

RESEARCH ARTICLE

‘Down pythons’ throats we thrust live goats’: snakes, zoos and animal welfare in nineteenth-century Britain

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Abstract

In nineteenth-century Britain, captive snakes in menageries and zoological gardens were routinely fed with live prey – primarily rabbits, pigeons and guinea pigs. From the late 1860s, this practice began to generate opposition on animal welfare grounds, leading to a protracted debate over its necessity, visibility and morality. Focusing on the c.1870–1914 period, when the snake-feeding controversy reached its zenith, this article charts changing attitudes towards the treatment of reptiles in captivity and asks why an apparently niche practice generated so much interest. By looking at the biological arguments put forward for and against live feeding, the article traces the changing nature of humanitarian activism in the late nineteenth century and shows how the shifting character of the live-feeding debate paralleled wider trends in the animal welfare movement. It also highlights the different types of knowledge and expertise involved in the debate, as naturalists, veterinary surgeons, legal professionals, zookeepers and humanitarians offered conflicting perspectives on questions of reptilian dietary requirements and animal sentience.

In 1881 an unnamed individual contacted the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) to inform its secretary of an atrocity he had witnessed at London Zoo. According to the letter, the man had visited the zoo the previous Friday and been ushered into the reptile house during feeding time. Before he knew what was happening, he found himself in front of one of the snakes’ cages, where he saw ‘[s]mall animals (mice, sparrows, rabbits, guinea pigs, etc.)’ being placed alive inside the tank and subjected to a ‘period of torture’ before they were devoured. He then moved on to observe the pythons, watching in horror as two of the animals crushed white ducks between their coils, the ‘feet and heads’ of the latter ‘giving occasional signs of life in jerks and movements of the beaks’. So disgusted was the witness that he immediately reported the matter to the RSPCA. ‘I should be failing in my duty as a member of a Christian community if I did not bring what passed before my eyes to the attention of the powerful and ubiquitous Society which is the constituted guardian of the animal creation in this country’.

The anonymous letter detailed above was just one of many letters received – and later published – by the RSPCA concerning the practice of feeding snakes with live prey in zoological institutions. Though not a new phenomenon, live feeding drew increasing criticism from the 1870s and became a matter of deep concern for animal welfare organizations. It occupied a disproportionate space in the journals of animal protection organizations like

the Humanitarian League and posed complex questions about the morality and biological necessity of feeding snakes with live birds and rodents. As the anonymous critic meditated,

Are full-grown ducks, with their strong claws and bills, proper food for snakes? Would they prey on such in their natural state? ... Will large snakes exist on nothing but large live prey? If so, is it not a grave crime to keep these creatures in existence at the price of such nameless torture?¹

Focusing on the period from approximately 1870 to 1914, when the snake-feeding controversy reached its zenith, this article charts changing attitudes towards the treatment of reptiles in captivity and asks why an apparently niche practice generated so much interest. Compared to other, better-documented, abuses, such as vivisection, animal baiting or the slaughter of wild animals for fashion, live feeding has received little attention from scholars.² This includes zoo historians, who have focused, instead, on enclosure design, health care for captive animals, cruel methods of training and the cruelties associated with the wild-animal trade.³ For nineteenth-century animal protectionists, however, the practice became something of a fixation, and its surprising prominence in a wide range of humanitarian literature raises important questions about conceptions of pain, notions of public decency and the ethics of keeping snakes in captivity. By looking at the arguments put forward for, and against, live feeding over an extended period, the article traces the changing nature of humanitarian activism in the late nineteenth century and shows how the shifting character of the live-feeding debate paralleled wider trends in the animal welfare movement. I focus on three pivotal moments in the snake-feeding saga, each of which generated extensive coverage in the press: the late 1860s, when live feeding was first challenged in the courts; the 1880s, when the RSPCA campaigned to end the public feeding of snakes with live prey at London Zoo; and the period from roughly 1902 to 1911, when the Humanitarian League conducted a sustained campaign against live feeding – now carried out entirely in private.

The article uses the snake-feeding scandal to explore three connected issues. First, it examines the evolving criteria for moral consideration in nineteenth-century Britain and considers how changing ideas about animal sentience and cognition influenced the

¹ 'Serpents and serpent feeding III', *Animal World*, April 1881, pp. 49–52, 50.

² For an overview of the humanitarian movement in nineteenth-century Britain see Hilda Kean, *Animal Rights: Political and Social Change in Britain since 1800*, London: Reaktion Books, 1998. On the shifting priorities of the RSPCA see Brian Harrison, 'Animals and the state in nineteenth-century England', *English Historical Review* (1973) 88, pp. 786–820. On the rise of anti-vivisection see Coral Lansbury, *The Old Brown Dog: Women, Workers and Vivisection in Edwardian England*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985; Anita Guerrini, *Experimenting with Humans and Animals: From Galen to Animal Rights*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003, pp. 70–92. On the exploitation of animals for fashion see Robin Doughty, *Feather Fashions and Bird Preservation: A Study in Nature Protection*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975; Helen Cowie, *Victims of Fashion: Animal Commodities in Victorian Britain*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022.

³ See, for instance, Nigel Rothfels, *Savages and Beasts: The Birth of the Modern Zoo*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002, pp. 44–80; Takashi Ito, *London Zoo and the Victorians, 1828–1859*, Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2014; Helen Cowie, *Exhibiting Animals: Empathy, Education, Entertainment*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 126–54; Andrew Flack, *The Wild Within: Histories of a Landmark British Zoo*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2018, pp. 153–78; Violette Pouillard, *Histoire des zoos par les animaux: Impérialisme, contrôle, conservation*, Ceyzérieu: Champ Vallon, 2019, pp. 74–133; Nigel Rothfels, *Elephant Trails: A History of Animals and Cultures*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2022, pp. 85–123. A notable exception is James Hall, who discusses early critiques of snake feeding at London Zoo within a wider analysis of reptile exhibition, but focuses on the period before 1870. See James Hall, 'Encountering snakes in early Victorian London: the first reptile house at the Zoological Gardens', *History of Science* (2015) 53(3), pp. 338–61.

perception and treatment of different species. Feeding live prey to snakes caused controversy because it inverted prevailing zoological hierarchies (which placed warm-blooded birds and mammals above cold-blooded reptiles). In appraising the practice, advocates and opponents of live feeding were forced to articulate the relative qualities of predators and prey and to define more precisely the parameters of pain, fear, wildness and domesticity. Some also questioned the naturalness of live-feeding, considering how this impacted on snakes (which might suffer if force-fed dead prey) or prey animals (which could not escape within the unnatural conditions of the menagerie). The case thus offers a window onto contemporary understandings of animal suffering and foreshadows some of the preoccupations of modern animal welfare science (which did not emerge as a recognized area of study until the 1980s).⁴

Second, the article foregrounds issues of authority and expertise. The snake-feeding debate centred on three related questions about the status, physiology and cognition of the animal actors involved. (1) Were rabbits, guinea pigs and ducks wild or domestic animals (and how should domesticity be defined)? (2) Could snakes digest dead prey? (3) Did the prey animals experience fear before their consumption (and how should this be determined)? These questions were assessed through interventions from a variety of people, including naturalists, veterinary surgeons, zookeepers and members of the public. The article explores the different forms of evidence mobilized by these groups to bolster their authority and situates the live-feeding debate within broader discussions about zoological classification, scientific credibility and social status – discussions which, as Harriet Ritvo and D. Graham Burnett have shown, extended well beyond scholarly circles.⁵ Was first-hand experience of caring for animals more trustworthy than theoretical knowledge? To what extent did class, gender and professional qualifications affect the credibility of witnesses? What rhetorical devices did actors use to render their claims believable?⁶

Third, the article highlights the importance of witnessing/visibility in nineteenth-century perceptions of cruelty. In the 1870s and 1880s, opponents of live feeding complained that the public nature of the practice would encourage voyeurism and brutalize spectators. In the 1900s, however, after snake feeding had been moved behind closed doors, members of the Humanitarian League worried that its private performance might permit even greater cruelty, since nobody would be present to witness it. The article asks how seeing (or hiding) violence towards animals shaped public responses to suffering, noting important parallels between snake feeding, vivisection and the slaughter of animals for meat – all of which shifted from public spectacle to private practice during this period.⁷

⁴ Donald Broom, 'A history of animal welfare science', *Acta Biotheor* (2011) 59, pp. 121–37.

⁵ Harriet Ritvo, *The Platypus and the Mermaid and Other Figments of the Classifying Imagination*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997. On social status and scientific credibility see Steven Shapin, 'The invisible technician', *American Scientist* (1989) 77(6), pp. 554–63; Stuart McCook, "'It may be truth, but it is not evidence": Paul du Chaillu and the legitimation of evidence in the field', *Osiris* (1996), 2nd series 11, pp. 177–97; D. Graham Burnett, *Trying Leviathan: The Nineteenth-Century Court Case That Put the Whale on Trial and Challenged the Order of Nature*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007; Oliver Hochadel, 'How to get into the pouch: solving the riddle of the kangaroo birth (1826–1926)', in Miquel Carandell and Oliver Hochadel (eds.), 'Science at the zoo: producing knowledge about exotic animals', *Centaureus* (2022) 64, pp. 635–58.

⁶ On witnessing, social status and credibility see Simon Schaffer and Steven Shapin, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle and the Experimental Life*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011, pp. 56–69.

⁷ On the movement of slaughterhouses to the outskirts of cities and overseas colonies see Rebecca Woods, 'From colonial animal to imperial edible: building an empire of sheep in New Zealand, ca. 1880–1900', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* (2015) 35(1), pp. 117–36. On the important role of bearing witness in turn-of-the-century animal advocacy see J. Keri Cronin, *Art for Animals: Visual Culture and Animal Advocacy, 1870–1914*, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018, pp. 87–92.

Recent historiography in the history of animals has placed increasing emphasis on animal agency, and the ability of non-human animals to shape their own – and human – history.⁸ Most of the non-human animals in this story had their agency limited by humans, who kept them in cages and made unilateral decisions about when their lives would end (this was, indeed, one of the key objections to the practice of live feeding). Contemporaries nonetheless endowed the animals in the live-feeding debate with a degree of agency, whether through suggesting that the snakes' consumption of live prey was a choice (as opposed to a biological necessity), or by deducing evidence of fear from the behaviour of ducks, rodents and goats in the presence of predatory reptiles. Individual animals, moreover, sometimes thwarted human desires by, in the case of snakes, refusing to eat dead prey, or, in the case of live prey, attacking/defying the snakes that attempted to eat them. A guinea pig in London Zoo 'nibbled' one snake 'so badly ... that ulceration of the entire skin ensued, and the reptile had to be destroyed'.⁹ A python called Princess in the Bronx Zoo refused food for twenty-three months and ten days, earning the nickname 'Mrs Pankhurst' (in reference to the suffragette hunger striker).¹⁰ The article considers the extent to which the biology and behaviour of non-human animals influenced attitudes towards live feeding, shaping the contours of the debate. The live-prey controversy is thus a form of multi-species history, albeit one in which the actions of non-human actors were constrained by the conditions of captivity.

Cruelty in the menagerie

In December 1869, menagerie owner James Edmunds appeared before magistrates at Liverpool Police Court charged with 'having caused to be cruelly ill-treated and tortured a certain animal – to wit, a rabbit, contrary to the statute'. The animal in question, a small grey rabbit about 'ten weeks old', had been put in a cage with a large snake and left there as food for the reptile. According to solicitor Mr Charles Pemberton, prosecuting, the snake 'coiled itself round the rabbit and sucked it, and the rabbit squealed very piercingly'. It then let go its hold before again attacking the creature and swallowing it whole.¹¹

Several witnesses called by the prosecution supported Pemberton's case, confirming that the rabbit was alive, that it was attacked by the snake, and that it suffered. Witness Mr Harvey, a professional cricketer from Birkenhead – and apparently a rabbit lover – testified that he saw the snake squeeze the rabbit; 'When it got away ... one of its eyes [was] out and its face was all bloody'. RSPCA inspector Mr Temperley corroborated Harvey's testimony, stating that he had visited the menagerie to confirm the witness's story and seen two further rabbits in the snake's cage, which, on this occasion, were removed. The third witness, veterinary surgeon Mr Dobie, had not seen the incident firsthand, but gave his professional opinion that the rabbit must have suffered 'great cruelty'.

The prosecution persuaded the magistrate that cruelty had occurred. Their case foundered, however, on two more nebulous issues: reptilian dietary preferences and the scope of the current animal cruelty legislation. The former issue concerned whether snakes

⁸ See, for instance, Susan Nance (ed.), *The Historical Animal*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2015, pp. 203–20; Amanda Rees, 'Animal agents: historiography, theory and the history of science in the Anthropocene', *BJHS: Themes* (2017) 2, pp. 1–10; Philip Howell, 'Animals, agency and history', in Philip Howell and Hilda Kean, *The Routledge Companion to Animal-Human History*, London: Routledge, 2018, pp. 197–221; Tamara Fernando, 'Seeing like the sea: a multispecies history of the Ceylon pearl fisheries, 1800–1925', *Past and Present* (2022) 254, pp. 127–60.

⁹ 'The food of snakes in captivity', *Animal World*, March 1908, p. 60.

¹⁰ '8-pound pig tempts python to end hunger strike', *New York Tribune*, 9 March 1914, p. 8.

¹¹ 'Is it cruelty to feed serpents on live rabbits?', *Birmingham Daily Post*, 30 December 1869, p. 6.

could survive on the flesh of dead animals alone, or whether they required their dinner to be still warm and breathing when they ate it. Edmunds, defending his exhibition, insisted that live feeding was necessary. The RSPCA disagreed, offering evidence that snakes could subsist on dead food. Pemberton observed, 'There was a dead rabbit in the same den ... and the serpent attacked it', so 'it was not requisite that the rabbit should have been put in alive'.

The issue of legal jurisdiction was even more thorny and revolved around whether the rabbit could legitimately be classed as a 'domestic animal' – the only type of animal covered in the Animal Cruelty Act of 1835. The prosecution emphasized the tameness of the rabbit, calling on the expertise of Harvey, who had 'owned as many as 75 rabbits' over the years. The defence, however, refuted the idea that this specific rabbit was tame, pointing out that the definition of 'domestic' could hardly 'be stretched so far as to cover the rabbits of our woods and fields'. At just ten months old, moreover, the rabbit's domesticity was hard to determine; even rabbit aficionado Harvey admitted that he could not be sure of its origin. Weighing up the evidence, magistrate Mr Mansfield agreed, dismissing the case. The feeding of live prey to snakes, he concluded, 'may be an odious exhibition' but it did not 'come within the statute'.¹²

The Liverpool snake-feeding case was an unusual and novel prosecution that proved to be the opening salvo in a long-running debate. Though directed at a single showman, the case addressed a broader practice in zoological collections, raising biological, ethical and legal issues that would persist for the next half-century. These centred on the suffering of the rabbit, the visibility of the feeding, the physiology of the snake and the classification of the rabbit as either domesticated or wild.

The issue of suffering – and how this should be measured – lay at the heart of the case. Did the animal feel pain when it was attacked by the snake, and was the nature of that pain excessive? The RSPCA argued that it was, and spent a considerable part of their prosecution trying to establish this fact. Harvey and Dobie both testified that the rabbit was subjected to 'great cruelty', while the society's solicitor, Pemberton, described how the animal 'squealed' in anguish when it saw the snake.¹³ The society also argued that the rabbit's suffering was worse for being prolonged. This was a particular preoccupation of animal protectionists in the 1860s and 1870s and featured strongly in other contemporary cruelty prosecutions. In 1874, for instance, the RSPCA prosecuted showmen John Day and Thomas Rayner for making an elephant walk from Nottingham to Gotham with a badly infected foot, causing the pachyderm 'absolute torture'.¹⁴

While the suffering of the rabbit was paramount, humanitarians also worried about the public nature of the feeding, which added to its repugnance. Had the rabbit been fed to the snake behind closed doors it is unlikely anyone would have complained. The fact that the act took place during feeding time, however, significantly changed the dynamics of the practice, converting a private unpleasantness into a public outrage. As the *Sheffield and Rotherham Independent* observed, feeding snakes with live prey was reminiscent of 'the barbarities of the Roman Amphitheatre', Spanish bullfights and 'the rat pits of London' – all reviled blood sports associated with historic civilizations, foreign cultures and lower-class thuggery.¹⁵ The live-feeding case also needs to be seen within the context of a wider movement – gaining momentum by the middle of the nineteenth century – to remove violence from the public domain, a trend reflected in several recent pieces of legislation. In 1867 public demonstrations of vivisection were prohibited, moving animal experiments behind closed doors. In 1868 the Capital Punishment Amendment Act put an

¹² 'Feeding serpents on live rabbits', *Morning Post*, 30 December 1869, p. 7.

¹³ 'Feeding serpents on live rabbits', op. cit. (12).

¹⁴ 'Cruelty to an elephant', *Nottinghamshire Guardian*, 27 November 1874, p. 5.

¹⁵ 'Cruelty to Animals', *Sheffield and Rotherham Independent*, 3 January 1870, p. 2.

end to public executions, moving the scaffold out of the marketplace and into the prison. In 1874 the London Slaughterhouse Act made it illegal to kill an animal 'in public view'.¹⁶ The motivation behind all of these reforms was not necessarily to reduce suffering (which, as we shall see, might be worse in private), but to render it invisible, preventing the raucous behaviour sometimes seen in the anatomy theatre or at public hangings.¹⁷ Against this backdrop, the feeding of snakes with live prey presented a challenge to the shifting moral compass of Britain's middle-class reformers and appeared barbaric and regressive.

A third, related, element of the Liverpool case concerned whether live feeding was biologically necessary, or merely exploited by showmen as a form of sensationalism. This question invited different answers and contributed, in turn, to a discussion of professional expertise. In a letter published in the *Manchester Times*, Edmunds's fellow menagerist – and bitter rival – William Manders claimed that he fed his snakes solely on 'fresh meat – it must be fresh', and that they 'thrive wonderfully' under this regime.¹⁸ Rebutting these assertions, Edmunds insisted that live feeding was essential, for while 'the very unpleasant plan of pushing meat down their [snakes'] throats with a stick' might suffice to keep sickly reptiles 'a little longer in existence', it would not do for animals 'in full health and vigour (as mine are)'. The showman also marshalled the authority of several other practitioners in his defence, asserting that his feeding method was 'corroborated by Frank Buckland, Esq. [Clarence] Bartlett Esq. of the Zoological Gardens, Regent's Park, and Charles Zoenrach [sic – Jamrach], all noted naturalists'.¹⁹ While menagerists took different approaches, humanitarians, veterinary surgeons and members of the public also weighed into the debate, drawing on both personal and professional experience. Mr Harvey, the prosecution's star witness, insisted that he had seen one of the snakes in the menagerie take hold of a dead rabbit in its cage and 'bolt it'. Veterinary surgeon Mr Dobie asserted that he, too, had witnessed snakes being fed on dead meat, though not in this particular show.²⁰ Though Dobie's testimony was inconclusive, his appearance on the witness stand illustrates the growing status of veterinarians and their increasing importance in cruelty cases, where they often served as expert witnesses.²¹ In 1878, for instance, veterinary surgeon James Pulling Heath testified before magistrates in Exeter that a ring in the upper lip of a dancing bear 'must cause the animal pain', the area being 'very sensitive'.²² The competing views of keepers, humanitarians and men of science thus came into conflict in the Liverpool case and would remain a key element of the snake-feeding controversy in the following decades, when the scandal migrated from the menagerie to the zoo.²³

Lastly, the Liverpool snake-feeding case posed important questions about zoological classification – at least from a legal perspective. According to the 1835 Animal Cruelty Act, mistreatment of 'any horse, mare, gelding, bull, ox, cow, heifer, steer and pig or any other domestic animal' was forbidden, and could be prosecuted.²⁴ Wild animals,

¹⁶ Jennifer McDonnell, 'Representing animals in the literature of Victorian Britain', in Howell and Kean, op. cit. (8), pp. 222–50, 231–2; Cronin, *Art for Animals*, p. 84.

¹⁷ V.A.C. Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People 1770–1868*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 56–89.

¹⁸ 'Serpent feeding in a menagerie', *Manchester Times*, 1 January 1870, p. 3.

¹⁹ 'Serpents feeding at a menagerie', *Liverpool Mercury*, 5 January 1870, p. 7.

²⁰ 'Feeding serpents on live rabbits', op. cit. (12).

²¹ Abigail Woods, 'Animals in the history of human and veterinary medicine', in Howell and Kean, op. cit. (8), pp. 147–70.

²² 'Cruelty to a bear', *Western Times*, 4 July 1878, p. 2.

²³ Oliver Hochadel, 'Watching exotic animals next door: "scientific" observations at the zoo (ca. 1870–1910)', *Science in Context* (2011) 24(2), pp. 183–214.

²⁴ Great Britain Parliament, *An Act to Consolidate and Amend the Several Laws Relating to the Cruel and Improper Treatment of Animals* (1835).

however, stood outside the law, and their status was more slippery. If baited by dogs, they were eligible for protection. If hunted, starved or trained to perform, their legal position was less clear, and depended on the whims of individual magistrates. In 1874, for instance, when the RSPCA prosecuted menagerist Harriet Edmonds and keeper Frederick Hewitt for making hyenas leap through burning hoops, magistrate Mr Bruce at Leeds Borough Court dismissed the case, on the grounds that 'if you asked anybody who understood the English language and who was not a lawyer, what was a domestic animal, the answer would not include a lion or a panther or a hyena'.²⁵ In 1896, in a case involving cruelty to a dancing bear, the magistrate quizzed a witness at length on the behaviour of the animal, asking, 'Is it friendly with you and the people in the house?' 'Do the children play with it?' 'Do you feed it occasionally?' He concluded, based on the answers ('Yes', 'Yes', and 'we give it bits of bread'), that the bear was sufficiently tame to qualify for protection, fining its owner ten shillings.²⁶ Together, these cases exposed the fuzziness of the law, and the ambiguous biological criteria used to assess domesticity or wildness. The Liverpool prosecution was thus part of a wider movement to expand the remit of animal cruelty legislation, which saw 'experts' of different stripes reflect on the nature of different species – in this case rabbits and snakes.

Horrors in Regent's Park

The snake-feeding debate lay dormant for much of the 1870s, but erupted again in the 1880s with a fresh round of recriminations. The target this time was not a travelling menagerie, but London Zoo, Britain's premier zoological institution. The point of contention was the weekly feeding of the establishment's reptiles, which took place every Friday afternoon at the reptile house – allegedly in full public view. Unlike the Liverpool case, the second round of the snake-feeding controversy played out not in court, but in the pages of the press, which both sides exploited to convey their respective arguments. The debate began in private, with an exchange of letters between Philip Lutley Sclater, secretary of the Zoological Society, and John Colam, secretary of the RSPCA. It culminated in print, in a series of lengthy articles in the RSPCA's monthly magazine, the *Animal World*, in the spring and summer of 1881 (Figure 1).

The RSPCA made its first moves against the zoo in 1876, when Colam opened his correspondence with Sclater.²⁷ The RSPCA's secretary had heard that live feeding was going on in the reptile house (opened 1849), and appealed to his counterpart in the Zoological Society to put a stop to it, partly on welfare grounds, partly on grounds of public decency. This appeal was met with frosty defiance from Sclater, who responded with five statements in defence of the practice, specifically:

- (1) that there is no cruelty in the practice conducted under his direction in the reptile-house every week during feeding-time; (2) that there is no attempt made by the management to attract persons to the gardens, by advertising the feeding time in the reptile-house, and by making such occasions sensational as shows; (3) that the serpents living in the reptile-house cannot be kept in health unless living prey be given to them; (4) that it is necessary for educational and scientific purposes to preserve ophidians in menageries; and (5) that this spectacle of serpent-feeding in

²⁵ 'Singular charge of cruelty in a menagerie', *Leeds Mercury*, 5 December 1874, p. 3.

²⁶ 'Gross cruelty to a performing bear', *Illustrated Police News*, 26 September 1896, p. 6.

²⁷ Letter from John Colam to Philip Lutley Sclater, 30 April 1881, ZSL Archives, SEC/7/3/16. There had been some intermittent criticism of live feeding at the zoo in earlier decades, but the RSPCA only took up the issue in the mid-1870s. See Hall, *op. cit.* (3), pp. 349–53.

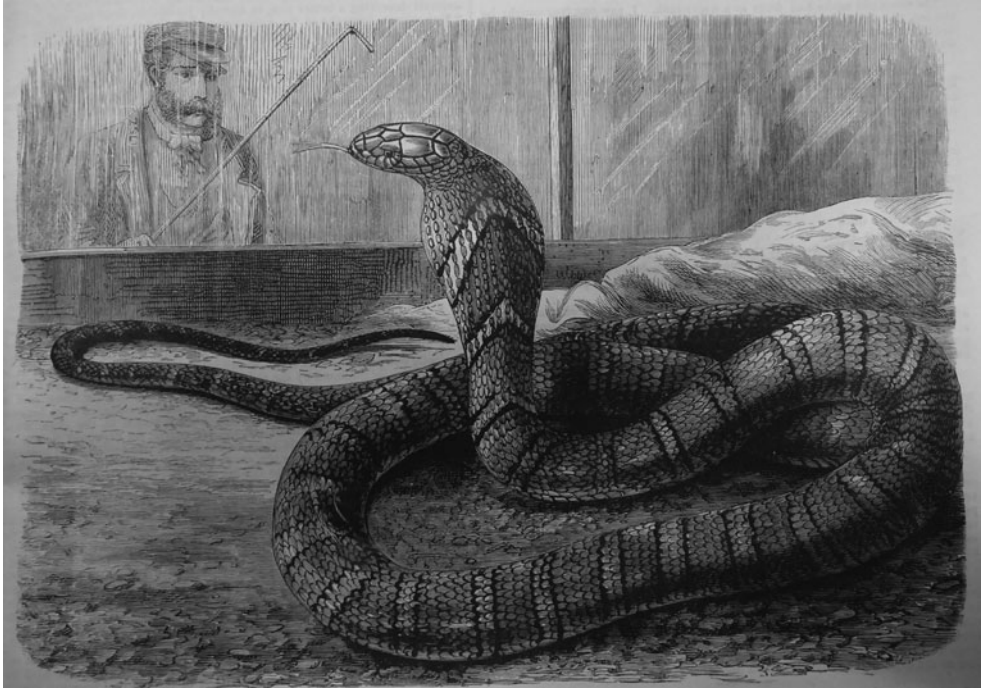


Figure 1. The hamadryad snake, 'Serpents and serpent feeding III', *Animal World*, April 1881, pp. 49–52, 49.

the reptile-house is not repulsive and demoralising, but is a reasonable and desirable source of healthy amusement to children and young persons.

The RSPCA sought to discredit each of these claims, and, to that end, marshalled a 'bulky' collection of evidence, drawn from letters sent to the society by concerned zoo-goers. The result was a long, detailed, refutation of Sclater's assertions, supported by a stomach-churning stream of eyewitness observations.²⁸

Addressing, to begin with, Sclater's claim that feeding snakes with live prey was not cruel, the RSPCA retaliated with a barrage of empirical accounts relating behaviours indicative of pain and distress. One observer described how he saw three snakes simultaneously attack a live frog, which 'was screaming with all its might', before one of the serpents 'swallowed it alive'. Another related the fate of a young guinea pig, which was struck by a puff adder on the left cheek' and 'squeaked and ran round the cage ... pawing the part with its hind foot'. A third recounted how three ducks were fed to each of the three West African pythons, which 'seized' and 'instantly encircled' them, causing them to defecate before dying from 'downright exhaustion, slow pressure and suffocation'. All these extracts – thirty-seven in total – emphasized the pain and fear suffered by the creatures placed in the reptiles' cage, providing a grimly monotonous recitation of cruelty.²⁹

As in the Liverpool case, a recurring element within the accounts published by the RSPCA was the protracted nature of the killing. This was viewed as tantamount to 'torture' – a word used explicitly by some observers – and gave the impression that the

²⁸ 'Serpents and serpent feeding III', op. cit. (1), p. 49.

²⁹ 'Serpents and serpent feeding III', op. cit. (1), pp. 50–1.

snakes were playing with their prey, prolonging its suffering. In one instance a frog was reportedly 'about ten minutes in the jaws' of a garter snake, 'alive and struggling terribly'; in another a large python 'killed a duck, which took about thirty-five minutes to die in terrible agony'. A third observer detailed with scientific precision the plight of a guinea pig, which struggled for over twenty minutes within a snake's coils:

I saw one snake ... fix a guinea pig with its body, holding the guinea pig as in a vice: this occurred at 6.10pm, and the cries of the poor guinea pig were simply sickening ... The guinea pig continued squeaking till 6.22pm (twelve minutes by my watch), until it was utterly exhausted in its endeavours to free itself from its tormenter.

The drawn-out character of the suffering drew inevitable comparisons with the other hot topic of the day, vivisection, which likewise saw animals subjected to repeated painful experiments in the name of science (and which was subject to new regulations from 1876). As one writer in the *Animal World* remarked, 'Slaughter-house torture is brief and tolerable compared to this, which is as repugnant as vivisection'.³⁰

Having established that live feeding was indeed cruel, the RSPCA went on to tackle Sclater's third point – that the practice was necessary. Writing in *The Times*, Sclater had insisted that snakes, 'according to the long experience of those who keep them in captivity, will not, in the majority of cases, feed at all except upon living food'.³¹ The RSPCA, however, disputed this claim, citing several instances in which snakes had been seen to consume freshly killed prey without ill effects. A spectator reported on one occasion, 'Some of the animals given for food were apparently half killed just before they were put in, such as sparrows, mice, rats, etc., being able just to move for upwards of two or three minutes, and then they died, and were generally eaten'. Another witness stated that a keeper separated an anaconda from the live rabbit it was struggling to ingest, 'killed the rabbit and gave it to the reptile, which took it and soon commenced to eat it'. In both cases the observers questioned the keepers about their intervention, but received evasive responses. The first man was told that snakes 'prefer live animals; but as they have a tank of water in their cages, their prey might get into the water and drown themselves if not nipped a bit before being put in, and then the serpents would not eat them'. The second, 'anxious to know whether this was to be the inauguration of a new plan in feeding', 'tried to elicit information from the keeper', but was informed, 'I cannot give you any information', and, after further prompting, 'We follow God's laws and ordinances, and they must be right'.³² Snakes thus clearly ate dead prey on occasions, but the practice of pre-killing their food was only adopted in specific circumstances.

If the evidence for the necessity of live feeding was inconclusive, another aspect of the feeding process was indisputably repulsive, namely the fact that it took place in full public view. In a conversation with John Colam, Sclater had protested that 'there is no attempt made by the management to attract persons to the gardens by advertising the feeding time in the reptile-house and by making such occasions sensational as shows'.³³ Whether advertised or not, however, nothing was done to prevent the public from watching the grisly spectacle, and the RSPCA claimed that one had only to knock on the door of the house at feeding time to be admitted. One visitor stated, 'There were 116 present' during one feeding session, 'including 20 children'; a second counted 'fifty-nine men and

³⁰ 'Serpents and serpent feeding III', op. cit. (1), p. 50. On the rise of the anti-vivisection movement, see Guerrini, op. cit. (2), pp. 70–92.

³¹ 'Feeding the reptiles in the zoological gardens', *The Times*, 19 August 1880, p. 10.

³² 'Serpents and serpent feeding III', op. cit. (1), p. 51.

³³ 'Serpents and serpent feeding V', *Animal World*, June 1881, pp. 82–3, 82.

forty-seven women ... accompanied by twenty-seven male and female children'. While some of those present reacted with disgust to what they saw, fainting, voicing objections or averting their eyes, many others appeared to revel in the action, even cheering on the snakes as they cornered their prey. One witness reported that he 'heard shouts of enjoyment, and offers to wager on certain snakes killing or seizing prey within a certain time; and from these people I heard what I may call a "murmur of applause" when any snake made a clever seizure'. Such unseemly behaviour raised concerns of moral corruption, particularly in relation to children. As another horrified spectator reflected,

Could one wonder if these children should afterwards be found pulling off flies' legs, stoning frogs or leaving callow birds to die which they had intended to feed ... eventually growing up with a craving for cock-fighting and to be present at a hanging?³⁴

Far from being a 'reasonable and healthy source of amusement' for children, the live feeding of snakes thus had the potential to brutalize younger viewers and to inure them to other forms of violence.

Two further aspects of live feeding generated particular concern, and help us to understand why the practice attracted such high levels of revulsion. First was the fact that the snakes' prey could not escape. Most Victorians accepted the inevitability of prey species succumbing to their predators. Stacking the deck so shamelessly in favour of the predator, however, violated the sense of fair play so dear to the Victorian big-game hunter and deprived the birds and rodents placed in the snakes' den of agency – something many observers regarded as both cruel and unnatural.³⁵ When a duck managed to wrestle its way free from the coils of a python, for instance, a distraught spectator lamented that 'the cage made escape after release impossible, else the bird might have taken wing'. Watching a different feeding episode, another observer condemned the unequal nature of the contest and specifically denounced the human contrivances that tilted it in the snakes' favour:

If the snakes had been at large on the banks of the Regent's Park Canal, and the ducks had been attacked by them there, I should have had no feelings of distress. The great mystery of suffering in this world, the strong preying upon the weak, must ever frighten and torment one; but in its wild state every animal has its chance of escape. Here, by the hand of man, were four helpless ducks, placed without any loophole of escape – the flying, the swimming, the diving, which might have helped them if attacked in their own element, avail them nothing now.³⁶

The constraints placed upon the snakes' living dinner thus undermined the natural dynamics of the contest between predator and prey, depriving the animals of agency.

The second aspect of snake feeding that provoked outrage was its perceived subversion of zoological hierarchies. Described variously as 'tormentors', 'horrid creatures' and 'cruel monsters', snakes had a bad reputation and were widely viewed as more primitive life forms than the warm-blooded rabbits, guinea pigs and pigeons that they ingested.³⁷

³⁴ 'Serpents and serpent feeding III', op. cit. (1), pp. 50–1.

³⁵ For a discussion of contemporary hunting practices see John MacKenzie, *The Empire of Nature: Hunting, Conservation and British Imperialism*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988, pp. 167–99.

³⁶ 'Serpents and serpent feeding III', op. cit. (1), p. 51.

³⁷ 'Serpents and serpent feeding III', op. cit. (1). There are important parallels here with vivisection, where experimentation on 'lower' animals such as frogs generated less concern than experimentation on cats and dogs. See Paul S. White, 'The experimental animal in Victorian Britain', in Lorraine Daston and Gregg Mitman, *Thinking with Animals: New Perspectives on Anthropomorphism*, New York: Columbia University Press,

Several commentators duly suggested that the zoo should dispense with snakes altogether if they could not improve their grisly table manners, placing their right to life below that of their mammalian prey. One critic remarked, 'If the serpents cannot live on food already dead', then 'a stuffed snake' would provide 'as good an illustration of its kind as our duty and principles of humanity ought to allow us to show'.³⁸ A second, comparing the zoo's reptiles with the recently departed African elephant, Jumbo (whose sale financed the construction of a new Reptile House in 1883), insisted,

The presence in the Gardens of so noble, so grand, so eminently sagacious a being as Jumbo, is of far more importance to the instruction and edification of numerous spectators than can be any number of boa constrictors and other useless and horri-fying monsters of the serpent species, which, moreover, are (*horresco refrens*) fed with living beings *far higher in organisation than themselves*.³⁹

That the perceived low status of snakes was central to the opposition to live feeding is further reinforced by the contrasting perception of two other species which also engaged in predatory behaviour at London Zoo: Sally the chimpanzee and the institution's seals. The former, a popular favourite at the zoo between 1883 and 1891, had a penchant for catching her own dinner: 'If a small bird were let fly in her cage, she would adroitly catch it as it flew past her, bite off the head and eat it, skin and feathers included'. She even subsisted on young pigeons for several months, before adopting the 'more civilised' diet of 'cooked mutton and beef tea'.⁴⁰ Despite her carnivorous tendencies, however, nobody criticized Sally's feeding habits or suggested that a stuffed chimpanzee would suffice in her place. This was undoubtedly because Sally was a primate, closely related to humans, and clearly above her avian and rodent prey in the zoological pecking order. As for the seals, contemporary accounts suggest that they too subsisted on a diet of live fish (as, apparently, did some pelicans and storks), but again the practice of live feeding appears to have been relatively uncontroversial among the public, attracting none of the outrage levelled at the snakes.⁴¹ One lone critic, the ornithologist Francis Orpen Morris, wrote to the RSPCA in 1871 to question the 'necessity of feeding the seals with live fish, especially as they have to be put down their throats ... one by one', but his complaint generated little interest, and received no reply.⁴² Feeding live fish to seals was therefore acceptable in a way that feeding live birds and rabbits to snakes was not.

The early 1880s thus witnessed a renewed and more sustained attack on the practice of live feeding and built upon the arguments already mooted in Liverpool in 1869. Whereas the Liverpool case played out in the courts, the campaign against London Zoo was conducted by means of private correspondence and articles in the press, seeking to change public opinion rather than to secure a conviction against an individual. The overall aim of the campaign remained the same, however, and the key points of contention were revived and elaborated. Did prey species experience pain and distress? Could snakes survive on dead meat? What was the likely impact on spectators of witnessing such brutality? Did the feeding of cold-blooded snakes with warm-blooded mammals and birds contravene zoological hierarchies?

2005, pp. 59–82. On negative attitudes towards reptiles in zoos see Hall, *op. cit.* (3), p. 339; and Flack, *op. cit.* (3), p. 129.

³⁸ 'Cruelty in the zoological gardens', *Animal World*, February 1870, p. 95.

³⁹ 'Jumbo', *Animal World*, March 1884, p. 36, added emphasis.

⁴⁰ 'Sally the chimpanzee', *Animal World*, November 1891, pp. 164–5.

⁴¹ 'The menu at the zoo', *Morning Post*, 31 August 1897, p. 6.

⁴² 'The zoological gardens', *Animal World*, June 1871, p. 143.

The protracted debate over live feeding at London Zoo also extended the discussion of authority and expertise that had begun in Liverpool, with commentators offering differing opinions as to whether the practice was (a) cruel and (b) necessary. Several classes of people contributed to this debate, from zoo directors to members of the RSPCA, all claiming possession of different types of knowledge. Importantly, members of the public also offered crucial testimony, acting as independent witnesses of what happened in the reptile house. The volume and detail of these accounts helped to clinch the argument for the RSPCA, and was the result, in part, of a plea from the latter for observers ‘to be exact in their observations’, providing precise and incontrovertible evidence and avoiding accusations of sentimentality.⁴³ The voices of zookeepers also feature in some of these accounts, though often as reluctant commentators. Opinion thus remained divided as to the nature and necessity of live feeding, but the debate had become more intense, more public and more sophisticated than it was in 1869.

‘Down pythons throats we thrust live goats’: from public obscenity to private hell

The public feeding of snakes at London Zoo came to an end in 1883 in response to pressure from the RSPCA. Live feeding, however, persisted – now behind closed doors – and this precipitated a third phase of the debate, in which humanitarians lobbied to end the practice completely. The main protagonists in this renewed controversy were the Humanitarian League, founded by Henry Salt, and the new secretary of the Zoological Society, Peter Chalmers Mitchell, who succeeded Sclater in 1903. As in 1881, the debate took place through the medium of private correspondence, emotive articles and letters in the press, though the tone of discussions was more acrimonious than it had been two decades earlier, and relations between the two protagonists notably chillier. This reflected the more radical character of the Humanitarian League, which, unlike the moderate RSPCA, promoted vegetarianism, opposed vivisection and hunting and campaigned vociferously against corporal and capital punishment.⁴⁴

The issue of live feeding came to public attention in September 1902, when T.W. Hitchmough visited London Zoo (Figure 2). Hitchmough wandered past the Reptile House, where he spotted ‘a big box with a wire top ... full of live rats’ and a ‘series of rabbit hutches’. He then heard a ‘plaintive cry’ as a ‘small goat of friendly disposition’ came running up to the wire fencing of its enclosure, eager to be ‘petted’. While Hitchmough was busy ‘scratch[ing] the little fellow’s head’ a keeper passed by, and Hitchmough asked him, ‘What are these chaps kept here for?’ The keeper proceeded to tell him that ‘the big python gets them’, that he killed them himself, and that it was not a quick death, for ‘[t]he python hasn’t much room to move about, so perhaps he only gets one coil round, and that grip forces out the entrails and breaks the goat’s ribs’. This statement shocked Hitchmough, who, after steadying his nerves with a ‘drop of brandy’, addressed a strongly worded letter to the *Free Lance* magazine calling for readers to ‘help stop what seems to me to be wanton cruelty in the Zoological Gardens’.⁴⁵

Hitchmough’s cause was swiftly taken up by the Humanitarian League, which published his letter in its journal and contacted the Duke of Bedford, president of the ZSL, for comment.⁴⁶ The duke declined to reply for three months, but the league eventually elicited the ambiguous response that ‘the use of living animals ... as food for the inmates of

⁴³ ‘Serpents and serpent feeding IV’, *Animal World*, May 1881, p. 66.

⁴⁴ On the more radical agenda of the Humanitarian League see Dan Weinbren, ‘Against all cruelty: the Humanitarian League, 1891–1919’, *History Workshop* (1994) 38, pp. 86–105.

⁴⁵ ‘Cruelty at the zoo’, *The Humanitarian*, October 1902, p. 63.

⁴⁶ Letter from Henry Salt to the Duke of Bedford, 18 October 1902, ZSL Archives, SEC/7/18/8.



Figure 2. 'A London snake charmer', *All about Animals* (London: George Newnes Ltd, 1898), p. 138.

the Society's Reptile House is confined to cases in which such diet is a necessity, and in these cases all care is taken to avoid any unnecessary suffering'.⁴⁷ Taking this as an admission that live feeding did occur, Salt pushed to have it banned, or at least regulated, suggesting that an officer of the RSPCA be present during feeding times to ensure no gratuitous cruelty took place.⁴⁸

In June 1903 Chalmers Mitchell announced that live feeding had ended, and that 'in future the reptiles will, as far as possible, be fed on freshly-killed rabbits and pigeons'.⁴⁹ Just three years later, however, the issue surfaced again when a report appeared in *The Tribune* alleging that 'on a recent occasion a live goat was given to the python'.⁵⁰ Angry at the apparent resumption of live feeding – and suspicious that the practice had never really stopped – the Humanitarian League fired off another series of letters to

⁴⁷ 'Snake-feeding at the zoological gardens', *The Humanitarian*, March 1903, p. 101.

⁴⁸ 'The new method of snake-feeding', *The Humanitarian*, September 1903, p. 147.

⁴⁹ 'The zoological society and its snakes', *The Humanitarian*, August 1903, p. 139.

⁵⁰ 'Snake feeding at the zoological gardens', *The Humanitarian*, December 1906, p. 94.

the Zoological Society, this time targeting Chalmers Mitchell. The latter's evasive reply convinced Salt that the rumours were true and prompted him to escalate the debate, raising donations to pay for advertisements in major newspapers.⁵¹

In June 1907, still dissatisfied with the ZSLs 'official secrecy', the league persuaded MP George Greenwood to raise the issue in Parliament, where he received a reply from the Home Secretary: 'Live prey is never given to serpents that will accept dead prey'.⁵² This was followed by a hostile meeting of the Zoological Society in January 1908, in which Rowland Hunt and Captain Alfred Carpenter expressed their objections to live feeding, and were met with sneers of derision.⁵³ In March, reports circulated in the press that live feeding had ended, whereupon Greenwood wrote to Chalmers Mitchell to confirm that this was true. The latter's angry silence was interpreted by the Humanitarian League as evidence that some snakes were still receiving live prey (most likely the venomous ones). The snake-feeding controversy only receded from the scene in 1911, when the ZSL recommenced feeding its reptiles in public every Friday afternoon – this time with dead prey. Allegations of occasional live feeding in private rumbled on until 1919, when the Humanitarian League was disbanded, but the issue gradually dropped out of the headlines.

The final instalment of the snake-feeding debate reprised many of the themes from the 1880s, but also introduced some new elements. The Humanitarian League was more radical than the RSPCA and less tentative in its dealings with the ZSL, which made for less courteous negotiations (though some of its members, among them Miss S.S. Monro, had participated in the earlier debate). The fact that snake feeding was no longer public, moreover, gave rise to rumour and conjecture, stoking mistrust between the two sides. 'We have met with much evasiveness at different times from persons who have desired to shield certain practices from publicity', remarked Salt, 'but never in our experience have we had to deal with such Protean gentlemen as these custodians of the reptiles at the "Zoo". They are as slippery as their own snakes'.⁵⁴ A detailed look at some of the arguments put forward for and against live feeding in the Edwardian period reveals both change and continuity in a now well-worn discourse, and shows how the protagonists reworked old critiques to fit new circumstances. Three facets of the debate stand out as especially significant: the clandestine nature of early twentieth-century snake feeding, the old question whether live feeding was necessary, and the prickly issue of who was best qualified to pronounce on ophidian dietary needs.

One stark difference between snake feeding in 1881 and snake feeding in 1903 was that the latter occurred in private. Rather than diminishing its cruelty, however, this increased it in the eyes of the Humanitarian League, which feared that greater brutality might be inflicted on the snakes' living prey now that their death was no longer subject to the public gaze. Writing in 1909, for instance, one critic argued that the hidden nature of contemporary feeding was its most sinister aspect:

So long as the throwing of the victims into the cages of the serpents and other reptiles was done publicly, there was some possibility that fear of exposure might have some influence to deter the aggravation or callousness on the part of the keepers. Secrecy, irresponsibility, and immunity from public censure, all the world over leave the doors open to the widest extent for every degree and form of callousness and cruelty.⁵⁵

⁵¹ 'Snake-feeding at the "zoo"', *The Humanitarian*, January 1907, p. 102.

⁵² 'The zoological society and its snakes', *The Humanitarian*, June 1907, pp. 1–4, 1.

⁵³ 'Snake feeding at the "zoo"', *The Humanitarian*, January 1908, p. 2.

⁵⁴ 'The zoological society and its snakes', op. cit. (52), p. 3.

⁵⁵ 'Snake-feeding at the "zoo"', *The Humanitarian*, January 1909, p. 102.

The Humanitarian League thus feared that by shifting snake feeding away from the public arena the zoo had merely removed the tempering influence of surveillance. To counter this move, it proposed employing RSPCA inspectors to monitor feeding and giving the Zoological Society 'a plentiful dose of that wholesome publicity which is the only cure for cruelty in dark places'.⁵⁶

The emphasis on hidden cruelty correlated closely with the wider concerns of the Humanitarian League, which campaigned against vivisection, capital punishment, private slaughterhouses and the mistreatment of performing animals – all forms of abuse conducted behind closed doors. In the case of vivisection, league member Louise Lind-af-Hageby published harrowing details of experiments performed on dogs, cats and rabbits by lecturers at King's College London – including one on a small brown terrier who, despite regulations to the contrary, had been vivisected on more than one occasion. Reflecting on the cruelty perpetrated on animals in this semi-public forum, she meditated on what greater abuses might occur in the seclusion of the laboratory: 'What about the careless, incomplete and private?'⁵⁷ In the case of circus animals, the concern was that the latter were subjected to repeated beatings behind the scenes to make them perform, experiencing sustained abuse at the hands of their owners. This, once again, was confirmed by a series of chilling exposés, in which the private was rendered public. In 1898, for instance, Joseph Simpson, consulting engineer to the Empire Theatre, Blackpool, witnessed extreme cruelty to a performing bear, who was 'thrashed unmercifully with a heavy whip' during rehearsals 'until its cries of agony could be heard all over the building'.⁵⁸ Where the RSPCA and other reforming organizations in the mid-nineteenth century had focused on public cruelty – in the menagerie, in the cattle market or on the scaffold – the Humanitarian League concentrated on private cruelty, which, though less raucous, might be just as repugnant.⁵⁹

A second aspect of the renewed snake-feeding debate was the old question whether the methods used in the zoological garden were natural and/or necessary – with the emphasis now more firmly on the former. For humanitarians, the essentially unnatural conditions imposed by captivity distorted the behaviour of snakes so much that they were unable to dispatch their prey quickly. Rather than continuing to sacrifice innocent goats to sickly reptiles, therefore, it would make better sense to exhibit the latter dead, in poses that more accurately resembled how they behaved in the wild. As Admiral W.R. Kennedy explained in 1911,

The answer to those who claim that snakes must be fed on live things is simple. Give them dead meat, and if they won't eat it (but they will, rather than starve), kill the snakes. They would look just as well stuffed, as they are usually coiled up in a torpid state of no more interest than a coil of rope.⁶⁰

For those who liked snakes, and wanted to see living specimens, such a remedy was not acceptable. Edmund Selous, a renowned ornithologist and elsewhere a fierce critic of zoological gardens, dissented from the Humanitarian League on this matter, on the grounds that '[t]here is no sense, in my opinion, in keeping snakes, except to study their habits,

⁵⁶ 'Snake-feeding at the "zoo"', op. cit. (51), p. 102.

⁵⁷ Louise Lind-af-Hageby and Leisa Katherina Schartau, *The Shambles of Science: Extracts from the Diary of Two Students of Physiology*, London: Earnest Bell, 1903, pp. 139–48.

⁵⁸ 'The training of stage bears', *Animals' Friend*, 1899, p. 189.

⁵⁹ In the case of hanging, Gatrell argues that moving the scaffold inside the prison in 1868 did nothing to alleviate the suffering of the condemned, who may well have derived comfort from the presence of the crowd. See Gatrell, op. cit. (17), p. 590.

⁶⁰ 'Snake feeding', *The Humanitarian*, November 1911, p. 183.

and those habits, in their entirety, I claim a right to study'. Writing in 1909, meanwhile, after the shift to dead prey, reptile owner Mary Cadogan claimed that both reticulated pythons in the Regent's Park menagerie had expired, 'victims', she surmised, of 'the absurd fiat that has gone forth consequent on the agitation against feeding reptiles with live animals'.⁶¹ This view was seconded by naturalist Frederick Aflalo, who questioned whether 'the death of the big pythons is wholly due to the cold, or whether inadequate methods of feeding, regrettably forced on the authorities by public opinion (which knows better than God how reptiles should take their food), have also had their share in the abnormal death-toll'.⁶²

As Aflalo's reference to God suggests, this debate sometimes took on a religious tone, especially when participants weighed up the moral implications of supplying snakes with live prey. Defenders of live feeding argued that it was God's will that snakes eat their prey alive, and therefore man's duty to facilitate this. One, using the pseudonym 'Anna Conda', sent a telegram to the ZSL in 1908 urging them to 'stand firm for live food and maintain the ordinances of the creator'.⁶³ A second, the aforementioned Mary Cadogan, complained that the Zoological Society was being 'ruled by a panel of old women, who set themselves up as knowing better than the good God, Creator of all, who allotted to each its appointed food'.⁶⁴ Humanitarians, by contrast, believed that man's primary duty was to the goats, rabbits and guinea pigs fed alive to reptiles, contending that actively providing snakes with living victims was going well beyond God's will. Most insistent on this point was Stephen Coleridge, president of the National Antivivisection Society, who likened giving live goats to pythons to providing female victims to Victorian Britain's most notorious serial killer:

The great Master mind ordained the good Lord Shaftesbury and Jack the Ripper, the alligator and Mr William H. Owen [author of a recent letter in support of live feeding] ... For myself, I do not think the great Master mind intended me to assist Jack the Ripper to his victims, the alligator to his human prey, nor the python to his live goat.⁶⁵

God might have decreed that snakes should subsist on live prey, but he had certainly not decreed that man should supply them with that prey in an environment in which the usual laws of nature were suspended. This was a more sophisticated version of the arguments made in 1881 about the relative ability of both predator and prey to exercise their agency by effecting a quick kill or escaping.

Finally, as happened in 1869 and 1881, the issue of expertise undergirded the entire debate, with contributors on both sides asserting their right to enter the discussion. Chalmers Mitchell based his defence of occasional live feeding on biological evidence, citing a 'scientific memoir' published in the Proceedings of the Zoological Society as proof that 'only men and monkeys have an instinctive fear of snakes' – hence rabbits, guinea pigs and goats could be fed to the latter without suffering psychological torture.⁶⁶ Salt, conversely, cited the experience of two foreign zoological professionals, Bronx Zoo director William T. Hornaday and Hamburg animal dealer Carl Hagenbeck, to prove that the feeding of dead prey was both viable and desirable.⁶⁷ A 1903 article in the *New York*

⁶¹ 'The secret of the reptile house', *The Humanitarian*, June 1909, p. 144.

⁶² 'The secret of the reptile house', *The Humanitarian*, August 1909, p. 165.

⁶³ 'Snake feeding at the "zoo"', op. cit. (53), p. 3.

⁶⁴ 'The secret of the reptile house', op. cit. (61), p. 144.

⁶⁵ 'The zoological society and its snakes', *The Humanitarian*, June 1907, pp. 3–4.

⁶⁶ 'The feeding of reptiles in captivity', *The Humanitarian*, October 1911, pp. 173–5, 174.

⁶⁷ 'The new method of snake-feeding', op. cit. (48), p. 147; 'The zoological society and its snakes', op. cit. (65), p. 3.

Times, for instance, described how the snakes under Hornaday's care dined on freshly killed rats, chickens and frogs (in part to protect the reptiles themselves from injury), though it admitted that the '27-foot python', Czarina, had to be force-fed once a fortnight by keepers to get her to accept the inanimate prey (Figure 3).⁶⁸ Perhaps inspired by these theoretical discussions, keepers at Bellevue Zoo, Manchester, conducted their own experiment on mammalian fear of snakes, introducing a 'rather unnaturally posed [stuffed] cobra' and then a 'lively boa constrictor' into the monkeys' cage and observing the primates' reactions. According to notes in a handwritten journal, the spider monkeys 'eyed [the fake snake] with mild wonder, nothing more', while an old male rhesus monkey 'thought of touching the [live] snake but dare not, and all this time his hands ... dithered with excitement, and he bared his teeth, and was around and in the wires above the reptile until we feared for the snake, which we removed'.⁶⁹ Zoologists, humanitarians and zookeepers thus made their own distinctive interventions into the feeding debate, drawing upon empirical observation to assess the necessity and welfare implications of feeding snakes with live prey.

One particularly interesting element of this long-standing tussle was the conflict between science and literature, which broadly mapped onto the battle between men of science and animal protectionists. Countering Chalmers Mitchell's 'scientific' assertion that only men and monkeys were instinctively scared of snakes, Salt referred the ZSL's secretary to 'Charles Dickens's letter (Forster's 'Life of Dickens' III, p. 136), in which a vivid description is given of the guinea-pig backing against the side of the cage, and of the five small sparrows shaking together "like dry leaves" when the serpent approached them'.⁷⁰ Chalmers Mitchell, however, refused to accept 'some purple passages from the writings of Charles Dickens' as 'evidence' that small animals experienced fear in the presence of snakes, insinuating that science trumped literature when it came to interpreting animal behaviour.⁷¹ While Chalmers Mitchell was unmoved by literary exposition, others embraced the written word, using poetry as a vehicle for changing public opinion. One animal lover penned a poem entitled *The Hymn of the Pious Reptile-Keepers*, which described, from a fictitious keeper's perspective, how 'Down pythons throats we thrust live goats, / Their natural food – oh rather!'.⁷² Another parodied Chalmers Mitchell's claim that non-primates had no innate fear of snakes by describing the supposed indifference of one 'Happy Guinea Pig' to being placed in a cage with a python:

So if you chance to see us, friend,
With shivering limbs and hair on end,
And all the signs of mortal fright,
Know that we tremble with delight,
And that our highest bliss is when,
We're thrust alive in python's den.⁷³

Literature was thus pitted against science in a public battle for hearts and minds – a move that foreshadowed many subsequent animal welfare campaigns.

⁶⁸ 'Feeding the snakes at the New York Zoological Park', *New York Times*, 26 April 1903, p. 34.

⁶⁹ *Animal Care Journal*, Belle Vue Gardens, Jennison Collection, Chetham's Library, Manchester, F.5.04, 25 May 1910.

⁷⁰ 'The feeding of reptiles in captivity', op. cit. (66), p. 174.

⁷¹ 'The feeding of reptiles in captivity', op. cit. (66), p. 175.

⁷² 'The hymn of the pious reptile-keepers', *The Humanitarian*, June 1907, p. 137.

⁷³ 'The happy guinea pig', *The Humanitarian*, December 1911, p. 190.



Figure 3. 'Handling a python', New York Zoological Society, postcard, 1906.

Conclusion

The struggle over live feeding in British menageries was a protracted conflict that surfaced on several occasions between 1869 and 1914. On the face of it, it was a strange issue to attract so much attention: snake feeding, however repulsive, was a very niche concern, and paled into insignificance in comparison to other much more prolific abuses. Despite its limited extent, however, live feeding generated a disproportionate amount of press coverage and preoccupied animal welfare campaigners for half a century. Why did the practice elicit so much opposition, what other concerns did it speak to, and what can the debate surrounding it tell us about changing attitudes towards animals?

First, the snake-feeding debate illustrated the shifting focus of Victorian and Edwardian animal advocacy. In the 1860s and 1870s the emphasis was on cruelty in travelling menageries. In the 1880s the focus moved to London Zoo, where the public feeding of snakes with live prey drew fire from the RSPCA. In the 1900s, the private feeding of snakes with live goats angered the more radical Humanitarian League, which called for the practice to be terminated altogether. The different methods employed by humanitarians to counter live feeding also reflected the different standing of the institutions in which it took place. Edmunds, the menagerist, was prosecuted; London Zoo, the nation's premier zoological establishment, was criticized in the press – politely, in 1881, by the RSPCA, more robustly in 1903 and 1907, by the Humanitarian League.

Second, the evolving nature of the debate highlighted wider social anxieties and was connected to broader questions about the visibility of suffering. In the mid-nineteenth century, there was concern about the corrupting influence of witnessing violence, and a move to make such violence invisible – hence vivisection was removed from the public sphere, slaughterhouses were exiled to the suburbs and executions were moved behind prison gates. By the early twentieth century, however, the primary concern was hidden cruelty, and there was a fear that rendering cruelty invisible would make it less subject

to proper regulation. The changing feeding practices of snakes perfectly paralleled these developments, functioning as a proxy for deeper, and perhaps more contentious, social issues; the third round of the snake-feeding debate, for example, ran parallel with an upsurge of criticism of vivisection, sparked, in this instance, by the erection of a statue in Battersea to commemorate 'a Brown Terrier Dog Done to Death in the Laboratories of University College in February 1903'.⁷⁴ It is probably for this reason that what appears to be a very rare form of cruelty received so much attention from the RSPCA and (to an even greater extent) the Humanitarian League.

Third, the snake-feeding debate reflected the changing legal status of animals and evolving attitudes towards their suffering. Before 1900, wild animals were not officially protected under the law, which only covered domestic species. After 1900, however, the Cruelty to Wild Animals in Captivity Act made it an offence to cause any suffering to a captive wild animal or to 'cruelly abuse, infuriate, tease or terrify it', bringing bears, lions – and arguably snakes – within the remit of the statute.⁷⁵ As the wording of the Act indicates, psychological as well as physical cruelty was also now a cause for concern, hence the preoccupation with whether the goats and guinea pigs in the python's den experienced fear. Despite these advances, however, some forms of abuse remained beyond the scope of the law – notably canned hunting and vivisection – and animal welfare organizations lobbied to get these abolished. Snake feeding acted, once again, as a surrogate for some of these concerns, with caged guinea pigs suffering the same fate as carted deer and snakes playing the role of vivisectionists in their slow, clinical 'torture' of small mammals.

Fourth, the snake-feeding controversy offers an insight into the rival forms of expertise surrounding animal management in the nineteenth century, and the types of evidence used to support different feeding practices. Keepers and zoo directors emphasized their personal experience of snakes, based on years of close contact. Humanitarians, conversely, drew upon eyewitness accounts from members of the public and consulted practitioners at other zoos. As the debate progressed, it also assumed an international dimension, as actors on both sides summoned evidence of practice overseas to support their respective stances on the necessity of live feeding. The RSPCA, for instance, noted that live feeding had been abandoned at the Parisian Jardin des plantes in 1874, printing signed affidavits to this effect from the zoo's director, Dr E. Sauvage, and the institution's reptile keeper, Monsieur Doudey.⁷⁶ Two decades later British delegates attending the 1907 Zoological Congress in Boston visited Raymond Ditmars and Charles Snyder at the Bronx Zoo and quizzed them about their feeding methods (which, by this time, involved pre-killing the snakes' prey).⁷⁷ Knowledge was thus central to discussions about ophidian diets, though participants disagreed as to what kind of knowledge carried the most weight.

Finally, the snake-feeding debate highlights the existence of human-imposed hierarchies on the animal world, and their importance in determining the treatment of non-human species. Feeding live fish to a seal was comparatively unproblematic, because the predator was viewed as superior to the prey. Feeding live mammals to snakes, however, was repugnant, because it inverted these 'natural' hierarchies. These views reflected broader assumptions about the cognitive capabilities of animals, with higher mammals often deemed the most capable of experiencing pain, and reptiles, amphibians and fish ascribed a lower degree of sensitivity.⁷⁸ Though twentieth-century science has shifted

⁷⁴ Lansbury, op. cit. (2), pp. 3–25.

⁷⁵ 'The protection of wild animals', *Humanity*, August 1900, p. 59.

⁷⁶ 'Serpents and serpent feeding V', op. cit. (33), p. 82.

⁷⁷ 'Yankee snakes are not like British snakes', *New York Times*, 24 November 1907.

⁷⁸ John Simons, *Goldfish in the Parlour*, Sydney: University of Sydney Press, 2023, pp. 265–72.

the boundaries of these hierarchies, such assumptions continue to shape our attitudes towards other species and to influence debates about animal rights. They also continue to shape feeding practices in zoos, where the feeding of live vertebrate and cephalopod prey is now illegal in Britain, but the live feeding of invertebrates is still permitted.⁷⁹ The preoccupations of nineteenth-century humanitarians thus illuminate wider questions about our understandings of other species that remain pertinent to this day.

⁷⁹ Geoff Hosey, Vicky Melfi and Sheila Pankhurst, *Zoo Animals: Behaviour, Management and Welfare*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 434–5.

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