

AN ISSUE WORTH PROTESTING

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People at times are bizarre. At times, “bizarre” doesn’t do them justice.

For instance, in late September of this year at the San Diego Zoo, PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) was out in full force at the annual Celebration for the Critters 2002. The Celebration for the Critters is an annual fundraiser with all proceeds going to the Center for the Reproduction of Endangered Species. You would think this event, put on by individuals who have dedicated their lives to saving endangered species, would be looked upon favorably by PETA but apparently not. As ticket holders to the event approached the main gates they were greeted by numerous protesters holding signs which read “Keep Elephants in Africa, Not in Cages.”

At the center of the controversy were 11 elephants from the Mkhaya Game Reserve in Swaziland, Africa. After approval from various agencies these elephants were to be transported to the San Diego Wild Animal Park where they would live out the rest of their lives. The Zoo points out that, like most of Africa’s national parks, the Mkhaya Game Reserve is at its holding capacity for elephants and these particular animals had been selected for culling. In addition, without the introduction of new genes coming directly from elephants in Africa, within 20 to 50 years elephants may no longer be able to reproduce within the U.S. due to inbreeding. PETA disputes the first claim as “untrue” claiming that there are only 18 elephants on 74,000 acres. Additionally, they have offered to help pay to move them to another national park within Africa to prevent them from living in captivity. “The zoos refuse to admit that elephants don’t fare well in captivity, where life is anything but normal...” a PETA flier points out, and this is exactly what they are trying to prevent.

Something that cannot be denied is the good intention of those from PETA. Obviously they feel that this would be an injustice towards animals that cannot speak for themselves and in response about 200 of them took a few hours out of their Saturday nights to stand out in the cold drawing attention to their cause. While people are free to pursue whatever cause they see fit, it is odd that this particular case brought about such an uproar.

It is odd because we are talking about the *transport* of 11 *animals* to the U.S., where they will be surrounded by some of the best vets, keepers and facilities that this world has to offer. Meanwhile, across the globe, *people* are being *oppressed*, are *starving*, and are *dying* at the hands of dictators and tyrants.

For example, this same September, the U.N. announced that nearly 14 million people in Sub Sahara Africa face starvation. Yes, this is the same Sub Sahara Africa where the Mkhaya Game Reserve is located. Accounts have surfaced for months of people surviving on leaves and roots, walking for days in search of help and dying along the way. Most disturbing are stories that in Malawi, mothers have “resorted to selling their children for 500 kwacha (\$8) because they have no food” and “stories that parents are even poisoning their children, rather than let them die a slow painful death from starvation” according to the BBC. Sadly those most likely not to live through this tragic event are young children who simply do not have the strength to last through such an ordeal. BBC Southern Africa correspondent Hilary Andersson, reporting on the tragedy, witnessed two children die within an hour, whom arrived to late to be saved at a Malawi hospital.

So where is the outrage? Where are the protesters calling for Zimbabwean President Mugabe’s removal after he confiscated white-owned farms that formerly produced enough food for the region? Where are the picketers incensed that Zambian officials have turned away genetically modified food, sent for aid, which has been deemed safe by the UN, the EMU and the FDA? Where are the multitudes of reporters alerting us to these problems? They do exist, but often they seem few and far between.

So this brings us back to the original question: How is it that the transport of 11 elephants causes an uproar while the deaths of millions of people on the same continent passes unnoticed?



In part it is because while individuals feel they can have a direct influence on the San Diego Zoo, they have less influence on Robert Mugabe. Truthfully though, it is much deeper than this simple explanation. The problem lies in the fact that many of us have been desensitized towards human misery. When people are reported as numbers, they are easy to ignore. They are faceless masses that fail to inspire emotion.

But what if it was your wife, husband, parent, or child that was starving to death? This is something that is unimaginable in our country of countless grocery stores and fast food restaurants. But what if it was? What if *you* were in the middle of a desert and had nothing to eat and no way of obtaining food? What if *you* were faced with a decision: "Should I let my child die a slow and inevitable death or should I kill them myself to end their suffering?" It is maddening that in this day in age people face these decisions.



Ironically PETA accomplished their goal. A week after the event they convinced Swaziland officials that the sale of the heard to the U.S. would violate international law. With their victory, as a society, I cannot help but to think we have failed. In no way am I saying that one should not care about animals, but perhaps together we should reevaluate our priorities. All of us must wonder to what degree we have given up our humanity when the death of a child draws less attention than the living conditions of an elephant.