

## Happiness is a matter of territory

I have heard nearly as much nonsense about zoos as I have about God and religion. Well-meaning but misinformed people think animals in the wild are "happy" because they are "free". These people usually have a large, handsome predator in mind, a lion or a cheetah. They imagine this wild animal roaming about the savannah on digestive walks after eating a prey that accepted its lot piously. They imagine this animal overseeing its offspring proudly and tenderly, the whole family watching the setting of the sun from the limbs of trees with sighs of pleasure. The life of the wild animal is simple, noble and meaningful they imagine. Then it is captured by wicked men and thrown into tiny jails. Its "happiness" is dashed. It yearns mightily for "freedom" and does all it can to escape. Being denied its "freedom" for too long, the animal becomes a shadow of itself, its spirit broken. So some people imagine.

This is not the way it is.

Animals in the wild lead lives of compulsion and necessity withing an unforing social hierarchy in an environment where the supply of fear is high and the supply of food low and where territory must constantly be defended and parasites forever endured. What is the meaning of freedom in such a context? Animals in the wild are, in practice, free neither in space nor in time, nor in their personal relations. An animal inhabits its space, whether in a zoo or in the wild, in the same way chess pieces move about a chessboard – significantly. There is no more happenstance, no more "freedom", involved in the whereabouts of a lizard or a bear or a deer than in the location of a knight on a chessboard. Both speak of pattern and purpose. In the wild, animals stick to the same paths for the same pressing reasons, season after season.

If you went to a home, kicked down the front door, chased the people who lived there out into the street and said, "Go! You are free! Free as a bird! Go! Go!" -- do you think they would shout and dance for joy? They wouldn't. Birds are not free. The people you've just evicted would sputter, "With what right do you throw us out? This is our home. We own it. We have lived here for years. We're calling the police, you scoundrel."

Don't we say, "there's no place like home?" That's certainly what animals feel. Animals are territorial. That is the key to their minds. Only a familiar territory will allow them to fulfill the two relentless imperatives of the wild: the avoidance of enemies and the getting of food and water. A biologically sound zoo enclosure is just another territory, peculiar only in its size and its proximity to human territory. That it is so much smaller than what it would be in nature stands to reason. Territories in the wild are large not as a matter of taste but of necessity. In a zoo, we do for animals what we have done for ourselves with houses: we bring together in a small space what in the wild is spread out. Finding within it all the places it needs – a lookout, a place for resting, for eating and drinking, for bathing or grooming, etc. – and finding that there is no need to go hunting, good appearing six days a week, an animal will take possession of its zoo space in the same way it would lay claim to a new space in the wild, exploring it and marking it out in the normal way of its species. Once the animal has settled, it will not feel like a prisoner and it will behave in the same way within its enclosure as it would in its territory in the wild, including defending it tooth and nail should it be invaded. Such an enclosure is subjectively neither better nor worse for an animal than its condition in the wild; so long as it fulfills the animal's needs. One might even argue that if an animal could choose with intelligence, it would opt for living in a zoo, since the major difference between a zoo and the wild is the absence of parasites and enemies and the abundance of food in the first, and their respective abundance and scarcity in the second.

A good zoo is place of carefully worked-out coincidence: exactly where an animal says to us, "Stay out!" with its urine or other secretion, we say to it, "Stay in!" with our barriers. Under such conditions of diplomatic peace, all animals are content and we can relax and have a look at each other.

In the literature can be found legions of examples of animals that could escape but did not, or did and returned. There is the case of the chimpanzee whose cage door was left unlocked and had swung open. Increasingly anxious, the chimp began to shriek and to slam the door shut repeatedly – with a deafening clang each time – until the keeper, notified by a visitor, hurried over to remedy the situation.

*Life of Pie, Yann Martel,*