

Briefing note

Subject: Human health and animal welfare at Queen’s Park Petting Farm

Purpose

To provide evidence-based policy recommendations to the City of New Westminster regarding Queen’s Park Petting Farm for 2021.

Background

In recent years, public attitudes toward the keeping of animals – whether on farms, in zoos, or as pets – have been changing. Greater scientific understanding of animal behaviours and sentience has put the human/animal relationship under increased scrutiny. This has led to questions about the ethics of traditional expressions of that relationship, such as animal performances (e.g. circuses, rodeos) and exhibitions (e.g. zoos, aquariums).

Consequently, public support for traditional events and activities involving animals has declined, with the [closure](#) of once-popular circuses, [bans](#) on cetacean captivity and continuous controversy over [zoos](#), [rodeos](#) and other forms of animal display.

Petting zoos/farms also experience public criticism and scientific concern related to animal welfare, threats to public health and questionable educational value.

The below considerations examine these issues as they relate to the Queen’s Park Petting Farm in New Westminster.

Considerations

Animal welfare

A common concern about petting zoos is that they subject animals to stress by placing them in settings that allow them little or no escape from the attention of visitors for long periods of time. This attention can include unwanted petting, chasing and noise (shouting), along with the close physical proximity of crowds of visitors. The presence of inadequately supervised children can increase the likelihood of these stressors.

The field of animal behaviour science has established that animals feel fear acutely. Renowned animal behaviour scientist, Dr. Temple Grandin, [stated](#): “The single worst thing you can do to an animal emotionally is to make it feel afraid. Fear is so bad for animals, I think it’s worse than pain.” [Research](#) has shown that prey species, such as cattle, have an inherent fear of unfamiliar objects, situations, smells, sudden movements and noises. These factors are likely to be present in a petting zoo setting, which exposes animals to a stream of unfamiliar visitors, each moving unpredictably and making noise.

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A 2019 [study](#) summarizing research on the effect of visitors on zoo animals found that: “The majority of studies on this topic have concluded that the effects of visitors on animal behaviour and welfare can be interpreted as negative.” The study suggests that visitors can cause fear in animals that is damaging to their welfare, stating: “If visitors are perceived by zoo animals as fear provoking or stressful stimuli, long term exposure to visitors could be a source of repetitive acute or chronic stress.”

This evidence strongly suggests that animal welfare is likely to be compromised in petting zoos because of stress and fear caused by the presence of visitors.

Threats to human health

Numerous studies have identified petting zoos as potential sources of serious zoonotic diseases. The B.C government ([HealthLink B.C](#)) lists E. coli, Salmonella, Campylobacter, Giardia Cryptosporidium and Yersinia among the diseases that could be present at petting zoos.

One 2019 [study](#) has shown “that petting zoos can create a diverse reservoir of multidrug resistant (MDR) bacteria, which could lead to highly virulent drug-resistant pathogens being passed on to visitors.”

Another [study](#) also raised concerns about antibiotic-resistant pathogens emerging from petting zoos, stating: “Our findings highlight petting zoos as a source for antibiotic-resistant ESBL/AmpC-producing bacteria, including highly virulent, disease-associated MDR E. coli strains.”

Specific animals, such as goats (which are commonly present at petting zoos, including the Queen’s Park Petting Farm) can carry a [range of diseases](#) that are transmissible to humans.

Many of these studies recommend strict hygiene measures at petting zoos to mitigate the risk of disease transmission but these are dependent on strong education for visitors backed by constant enforcement and supervision, especially pertaining to children, which increases staffing costs.

Educational value

The educational value of zoos in general is highly [disputed](#), although there appears to be little research specific to petting zoos in this regard.

A 2014 [survey](#) of children visiting the London Zoo revealed that 62% of children showed no change in knowledge regarding new facts about animals or anything pertaining to environmental conservation. This suggests viewing animals at petting zoos may not be a useful educational experience for children.

Animal advocates also argue that petting zoos send the wrong message to children by perpetuating the notion that animals exist for our amusement, to be exploited and not respected as sentient beings.

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Petting zoos can teach the wrong lesson about consent and respect for boundaries, with one [writer](#) on parenting stating: “Debates around spectacles like petting zoos often center on how the animals are acting. If the goats and sheep are passive, adults interpret this as the animals “not minding” their predicament. The problem is, both animals and people may sometimes be passive not because they agree to physical touch but because passivity feels like their best defense... Consent only occurs when a person or animal has the option to say “no” without fear of repercussion.” In the case of a petting zoo, this would require a handler for each animal that is skilled in understanding that specific animal’s fear-based responses.

Coyote predation

As coyotes are [known](#) to be especially prevalent in the Queen's Park, there is a risk that animals at the petting farm will act as an attractant. This could not only put the animals at risk of predation but also create a public safety issue. In 2016, several coyote attacks on humans forced the [closure](#) of a petting zoo and park in Los Angeles. A local Fish & Wildlife official stated: “The petting zoo is surrounded by a high fence to prevent coyotes from getting in, but the smell of animals may be part of what lures coyotes to the park.”

Recommendation

Given the aforementioned changes in public attitudes concerning the animal-human relationship, it would be timely for New Westminster Parks and Recreation to reconsider the appropriateness of operating the Queen’s Park Petting Farm.

Parks and Recreation can take into account:

- The evidence that the petting zoo model compromises animal welfare by subjecting animals to fear and stress caused by the presence of visitors.
- The evidence that petting zoos are a source of zoonotic disease that represents a considerable threat to public health; including the related costs to mitigate this.
- The evidence that petting zoos may not provide a valuable educational experience and may instead encourage a lack of respect for animals and, more generally, for the boundaries of others; including the related costs to mitigate this.
- The potential for coyote predation of petting farm animals, which may also create a risk to public safety.

The Vancouver Humane Society believes that there are sufficient grounds for New Westminster Parks and Recreation to end the operation of the Queen’s Park Petting Farm and asks that the petting farm be closed at the earliest practical opportunity.

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References

[HealthLink BC - Petting Zoo and Open Farm Visits](#)

[Petting Zoo Animals as an Emerging Reservoir of Extended-Spectrum \$\beta\$ -Lactamase and AmpC-Producing Enterobacteriaceae, 2019](#)

[Observation of Practices at Petting Zoos and the Potential Impact on Zoonotic Disease Transmission, 2007](#)

[Farm Fairs and Petting Zoos: A Review of Animal Contact as a Source of Zoonotic Enteric Disease, 2017](#)

[Zoonotic Fecal Pathogens and Antimicrobial Resistance in Canadian Petting Zoos, 2018](#)

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[Article, eXtension Goat Community of Practice: What are some diseases goats can transmit to humans?, 2019](#)

[The Visitor Effect on Zoo Animals: Implications and Opportunities for Zoo Animal Welfare, 2019](#)

[Fact sheet, Zoo Animal Welfare Education Centre: Visitor Effect on Zoo Animals](#)

[The visitor effect in petting zoo-housed animals: Aversive or enriching?, 2014](#)

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