



EAZA Executive Office

c/o Artis Royal Zoo
PO Box 20164
1000 HD Amsterdam
The Netherlands

Phone: +31 20 520 0750
Fax: +31 20 520 0752
Email: info@eaza.net
Website: www.eaza.net

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Open Letter To Members of the Barcelona Municipal Council from the European Association of Zoos and Aquaria

The European Association of Zoos and Aquaria (EAZA) has noted with concern the proposal to modify the Ordinance for the Protection, Possession and Sale of Animals (CM25/07/2014) Article 32 with the addition of Article 33(b), as proposed by the Zoo XXI Consortium, referred to in the proposal as IC 2017. EAZA has reviewed the proposal closely and has found its conclusions to be unsound on both scientific and ethical grounds. Indeed, the proposal itself, and searches of the ZooXXI's public channels suggest that the group appears to have no expertise or experience in the operation of a modern zoo and appears to have no understanding of the integrated conservation framework.

Ethics

IC 2017 has presented its proposal on the grounds that the ethics and knowledge of the 21st century require reform of zoos including Zoo Barcelona. The proposal presents no evidence for such a change to the ethical landscape and defines no baseline from which to measure. While EAZA understands that IC 2017 has obtained 17,000 signatures in support of its proposals, this must be weighed against the more than 1million visitors to Barcelona zoo annually, who evidently do not share this ethical viewpoint. While the ethical argument in the proposal is not well articulated, the principles of "compassionate conservation" listed within state:

"First, do no wrong". Should the Council require the adoption of the IC 2017 proposal, ethically it must prove that Barcelona Zoo is knowingly or unwittingly doing wrong and must also define the parameters of what such wrongdoing would entail on scientific and ethical grounds. This principle also applies to the other items listed, namely "individuals matter; valuing all wildlife, peaceful coexistence with wildlife". The Council must provide objective criteria against which the zoo can be judged, provide concrete evidence that the citizens have understood both sides of the argument, and prove that the majority are in support of the proposal.

The proposal further asserts, without evidence, that the current zoo operation does not present animals as beings deserving of respect, endowed with physical and psychological sensitivity, cognitive and emotional abilities and different forms of consciousness. EAZA counters that the zoo as it stands does present animals in this fashion. Indeed, the zoo and all EAZA Members are required to provide education to visitors which fulfills exactly these functions, as a condition of membership of the Association. We attach our Standards for Conservation Education¹ as illustration of the terms of Barcelona's accreditation.

The proposal furthermore states that education at the municipally-funded zoo requires it to develop empathy for animals through biophilia among its visitors as a condition of continued funding. Ethically speaking, this would require all municipally-funded educational institutions to have the same requirement or would carry no moral or ethical validity whatsoever. Indeed, under this

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framework, the demand would also extend to education about all species including domestic livestock bred for food, and the captivity of companion animals.

The proposal further states, again without any evidence, that “the new model explicitly recognizes that the suffering of animals is inherent to their captivity, since it is equivalent to the impossibility of developing natural behaviours.” The proposal presents no scientific proof that animals at zoos including Barcelona Zoo are suffering as a result of their housing at the zoo. Furthermore, there is no link between the first clause of this sentence to the second in ethical terms. For the claim to hold any weight, it should first demonstrate that the suffering of animals is inherent to their captivity, by comparing the welfare of animals in captivity to the welfare of animals in their natural habitat on a scientifically objective basis. The second clause aims to show that the development of natural behaviours automatically leads to the eradication of animal suffering, a claim that any scientific or ethical body would find preposterous. To illustrate: African elephants in the wild are currently experiencing severe drought through large areas of their natural habitat. While they are able to express their natural behaviours, food and water is so scarce that there is no doubt that these animals are experiencing acute suffering. Such conditions would never be allowed to occur at a modern zoo such as Barcelona.

IC2017 also makes a fundamental mistake in the presentation of its case, conflating animal welfare and environmental action with animal rights. For the avoidance of doubt, animal welfare is a state that is objectively measurable through scientific means. Environmental action similarly carries the weight of a consensus of scientists. Animal rights is an ethical position, a personal decision based on weighing evidence, yet purely subjective and personal in outcome. For IC2017 not to understand this difference makes it difficult to take seriously the scientific aspects of the case, however:

Science

The proposal asserts that Barcelona Zoo is not currently run on scientific criteria. EAZA rejects the claim that the zoo is not run on scientific grounds and can point to the internationally recognized qualifications of the staff across a range of scientific disciplines, as well as specific instances of scientifically valid actions carried out by them. EAZA questions whether the Municipal Council also recognizes these qualifications, and if not, requests the Council to demonstrate why they believe these qualifications to be invalid. Furthermore, EAZA notes that IC2017 (ZooXXI) does not credit any authors for its reports on Barcelona Zoo, and indeed, does not present any scientific credentials on any of its public outlets (website etc.). We therefore call on IC2017 to present their scientific credentials (at a higher educational, doctoral and post-doctoral level) for scrutiny in comparison to the scientific credentials of Barcelona Zoo staff. EAZA also stands ready to support its statement in opposition to the IC 2017 proposal with the scientific credentials of its senior representatives.

EAZA believes that some opportunity exists to modernize some facilities and working practices at the zoo. Nonetheless, the ability to do so depends on adequate resourcing by the funding authority, not conversion to an ill-thought out model that is not based on scientific principle, and which could lead to a number of negative outcomes:

The proposal requires many of the animals currently in the zoo to be reintroduced into their natural habitat. EAZA requires any such reintroduction to be carried out in accordance with the IUCN Species Survival Commission’s Guidelines on Reintroductions and Conservation Translocations², on both scientific and ethical grounds. IC2017 have demonstrated no prior knowledge or understanding of the complexity of the multi-decade nature of projects run in accordance with this

² Appendix B

scientific and ethical framework. It should be noted that projects not run on this basis will almost certainly fail and result in the deaths of the animals released for no conservation benefit. EAZA would take no responsibility for such an outcome and would condemn Barcelona Municipal Council in the strongest possible and public terms if it should occur.

In addition, this measure is required only for animals deemed by IC2017 to have conservation value – although they fail to define their criteria for such value; however, EAZA assumes that many such animals would be of species currently managed in zoos by the more than 200 EAZA Ex Situ Programmes (EEP). These programmes maintain common ownership of all animals of their species across Europe, and Barcelona Zoo is a signatory to the EEPs in which it participates; this means that the zoo is not free to reintroduce animals without our express permission. Again, IC 2017 appear to have no understanding or knowledge of this aspect of zoo operations, and we would insist on IUCN Guidelines being used in any such reintroduction.

The IC 2017 consortium calls for research and education to be carried out via technological means, presumably (although these are not described in any workable detail) internet or other screen-based technologies. EAZA notes that there is no scientific evidence that shows these technologies to be more effective than current zoo education, and that some studies point to a reduction in a viewer's empathy for the natural world. We also decry the idea that children and other members of the public are, through this proposal, being encouraged to spend yet more time in front of screens.

The proposal to convert the site to a rescue and rehabilitation centre makes no reference to a formal study of the effects of this conversion in terms of disease control and public access to the site, or the effect of transferring healthy animals to other rescue centres, which we believe would be deleterious for both animals and rescue centres. EAZA is qualified to speak on this matter as we have relationships with many such centres, contributing expertise and over €1million annually to the sector. By contrast, the IC 2017 consortium appears to have no understanding of the integrated framework for rescue and rehabilitation that includes good zoos, which further undermines their case.

Indeed, the integration of the conservation (including the IUCN SSC One Plan Approach), rescue and rehabilitation, research, and education networks that include modern zoos such as Barcelona do not appear to have been considered at all by the IC 2017 proposal.

In summary, we find no evidence of any understanding whatsoever of the role of the modern zoo in Zoo XXI proposal, no evidence that the group has the scientific credentials to make a case for their proposal, and no evidence that the proposal has the support of anything but a tiny minority of the citizens of Barcelona. We therefore call on the Municipal Council to reconsider its position, and to discuss with EAZA the current framework and how it might be adapted without the wholesale destruction of its current effectiveness and a catastrophe for the animals it currently houses.

Yours Faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Myfanwy Griffith', written in a cursive style.

Myfanwy Griffith
EAZA Executive Director