.

[LAUGHS]

**Steven Beller:** You are my son, after all. Yes, that is definitive proof. That's so bad, Nathaniel, that's so bad.

[FATS WALLER FADES IN]

**Nathaniel Brimmer-Beller:** Thank you very much to Esther Brimmer and Steven Beller for speaking with me today. For THE BIG PONDER, I'm Nathaniel Brimmer-Beller. Thanks for listening.

[FATS WALLER FADES OUT]

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