

Euthanasia of a 2 year old male giraffe at Copenhagen Zoo

A lot has been said about the euthanasia of the above mentioned giraffe. People and organisations from all over the world have stated their critique or support of the action, and as so often happens there has also been a lot of misunderstandings. Consequently there is a need for clarification. On the following pages I have described what REALLY happened as well as the background for our decisions.

The three main points of criticism were:

- Euthanasia/culling of a 2 year old male giraffe
- Inviting the public to watch the autopsy
- Feeding the carcass to the lions

Euthanasia/culling of a 2 year old male giraffe:

On 9 February we euthanized a 2 year old male giraffe that was declared “surplus to the population”. As you may know our giraffes are all part of the European breeding programme for giraffes, and as a pure reticulated giraffe, this giraffe was one of a European population of a little more than one hundred giraffes distributed over ~35 European zoos. Because he comes from a genetic line that has bred very well over the past years there was no space for him anywhere in the population, and he was declared “surplus”. I don’t need to explain to you the background for such a statement, but fact is that we couldn’t place him within the programme without taking space for genetically more important individuals.

And just a clarification: Euthanasia was NOT our first choice, but our choice when all other potential solutions had proven not workable. So, we followed the procedures stated in the EAZA policy for the use of euthanasia (which is also reflected in the WAZA policy for the same issue).

Personally I think it is great that we have come so far that giraffes breed so well that a surplus may arise. Twenty years ago and even less years ago that was not the case. And I must also say that we have bred this line of giraffes since the 1960s and have had 38 offspring in total. One was stillborn, and 20 were sent to other European zoos. The remaining 17 giraffes have been used for our own stock over the past fifty years (renewal of the population), and some of them have died due to trauma, sickness etc. The actual male was the first one to be euthanized due to being a surplus to the European population.

I must also admit that I don’t quite understand the hard criticism from some people. Culling of surplus animals is used all over the world in order to adapt the populations of animals to the available space. Due to the unbalance in nature

created by human activities this is essential in order to avoid that some animals destroy their own and other animals' habitat and thus decrease the overall fitness of the populations. The zoo situation is exactly the same – we have a certain amount of space available and must adapt the population to fit into this space without crowding and consequently decreased welfare. As long as the space limit is not reached it is not a big problem, but when animals start breeding well – which is a good thing – we may have a surplus of animals now and then. Just moving this surplus to other places will just move the problem, out of sight out of mind. And that is in my eyes NOT a solution.

And breeding is necessary as you all know to currently renew the population. And as you also know we can not just say at the start of every breeding season: I need 7 more individuals (3,4 for example) in my population to reach the optimal size. So, I recommend 7 females to breed. Who knows if all matings will be successful? And what about the sex ratio? We can't predict to have exactly what we need to have an optimal population. Let's say that only five of the seven pregnancies resulted in calves, and that the sex ratio of these calves were 4,1. We will then as a start of the new season have two giraffes less than needed/wanted, and the sex ratio would be wrong, i.e. we have decreased the overall quality of the population. But if we instead let the animals breed at natural intervals we will certainly come to a stage where we will have a surplus that then needs to be euthanized (culled if we compare to situation in the wild). But we will still have a sound population all other things equal. Breeding without surplus at some stage is not good practice!

Furthermore we think it is essential for the welfare of our animals that they are allowed to breed at natural intervals, even if this means we will end up having a surplus now and then. If we keep males and females away from each other or use chemical contraception we take away a big deal of their natural behavior and consequently reduce their welfare. Is that fair to the animals for which we say that we do our utmost to provide them with good welfare? I don't think so. And then I haven't mentioned the other negative side effects chemical contraception can have on the animals and which is well documented for several animal species and not looked into for other species.

It is right that during the process we received through the press offers from two European zoos that said they could take him. One was Yorkshire Wildlife Park in the UK and the other one was Frösö Djurpark in Sweden. But these offers were rejected by us for the following reasons:

Yorkshire is already part of the European breeding programme had had thus already been considered in the analyses made before making the recommendations and had been found “not suitable” – not because of the facility

as such, but because of its existing population and the future use of this space. By sending our giraffe to Yorkshire we would occupy space for genetically more important animals than our giraffe, and we would thus counteract our efforts to ensure a healthy population far into the future and to avoid “the deleterious effects of captive breeding” as stated in the IUCN Guidelines for ex situ Breeding for Conservation.

Frösö is not a member of the European breeding programme and has not even applied for membership of EAZA. They are thus not willing to sign up for working under the same ethical codes and best practices as we are. This means among others that they are not willing to exchange animals for free but are still selling animals. We will not send animals to places where we can't safeguard a “good life” for the animal in all its lifetime, and if we send an animal to a place where they want to be able to sell animals we risk giving our animals away to dealers that at a later stage will sell to substandard zoos – i.e. our animals will have to suffer from these conditions perhaps 20 years or more. That's a decision we have made many years ago – we won't do that.

Our philosophy behind all this is that we consider it of utmost important that our animals have a good life as long as they live, long or short. None of our animals have any expectations of how long they will or can live. But they sense the quality of their actual life, and that part must be as good as ever possible. We also consider the opportunity to perform as much natural behavior as one of the main issues in animal keeping. And that is why we don't want to use contraceptives or to keep males and females away from each other. So, all in all we couldn't and wouldn't prevent our giraffes from breeding at natural intervals in order to avoid a possible surplus problem. Rather let them breed and when the offspring reaches the age where they start fighting with their parents take them away, either by sending them to another zoo (if that is possible) or to euthanize them if there is no other options left.

Invitation to the autopsy:

First three clarifications:

- *The giraffe was NOT shot in front of the public, but in the giraffe stable with only the vet and the animal keeper present – as we always do when we need to euthanize an animal.*
- *The autopsy was NOT done on the public area of the Zoo, but in an area where the public has no access and where we normally do autopsies (at the vet clinic). So nobody could accidentally run into the dead giraffe. They had to make a choice to enter that specific area.*

- *The autopsy was NOT a PR stunt to earn more money. If we had wanted that it would have been announced in press releases prior to the actual event. It was not. It was only announced in an electronic newsletter to those of our guests that receive that on a regular basis to be informed about what goes on in the Zoo. And there was NO fee to attend this session.*

In Copenhagen Zoo we have a rule that all animals that die, small and big, must undergo an autopsy in order to gain scientific knowledge and to detect possible abnormalities. That also goes for animals where we already know the cause of death as in this case.

So, since we were to do the autopsy anyway, and we had to do it in the open (but still in the off exhibit area) due to the large size of the giraffe we wanted to invite our public to watch how such a thing is done and to show them how fantastic a giraffe is, not only when it walks on the savanna, but also as a biological creature. There are so many exciting things to show, among other the enormous heart it needs to pump the blood 2 meter up to the brain, that it doesn't have more neck vertebrae than we have despite the neck is 2 meter long etc. All fascinating things that can contribute to the general fascination of the giraffe as an animal. So, for us the autopsy was a unique opportunity to show people these wonders and to fascinate them even more.

We have then been criticized because we did this in the first place (unethical they said) and even more because we "showed it to small kids". Well, first of all we don't think at all that doing an autopsy in front of interested people can be unethical since it needs to be done anyway, and we want to be open to our public about how a zoo works, not only about what they see in the enclosures, but also the important work behind the scenes, here the scientific part. And that also kids could watch is nothing special in Denmark. We have done autopsies like this for many years with other species such as bears, lions, antelopes goats, snakes etc., and have never experienced any sort of complaint, only fascination and gratefulness from those that chose to watch. Furthermore such "open autopsies" are conducted all over Denmark in the forests with roe deer during the hunting season, and at the natural history museums with whatever animals they have available. So, in Denmark it is a natural thing and people honestly don't find it disgusting or "cruel to the kids to experience". On the contrary, kids are so good in asking the right questions, they are straight forward as opposed to us adults that sometimes don't dare asking the good questions. So, we have had many kids through sessions like this over the years (this is the first time with a giraffe), and I am sure that they all sleep well at night after having seen it.

And what do people then learn from such autopsies? Apart from learning about "the wonders of the giraffe" as explained above they learn about life and death,

they hear about death in a natural context, and death is demystified especially for the kids. From being something that makes kids throw up when they find a dead animal in the forest a carcass becomes something they have seen before and learned about. They have seen how the food lies in the intestine and will pop out if you cut a small hole. So, when they by accident see such things in “forest carcasses” it is not just a disgusting blurry thing coming out of the skin, but half digested food coming out from the intestine etc. etc. This is just the short story of the demystification, but I feel pretty confident that you would agree with me if you had experienced the autopsy yourself. It lasted 3 hours, and many people stayed there for more than an hour, and there were more people coming in all the time. So, we consider this autopsy, together with the many other ones we have performed openly, a big success, despite the criticism from people who have not seen it themselves. And not a single complaint from some of the many visitors that were present, only praising words!

I am sure much of the criticism is caused by cultural differences between the various parts of the world. But this was done in Denmark where such things are normal to be open about. So, for us this was not a problem, only yet another good educational event and a unique opportunity to tell our public how a zoo works from life to death.

Feeding the carcass to the lions:

After the autopsy we had a little more than 200 kg meat from the giraffe. Part of this meat was used to feed the lions, and part of it was stores for future use as carnivore food. This is also quite natural here in Denmark, and we have done that for ages (feeding the carnivores whole carcasses in stead of just a certain amount of anonymous meat. We do that in order to feed the carnivores as natural as possible so that they can perform also that part of their natural behavior and in order to show our public that this is actually what carnivores live from in the wild and this is how they deal with such carcasses. Much more enriching for the animals and much more educating for our public.

People have said that it was cruel to do this in front of kids. But we certainly don't agree with that. Kids and adults needs to see as much of the real world as possible, and not a romantic world where carnivores don't eat other animals. And last, but not least: If we hadn't fed the meat to the lions the lions would have had meat from a cow or a horse – animals that also were live before they were shot. So, no difference, apart from better welfare for the carnivores and better education for the public. And I am sure none of you would have thrown the eat away as useless, right?

Also here I see a big cultural difference between the various parts of the world, and I am sure this difference is the reason for the strong reactions from especially the UK and USA. But in Denmark where the feeding was performed it is only natural and done by most of the zoos as we do it.

General comments:

I hope you have followed me all the way through the whole process and have read all 6 pages (sorry for the length of this explanation). But I thought you should know our reasons and the situation here in Denmark, and I hope you have a better understanding about the whole incident as before. For us every little bit was a sort of business as usual. We have used the “bred and cull” policy for decades, we have done open autopsies and have fed whole carcasses to our carnivores also for ages/decades, and with no complaints at all. Only a very few when we two years ago euthanized two young leopards that were declared surplus to the population as was the giraffe. And when I say “business as usual” it doesn’t mean that we do it every day. Of course not. But we do it in accordance with EAZA policy whenever needed. And as for carcass feeding and open autopsies we do it whenever it fits into the feeding schedule (when carcasses are available) and when autopsies can be used in our interpretation programmes.

Furthermore we have always been open about what we do and how we manage our animal population, also when we have euthanized animals. So, nothing to hide, and the open autopsy and the carcass feeding are both consequences of this transparency policy.

Last but certainly not least some philosophical notes: What is so wrong and cruel about euthanasia if it is done after thorough analyses and performed by an experienced vet in accordance with national law? How can euthanasia be so “out of order” in a world where millions of domestic animals are killed every day to provide us human beings with meat, and where millions of dog and cat offspring are euthanized every year because they are unwanted. Or where pest control by killing billions of rats and mice is generally accepted, and hunting lays down millions of hares, deer and similar hunting objects every year, even in your own country. And where for conservation reasons some animals are killed in order to protect others and where even giraffes and elephants are culled every year in Africa as surplus animals? These are all “healthy animals” as are the ones euthanized in zoos and as was the young giraffe in Copenhagen Zoo.

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