

## Why Copenhagen zoo was right to cull giraffe

By Lesley Dickie, zoo association director, Special to CNN  
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**Editor's note:** Lesley Dickie is Executive Director of the [European Association of Zoos and Aquaria](#). The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely his.

**(CNN)** -- The European Association of Zoos and Aquaria (EAZA) takes very seriously its duty of protecting endangered and vulnerable species from extinction.

Our European Endangered Species Programmes (EEP) have been established to ensure a viable future for endangered animals -- including giraffes -- despite the destruction of their habitats and rampant poaching of wild animals.

More than 700 giraffes are kept within our institutions to the highest possible standards of welfare and care by zoos such as Copenhagen, and EAZA monitors breeding closely to ensure that the species has the genetic diversity it needs to have the best possible chance of survival in the long term.

While we understand that some members of the public are upset by the [ethanization of the giraffe at Copenhagen zoo](#), the protection of the species as a whole must be our priority.

Our resources are regrettably finite, and as a result, the EEP must prioritize animals which can contribute to the overall genetic health of the captive population.

This means that in rare cases (five in the case of giraffes in EAZA zoos since records began in 1828), animals must be removed from the population by management euthanasia.

Compare this to the 60 billion+ healthy, young animals killed each year worldwide for human consumption. In-breeding is a serious problem that can lead to genes being passed on that increase the population's susceptibility to disease and other chronic conditions which threaten the future of the species in our care.

### [Zoo staff get death threats](#)

As for alternative solutions, we cannot in good conscience recommend the transfer of animals under our protection to zoos which are not our members and therefore not subject to our strict standards of animal husbandry and welfare; transfer within our network does not represent a solution to the unsuitability of the individual animal for breeding. Contraception is difficult and in its infancy for female giraffes, and can be irreversible.

Castration of a male animal can have also undesirable side-effects, and a place that could otherwise be reserved for an animal that can contribute to its species' future is lost.

Release into the wild of this single individual would almost certainly result in early death for the animal, after a long and stressful journey of thousands of kilometers -- reintroduction is an intensive and complicated matter and we would not countenance this unless recommended to by the IUCN, the paramount global body for nature conservation.

All of these alternatives were explored, and none were found to be viable; in addition, EAZA's position is supported by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

EAZA members do not euthanize animals lightly, and we are saddened by the death of any animal in our care.

Nonetheless, we strongly support Copenhagen Zoo, which has an exemplary record of animal welfare, education, research and conservation, and which took great pains to be transparent about the situation -- 7,000 visitors came to Copenhagen Zoo on Sunday, while 15 protesters stood outside.

The Copenhagen public spoke with their tickets to the zoo and left knowing far more about the real threats to conservation of giraffes in the wild.

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