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Natural History Museums, Zoos, and Conservation in Latin America

Contemporary zoos proudly present themselves as institutions that focus not only on visitors' entertainment and leisure, but also on environmental education and conservation programs. Their teams include zoologists, ecologists, and vets. Zoos have partnerships with nature protection organizations and local/tradition communities around the world. These institutions also insist on proclaiming their differences with "old" zoos.

However, the study of the early days of zoos in Latin America draws a more nuanced picture of this history. Many zoos were created with conservationist perspectives. This relationship deepened even further as many Latin American zoos were linked to Natural History Museums, and became working institutions for leading naturalists. This was the case of Alfonso Luis Herrera at the Chapultepec Zoo, in Ciudad de Mexico, Emilio Goeldi and Emilia Snethlage at the Belém do Pará Zoological Park, Brazil; Eduardo Ladislao Holmberg and Clementi Onelli at the Buenos Aires Zoo; Carlos Alberto de la Torre in Vila Dolores, in Montevideo; Karl Feibrig and Anna Gertz at The Botanical and Zoological Garden, in Assunción, Paraguay.

This presentation will focus on these case studies, aiming to bring a multifaceted approach to the history of zoos, highlighting the complexity of these institutions in Latin America throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. What are the historical reasons for the contemporary oblivion of these conservation and educational traditions so relevant from the late nineteenth century and to the first three decades of the twentieth century? Why was this trend practically excluded from most of these Latin American zoos from the 1930-1940s on? What are the differences between the conservationist proposals by the contemporary Latin American zoos and those of the first years of their existence?

The study of Latin American Zoos' history is especially relevant at a time when animal protection movements profoundly criticized these institutions as places of cruelty against animals. Some zoos, such as Vila Dolores and Buenos Aires, are now closed. Despite several acute problems faced by zoos in developing countries and the huge financial difficulties for ensuring the welfare of their animals, many of them include conservation efforts for endangered native species, employing a team of researchers in zoology, ethology and veterinary of wild animals, as well as offering important options for outdoor recreation and environmental education to poor dwellers of large cities such as Ciudad de Mexico, and Lima.