

Four-Day-Old Baby Orangutan Needlessly Killed at Switzerland's Basel Zoo
From [Marc Bekoff](#)
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This is just a short piece to alert people to what happened at the Basel Zoo this week. Many people don't know what happened and many have asked me to write something so that a wider audience would know. More information can be found here—[Zoo Basel puts baby orangutan to sleep—now a shitstorm is raging](#)—and in articles below.

A baby Orangutan was killed—*not* euthanized—at the Basel Zoo after her mother, Revital, died. This is a case of "zoothanasia" as I call it, because killing the baby was not done as a mercy killing because she was suffering from interminable pain or from an incurable disease—she wasn't. The zoo decided the baby wouldn't live or have a quality life because she was motherless. This claim is unfounded. (see Note 1) Shame on them.

Killing the baby is ethically indefensible no matter what zoo administrators say. This is not a "radical animal rights" position but rather all about *decency* and *respect* for the life of every single individual—the baby should not have been killed. And, of course, the mother should never have been impregnated. Zoos kill otherwise healthy animals for a wide variety of self-serving reasons. Many people don't know this. Zoos call it "management euthanasia" to sanitize this heinous act. The individuals are written off as "surplus animals" and slaughtered.

In a BBC News essay by Hannah Barnes called "[How many healthy animals do zoos put down?](#)" we learn: "EAZA [European Association of Zoos and Aquaria] does not publish these records or advertise the number of healthy animals that have been culled, but executive director Dr Lesley Dickie estimates

that somewhere between 3,000 and 5,000 animals are 'management euthanised' in European zoos in any given year.”

Three thousand to five thousand animals isn't a small number at all. Indeed, I was shocked when I learned this fact and that this large number of animals was considered to be disposable at the whim of zoo administrators who then come up with lame excuses for why they killed the animals.

In January 2018 we learned that a zoo in Sweden had killed — they used the word “euthanized”—nine healthy lion cubs since 2012 because they couldn't afford to keep them. People who didn't know that zoos do these sorts of sickening things are incensed as they should be. After Marius the young giraffe was slaughtered in the Copenhagen Zoo in 2014, I had contact with people from all over the world about how surprised and upset they were, including many who never before had gotten involved with animal protection.

Animals who understandably escape from their cages and horrific lives at zoos also are routinely killed. In December 2022, three chimpanzees were shot dead soon after they escaped from their cages in the Furuviksparken zoo in Sweden, and a fourth was also killed shortly thereafter. The zoo was closed and the chimpanzees were killed because the zoo didn't have enough anesthetic on hand. They also said that the chimpanzees were killed because of concerns for human safety.

When pressed on the issue of killing healthy animals, zoo directors will often claim that it is “necessary” or “it had to be done” or will use some dismissive strategy such as, “It's a complicated issue.” In an [interview](#) I did with Jenny Gray, CEO of Zoos Victoria (Australia), when I asked her about killing so-called surplus animals—I wondered if she would have chosen to kill Marius or other animals who couldn't contribute for one reason or another to your zoo's breeding program — she said, “I have deliberately not given simple answers to what are complex issues. Many arguments can be mounted. I would hope that students of ethics can refine not only their personal view but also the plausible arguments to the contrary.” Of course, there are many arguments to the contrary that rely on doing what's right and what's decent.

Deciding to kill otherwise healthy individuals really is *not* complicated at all. *Zoos should not kill healthy animals*, and if zoo management practices “require” the killing of healthy animals, then these practices need to change. Right now, today.

Also, of course, captive breeding needs to be stopped. The animals who are born in zoos are unlikely ever to be “reintroduced” to their native habitats and might just be killed because zoos find them useless. As outrageous as this sounds, it is a reality that never, ever, should happen.

To sum up, the zoo is 100% responsible for the all too brief existence of this lovely baby; the zoo is responsible for killing her with no just cause at all; the people who made this egregious decision should be ashamed of themselves; the zoo should seriously consider holding a public forum on what went wrong; the zoo should stop captive breeding; the zoo should build a memorial to baby orangutan and perhaps consider naming her—rather than calling her “it”—posthumously; and the zoo should stop hiding behind what they're “allowed” to do—they killed a baby and robbed her of the possibility of having any sort of life whatsoever and for this they should be exposed for what they did, not humane-washed or sanitized. They killed a young baby needlessly and I would love to have people express what they themselves truly feel in their hearts and stop hiding behind what's sanctioned because then perhaps we'll see some progress. Events like this will happen again, I'm sure, and we'll hear the same old lame excuses for this and other similar heinous acts.

Note 1: In response to the zoo's claim that they killed the baby out of concerns for her well-being, Patti Ragan, Founder, Center for Great Apes, told me:

"Hand-raising newborn orangutans does *not* make it impossible to introduce them to other orangutan companions or mates when appropriate. The orangutans at the sanctuary live in social pairs or small groups and were introduced together after years living with humans. The broad statement that hand-raised orangutans cannot live in social pairs or groups... and that they do not breed is untrue. When so many people and organizations in Borneo and Sumatra, as well as zoos and sanctuaries around the world, are struggling to save the lives of every individual orangutan, this situation where a critically endangered species was euthanized as a newborn is heartbreaking and sickening. The deed is done. But hopefully more awareness of options and possibilities will affect the outcome for another infant in the future who is in a crisis situation." (included with her permission)

Some relevant links:

Jane Goodall Institute, [Statement on the killing of chimpanzees in Swedish EAZA Zoo Furuviiksparken "Zoothanasia" Is Not Euthanasia: Words Matter](#)

[Killing Healthy Animals in Zoos: "Zoothanasia" is a Reality](#)

[Healthy Young Zoo Giraffe to be Killed: "Zoothanasia" Redux](#)

[Swiss Zoo Kills Healthy Young Bear to Protect Him](#)

Zoo Ethics and the Challenges of Compassionate

Conservation, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/animal-emotions/201707/zoo-ethics-and-the-challenges-compassionate-conservation>

Swedish Zoo "Zoothanizes" Nine Healthy, "Useless" Lion

Cubs, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/animal-emotions/201801/swedish-zoo-zoothanizes-nine-healthy-useless-lion-cubs>

Sweden Furuvik zoo: Anger over shooting of chimpanzees in zoo

escape, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-64005819>

Three chimpanzees shot dead after escape from Swedish

zoo, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/dec/14/three-chimpanzees-shot-dead-after-escape-from-swedish-zoo>

'Surreal' killing of 4 chimpanzees has zoologist reconsidering ties with Swedish

zoo, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/sweden-zoo-chimpanzees-killed-1.6691262>

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How many healthy animals do zoos put down? <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-26356099>

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Also see:

<https://www.swr.de/swraktuell/baden-wuerttemberg/suedbaden/zoo-schlaefert-orang-utan-ein-100.html>

<https://www.bzbasel.ch/basel/basel-stadt/erklaerung-nach-unverstaendnis-zolli-nimmt-stellung-zum-ingeschlaeferten-affenbaby-ld.2409095>

<https://www.thurgauerzeitung.ch/basel/basel-stadt/orang-utans-affenweise-ingeschlaefert-darum-hat-sich-der-basler-zolli-gegen-eine-handaufzucht-entschieden-ld.2409251?reduced=true>

<https://www.nau.ch/news/schweiz/zoo-basel-orang-utan-weibchen-stirbt-nach-geburt-ihres-jungen-66410435>