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A zoo animal's neighbourhood: how conspecific neighbours impact welfare

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Abstract

While the zoological community strives to provide the best possible living environment for non-human animals, space limitations constrain where zoos can house particular species. Therefore, an individual may live in proximity to animals that impact its behaviour, physiology, reproductive function or overall welfare status. This article examines how solitary and social species living in managed settings are positively and negatively affected by conspecific neighbours. When making housing decisions, zoos should follow husbandry recommendations outlined by zoo associations, integrate natural history information and attempt to view the environment from the perspective of the species of interest. Furthermore, researchers can collect survey, behavioural and physiological data to examine how variables, such as density, distance between neighbours, the age/sex of conspecifics and types/amount of exposure to others influence welfare. Ultimately, zoos should consider the needs of individuals and investigate whether welfare can be enhanced by modifying enclosures, husbandry routines, enrichment schedules or access to conspecifics. A zoo's willingness to alter an animal's exposure to conspecifics may have a substantial impact on physical, mental and emotional health.

Keywords: *animal welfare, behaviour, conspecific neighbours, physiology, welfare monitoring, zoo animals*