

No "Living Will" for species

What is a "Living Will" ? A Living Will is a legal mechanism or convention which enables an individual to declare in a special document signed by him or her, witnessed by two other individuals and documented by a Notary Public that, in the event he is incapacitated beyond reasonable hope of recovery, that he does NOT want to be put on life supports. Life supports include a variety of procedures such as artificial feeding, artificial breathing, etc. which require equipment and medical oversight. The "living will" was originated in western countries I imagine and is gaining more and more currency or popularity as time goes on. People want this because they don't want to be trapped in a body that can't move or speak, or even think, and/or they don't want their loved ones to be burdened with staggering hospital bills required to keep someone who is arguably "brain dead" alive in body. It is presumed that when the brain is not working, the body will give up eventually but maybe not for years. I don't know that the "spirit" is discussed in this context.

I and my parents both signed living wills and I was comfortable with that until recently when some science news announced that it is very possible that SOME comatose persons are not brain dead at all but simply can't express their thoughts and feelings. They can't speak, blink or give any other sign -- EXCEPT what can be read on a brain scanner. Two groups of individuals were thus tested by giving them some commands ... to think about climbing stairs, playing tennis, looking for a lost object, etc. Some of them did not show any reaction at all and these are supposed to be what are really brain dead. The others showed activity in their brain -- different areas for different commands, but the same areas that normal individuals showed when they were given the same commands! Some of those supposedly comatose people can hear and understand everything that is going on around them. They embody the worst nightmare ... buried alive. This new science might raise some questions about "vegetative state" and "living wills" as they continue to study comatose patients with ever evolving technology.

It is interesting to think of the "Living Will" in context with wildlife conservation. IUCN SSC has very rigid guidelines which have to be followed before a species can be declared completely extinct. A certain number of years have to pass with no sightings at all before Extinction is declared. Even with such guidelines, it happens that a species just re-appears all of a sudden.

Something more to think about is what happens to whatever remaining habitat there may be when a species of plant or animal which used to live there is declared extinct. I'll bet there are at least a few cases where greedy developers stomped in to finish the habitat, just like impatient relatives pull the plug to avoid crippling hospital bills.

Most conservationists are, or should be, kind of like a conservative doctor or loving family which doesn't want to make a hasty decision about their patient or loved one. And zoos have, or should do, a special role to play in this context. In Zoo Outreach Organisation we formulated an aphorism that "zoos give wild animals with no chance, a last chance" and had a slogan that "captive breeding can save a species". Others have since poached these sayings and, in truth, we just stopped using them because it was starting to look like it wasn't true. Particularly in the South Asian region where zoos are not in a position to cooperate with one another due to lack of understanding of cooperation and coordination. But in fact, global coordination has not been very successful anywhere. Only a very few species have been helped and that too at enormous cost. Whatever has been going wrong is too complex and embarrassing to describe here but it has now been recognised that zoos are not living up to that potential of saving species as such. A committee which was formed by CBSG many years ago (the old "Conservation Coordinators set up by Dr. Tom Foose was co-opted by IUDZG and made into CIRCC, Committee for inter-Regional Conservation Co-ordination. For some time CIRCC has been working on guidelines and policy for Global Species Management Programmes. Now this is ready and we are pleased to present it here. The following articles are 1) a report on CIRCC activities, including this document, and 2) the Global Species Management Program document itself.

Essentially it is a statement by zoos that they are not going to (symbolically) sign "living wills" for species! Not a bad thing that ! We hope that this new GSMP will inspire more and more of the world's zoos (particularly in high-biodiversity countries) to take up ex situ conservation more seriously with full knowledge of what is entailed, so that not just any random breeding, over-breeding, cross breeding, in breeding, etc. will be considered conservation. This document is a hopeful step forward. - Sally Walker

Committee for Inter-Regional Conservation Co-ordination (CIRCC)

Report: Leipzig, August 2006

WAZA's Committee for Inter-Regional Conservation Co-ordination (CIRCC) met twice this year, at Gonubie, South Africa in May and most recently in conjunction with the CBSG Annual Meeting in Halle, Germany in August 2006.

CIRCC has a history of small successes but is now poised to make a considerable contribution to conservation through establishing the **WAZA Global Species Management Program**. Committee Chair, Jonathan Wilcken, presented the outcome of the group's work at the WAZA Conference in Leipzig. This report is a summary of that presentation.