

TrueZoos: A Guide to Ethical Zoos and Fostering Wildlife Appreciation

Honors Thesis

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I have always known I wanted to work with animals, but over time, that interest has become more specific and meaningful. My goal is to become a zookeeper, ideally working with big cats, because I have always been drawn to their power and complexity. However, as I learned more about animals in captivity, I realized that not all zoos and sanctuaries provide the same level of care or ethical treatment. This realization became even clearer during my freshman year at Colorado State University, when I took an animal ethics honors seminar with Nicole Vieira. That class pushed me to think more critically about the role zoos and sanctuaries play in conservation, education, and animal welfare, and it ultimately led me to develop the idea for my project, TrueZoos. This project not only focuses on developing the TrueZoos website but also includes a detailed plan for its future growth and expansion, outlined in Appendix A.

The original inspiration for TrueZoos came from the Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch program, a resource I knew well growing up near the aquarium. Seafood Watch provides clear, accessible information that helps people make more ethical choices, and I realized there was no equivalent resource for zoos and sanctuaries. I wanted to create a platform that makes it easy to identify ethical facilities worth supporting, especially because many visitors may not realize the differences in animal care standards among them. After sharing this idea with Nicole Vieira, she encouraged me to pursue it further and even suggested it could become my honors thesis, which ultimately led me to develop TrueZoos.

Ethical Zoos and Sanctuaries in Colorado



Cheyenne Mountain Zoo

Cheyenne Mountain Zoo is a 146-acre mountainside zoo that has been open since 1926 and features a wide variety of species from around the world. It is known for its strong conservation efforts and



Colorado Wolf and Wildlife Center

The Colorado Wolf and Wildlife Center is a sanctuary dedicated to rescued wolves, wolf-dogs, and foxes that cannot survive in the wild. Founded in 1997, it focuses on education, conservation, and providing



The Cheyenne Mountain Zoo

The Cheyenne Mountain Zoo is a mountainside zoo dedicated to conservation, education, and animal care. Home to a wide variety of species, it is especially known for its large giraffe herd and interactive feeding experiences, while supporting global efforts to protect wildlife and their habitats.

Donate Now



Let's Chat!

Explore the Cheyenne Mountain Zoo

Their Conservation Efforts

The Cheyenne Mountain Zoo participates in a myriad of conservation efforts worldwide. They are best known for their efforts in the care, breeding, and reintroduction of black-footed ferrets. They are dedicated not only to supporting the animals in their care but also to supporting those in need in the wild. [Click here to learn more about their organization and their conservation efforts!](#)

What are they Doing?

The Cheyenne Mountain Zoo is committed to enhancing the living conditions for the animals in their care. Currently, they are in the process of constructing a new Giraffe barn and outdoor living space, designed to provide a more enriching environment. Known for their impressive Giraffe herd, the zoo is thrilled to offer these majestic animals an updated habitat. [Click here to learn more about the exciting changes on the horizon!](#)

Tickets!

The Cheyenne Mountain Zoo has an array of other opportunities for guest engagement. They require advanced tickets for the zoo and often sell out so plan your visit early! They also have tour, event, venue rental, and even overnight stay opportunities as well. [Click here to visit their page and schedule your visit now!](#)

One of the most important parts of this project is how I evaluate and grade zoos and sanctuaries on the website, and developing this process required me to carefully consider both ethical theory and industry standards. I designed a multi-step methodology that prioritizes credibility, transparency, and accountability. The first step focuses on accreditation, specifically whether a zoo is accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, which sets a baseline for animal care, conservation, and professional practices. However, I recognize that accreditation alone is not sufficient, as standards can vary across species and institutions. For example, AZA provides specific care guidelines for

different types of animals, meaning a facility may meet standards for one species, such as big cats, while falling short for others.

Initial Research

TrueZoos prioritizes the accreditation of zoos and sanctuaries as the first step in evaluating their ethicality. The AZA (Association of Zoos & Aquariums) accreditation holds zoos and aquariums to a high standard of animal husbandry, animal well-being, conservation, and more. For a zoo to be considered ethical by TrueZoos, it needs to be accredited by the AZA. For more information about the AZA and its criteria, please visit <https://www.aza.org/>. In terms of sanctuaries and their accreditation, it is a little different. While there is the GFAS (Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries), which accredits sanctuaries, it is not as widespread as the AZA, and not all ethical sanctuaries are accredited by the GFAS. So while it is exceptional for a sanctuary to be accredited by GFAS, it is not a criterion we require of sanctuaries. For more information about the GFAS and its criteria, please visit <https://sanctuaryfederation.org/>.

If the zoo or sanctuary being researched passes this first criterion, it moves onto the secondary research phase (as shown below).

To strengthen my evaluation process, I also draw on ethical frameworks such as those presented by Holmes Rolston III, which emphasize the intrinsic value of animals and the importance of respecting their natural behaviors and well-being. For sanctuaries, where accreditation is less standardized, I incorporate criteria from the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries checklist, which provides guidelines for ethical rescue, care, and non-exploitative practices.

In addition, I reviewed the standards of the Zoological Association of America; however, I found that these criteria are often less rigorous and not always aligned with the ethical standards supported in the literature. While some ZAA-accredited facilities may provide acceptable care, many do not meet the ethical treatment standards expected by TrueZoos, reflecting an ongoing trade-off between accessibility and welfare standards.

Beyond accreditation, I conduct a secondary research phase that includes analyzing habitat quality and enrichment through images and videos, reviewing visitor and blog feedback to identify patterns in animal behavior and public concern, and examining news sources for any reported issues. This layered and research-based approach ensures that each evaluation is deliberate, evidence-based, and transparent, providing both

credibility and long-term protection for the project. An example of this evaluation process, including the layered structure of the information presented on the website, is shown in the screenshots included in this thesis.

Secondary Research

Habitats/Enrichment

TrueZoos is dedicated to evaluating the habitat and enrichment quality of zoos and sanctuaries. By utilizing their websites, Google images, and more. TrueZoos analyzes pictures and videos to assess the living conditions and enrichment activities for animals. If a zoo or sanctuary meets the standards of good quality, they successfully fulfill this criterion.

Blog/Visitor Reviews

TrueZoos values the insights shared by bloggers and visitors regarding animal behaviors, habitat conditions, and more. By analyzing these reviews, we can determine if a zoo or sanctuary provides a positive experience for inhabitants. When these places are mostly positively portrayed, they meet our criteria for excellence in animal welfare. Your feedback matters in shaping a better future for the animals.

News Stories

TrueZoos carefully analyzes both recent and historical news stories related to the zoos we research. We prioritize the validity of each story and the credibility of the news behind it. By examining these narratives, we assess the public image of each zoo or sanctuary, noting any negative events that may have occurred. If a zoo or sanctuary has a mostly positive news presence they fulfill this criterion.

TrueZoos Ethical Conclusion

If a zoo or sanctuary meets the three criteria above and the accreditation requirement (the accreditation requirement is for zoos only), it is considered ethical by TrueZoos. However, just because a facility is not currently listed on the TrueZoos website does not mean it cannot be included. TrueZoos is continuously updated to reflect changes and developments, ensuring organizations are accurately evaluated for addition or removal from the site.



TrueZoos

[Privacy Policy](#)

Contact Us

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Website Review

For more information, reach out

* First name

Looking ahead, I see TrueZoos becoming much more than just a website. While the platform itself is the foundation, my long-term goal is to expand it into an interactive, educational experience that connects people directly to animals, conservation, and ethical decision-making in a way that feels real and impactful. One of the main ways I plan to do this is by developing summer camps for middle and high school students that are inclusive of both public and homeschool learners. These camps would go beyond

traditional classroom learning by allowing students to visit zoos and sanctuaries, compare ethical and unethical practices, and actively engage with what they are learning. Instead of just hearing about animal welfare, students would be able to see it, question it, and form their own informed opinions. I also want these camps to include outdoor, immersive experiences, such as exploring natural environments, so students can better understand the differences between animals in captivity and in the wild. By doing this, the camps would not only educate students but also help them build a stronger, more personal connection to conservation.

In addition to camps, I plan to expand TrueZoos through a range of travel experiences open to people of all ages. These would include day trips to zoos across the United States, as well as longer trips to international zoos and natural wildlife areas. The goal of these experiences is to help participants move beyond simply being visitors and become more active observers and critical thinkers. By seeing a variety of facilities and environments, individuals can better understand differences in animal care standards, cultural perspectives, and conservation practices. Visiting natural habitats would be especially important, as it provides context for what animals' lives look like outside of captivity and helps people more fully evaluate the role and responsibility of zoos and sanctuaries. These experiences would not only educate participants but also empower them to make more ethical choices and support facilities that prioritize animal welfare and conservation.

Beyond in-person experiences, I also want to grow TrueZoos through media, community engagement, and creative outreach. I plan to create a YouTube video blog that documents my visits to zoos and sanctuaries, giving viewers an inside look at each facility and what I observe in real time. These videos will highlight key aspects such as habitat design, animal behavior, and overall conditions, allowing people to see the environments for themselves rather than relying only on written descriptions. This is especially important for individuals who may not be able to travel but still want to learn about different facilities.

Alongside the video content, each visit will also include a written blog post that reflects on my experience in more detail. These blogs will not only describe what I

observed, but also connect directly to my grading system by explaining specific aspects of how and why a facility received its evaluation. By including both personal observations and reasoning tied to my criteria, the blogs provide a more transparent and in-depth understanding of each review. Together, the written and visual components create a more engaging and informative platform, helping audiences better understand the ethics of zoos and sanctuaries while feeling more connected to the animals and facilities being evaluated.

In addition, I envision building a community on platforms like Patreon, where supporters can contribute to TrueZoos' growth while gaining access to exclusive content and updates. I also want to include an online shop that offers crocheted animals inspired by real zoo animals, each paired with its story and, potentially, a small educational book. This adds a more personal and emotional connection to the animals, especially for younger audiences, and helps make conservation feel more tangible and relatable.

Another important part of my future vision is creating opportunities for others to be involved in meaningful ways. I hope to offer paid internships for college students, allowing them to work as camp counselors or trip leaders while gaining experience directly relevant to careers in animal care, conservation, and education. This not only helps students build their resumes but also helps create a network of individuals passionate about improving animal welfare. By involving others in the process, TrueZoos becomes more than just my project; it becomes a collaborative effort that brings together people who care about animals and want to make a difference.

Overall, these future plans are designed to benefit both the public and conservation efforts in a meaningful and lasting way. For the public, TrueZoos provides accessible, engaging, hands-on opportunities to learn about animal welfare and to think more critically about the places they choose to visit and support. For conservation, increasing public awareness and accountability can encourage zoos and sanctuaries to improve their standards, as public perception and support play a major role in how these facilities operate. By combining education, real-world experiences, and community involvement, I believe TrueZoos can help create a shift in how people view and interact with animals in

captivity, ultimately contributing to better animal welfare and stronger support for conservation efforts.

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Appendix A

Summary:

TrueZoos is an educational and advocacy-based platform designed to help the public identify and support ethical zoos and wildlife facilities across the United States. What starts as a website that evaluates zoos based on clear ethical criteria will expand into an interactive business that combines education, travel, and hands-on experiences. TrueZoos aims to bridge the gap between public interest in animals and a deeper understanding of animal welfare, conservation, and ethical responsibility.

Mission Statement:

The mission of TrueZoos is to promote ethical treatment of animals in captivity by educating the public, holding facilities accountable, and providing meaningful, hands-on experiences that connect people, especially younger generations, to wildlife and conservation.

Core Services and Offerings:

1. Website Platform

- a. The TrueZoos website will serve as the foundation of the business and will include:
 - i. Profiles of zoos and sanctuaries across the U.S.
 - ii. Ethical ratings based on specific criteria (animal welfare, conservation efforts, enclosure quality, etc.)
 - iii. Educational content about zoology, animal behavior, and conservation
 - iv. Blog-style posts and updates about zoos and industry changes

2. Educational Camps and Programs

- a. TrueZoos will offer inclusive summer camp programs designed for **public school and homeschool students**, ensuring that all participants can benefit both educationally and experientially. These camps will be tailored by age group and designed to combine hands-on learning with real-world exposure to animal care, conservation, and zoo ethics.

- b. Age groups:
 - i. **Elementary School (potential expansion)**: Introductory, engaging activities focused on basic animal knowledge, creativity, and appreciation for wildlife.
 - ii. **Middle School**: Hands-on and creative learning, such as designing animal habitats through drawings and learning foundational concepts in zoology and conservation.
 - iii. **High School**: More advanced, project-based experiences where students create detailed habitat designs, analyze animal welfare, and critically compare ethical and unethical zoos.
- c. Camp structure:
 - i. Summer camps will include visits to multiple zoos (both ethical and unethical) to help students develop critical thinking skills about animal care and facility standards.
 - ii. Outdoor and immersive experiences, such as hiking and exploring ecosystems (e.g., forests like the redwoods), to connect students directly with nature.
 - iii. Activities that encourage observation, creativity, and real-world application of knowledge.
- d. These camps are designed to go beyond traditional classroom learning by giving students the opportunity to actively engage with animals, environments, and ethical decision-making in a meaningful and memorable way.

3. Travel Experiences

- a. TrueZoos will offer a range of travel experiences that allow participants to pay to explore zoos and wildlife in both local and global contexts. These experiences are designed to combine education, observation, and real-world evaluation of animal care and conservation practices.
- b. U.S. Day Trips (Zoos):
 - i. Organized visits to zoos across the United States
 - ii. Guided discussions on ethical vs. unethical practices

- iii. Opportunities for participants to actively evaluate facilities using TrueZoos criteria

- c. International Zoo Trips:

- i. Travel experiences to zoos in other countries
- ii. Exposure to different standards of animal care and cultural perspectives on wildlife
- iii. Comparative analysis of global zoo practices

- d. International Wildlife Trips (Natural Habitats):

- i. Trips focused on observing animals in their natural environments rather than captivity
- ii. Visits to ecosystems such as forests, savannas, or other wildlife areas
- iii. Emphasis on conservation, natural behavior, and the contrast between wild and captive animal life

- e. These travel experiences allow participants to move beyond learning from a screen and instead engage directly with animals, environments, and ethical considerations on a much deeper level. They also reinforce the mission of TrueZoos by helping participants understand not only how animals should be cared for in captivity, but what their lives look like in the wild.

4. Internship and Leadership Opportunities

- a. TrueZoos will offer opportunities for college students to work as:

- i. Camp counselors
- ii. Trip leaders
- iii. Educational guides

- b. These roles can function as paid internships, giving students valuable experience for careers in zoology, conservation, or education

5. Media and Content Creation

- a. TrueZoos will expand its reach through digital content, including:

- i. A YouTube video blog documenting zoo visits and ethical evaluations
- ii. Written blogs on ethicality grading and zoo trips
- iii. Educational videos about animal care and conservation

- b. This helps build a wider audience and increases transparency in the evaluation process

6. Online Store

- a. The TrueZoos website will include a shop featuring:
 - i. Crocheted animals based on real zoo animals
 - ii. Each item includes the animal's story and background
 - iii. Children's mini books to educate younger audiences
 - iv. TrueZoos merch
 - v. And more
- b. This adds a personal and emotional connection to the mission while supporting the business financially

7. Community Support (Patreon)

- a. TrueZoos will create a Patreon or membership system where supporters can:
 - i. Access exclusive content
 - ii. Support ethical zoo advocacy
 - iii. Help fund trips, research, and educational programs

Target Audience

TrueZoos is designed to reach a wide audience, including:

- Families and individuals interested in visiting zoos
- Students (middle school through college)
- Homeschool communities seeking educational credit opportunities
- Animal lovers and conservation advocates

The business is intentionally structured to provide value to people of all ages, with varying levels of engagement based on experience and interest.

Revenue Streams

TrueZoos will generate revenue through multiple channels:

- Program and camp fees
- Travel experience fees
- Online store sales

- Patreon/membership support
- Sponsorships and partnerships (future)
- Ad revenue from website and YouTube content

Startup Staffing and Operational Costs

TrueZoos will begin with a small, functional team to support website development, research, content creation, and program implementation.

- Primary roles will include:
 - Founder/Director (Lexy Sapiro)
 - Oversees zoo and sanctuary evaluations
 - Manages content creation and website updates
 - Directs overall business operations and future growth
 - IT/Web Developer (part-time or contract)
 - Builds and maintains the website platform
 - Ensures functionality and user accessibility
 - Video Editor (part-time or per project)
 - Edits YouTube videos and digital media content
 - Supports expansion of online educational outreach
 - Interns (college students)
 - Serve as camp counselors and trip assistants
 - Assist with supervising participants during camps and travel experiences
 - Help facilitate activities and educational discussions
 - Gain hands-on, resume-building experience in animal care, conservation, and education
- Cost considerations:
 - IT/Web Developer: approximately \$25–40 per hour
 - Video Editor: hourly or per-project basis
 - Interns: stipend-based or limited hours (approximately 10–15 hours/week)
- Additional cost considerations:

- Employees working at least 50% time require an additional 35–40% in fringe costs (benefits, taxes, insurance)
- To reduce costs in early stages, TrueZoos will prioritize:
 - Part-time roles
 - Contract-based work
 - Internship-based positions

Risk Management and Legal Considerations

As TrueZoos expands into camps, travel experiences, and hands-on programming, there are inherent risks related to participant safety and liability.

- Potential risks include:
 - Travel-related incidents (transportation, international trips)
 - Physical activity during camps and outdoor experiences
 - General participant safety during programs
- To address these risks, TrueZoos will:
 - Obtain appropriate liability insurance
 - Ensure coverage for travel, activities, and program participation
- Legal considerations related to evaluations:
 - Zoos and sanctuaries may challenge ratings or published evaluations
 - Risk of defamation or slander claims if facilities disagree with assessments
- To reduce legal risk, TrueZoos will:
 - Maintain a clear and consistent evaluation methodology
 - Base all claims on credible sources and observable evidence
 - Ensure transparency in how facilities are evaluated
- Future legal and personnel support:
 - Retain a lawyer/legal advisor to:
 - Assist with liability and insurance requirements
 - Provide protection against defamation or slander claims
 - Consider hiring a personnel/human resources role as the business expands to:

- Manage staffing and contracts
- Oversee liability and compliance

Future Growth and Vision

In the long term, TrueZoos aims to become:

- A widely recognized authority on ethical zoos
- A trusted educational resource for schools and families
- A platform that influences how zoos operate and improve animal welfare

The ultimate goal is not just to inform people, but to create a system that encourages, supports, and expects ethical practices.