

**Human Zoos, Conservation Refugees, and the Houston Zoo's The African Forest**  
*By Shannon Joyce Prince*

The Houston Zoo has proudly announced a new project, The African Forest, which is set to open December 2010 if we don't halt it. According to the Zoo's website, The African Forest is not just about exhibiting "magnificent wildlife and beautiful habitats. It's about people, and the wonderful, rich cultures that we all can share." Actually, The African Forest is about exhibiting and teaching inaccurate Western conceptions of African indigenous cultures in a place designed to exhibit and teach about animals. The African Forest is also about making and keeping African indigenous peoples conservation refugees.

Fairs, exhibitions, and zoos that showcase, market, or teach about Africans and other non-white peoples as though they were animals are called "human zoos." Human zoos have been condemned since 1906 by scholars, leaders, and lay people both non-white and white, and those condemnations had caused human zoos to die out almost completely decades ago. For that reason, this essay is not about *arguing* that human zoos are immoral in general or that this human zoo in particular must be stopped. The verdict, so to speak, has been made: human zoos are both unethical and indefensible. Yet, as Malcolm X once said, "Racism is like a Cadillac, they bring out a new model every year." A new human zoo demands a new denunciation.<sup>1</sup>

I will describe The African Forest in detail later on, but to provide you with a frame for understanding those details, I must first briefly describe the history of human zoos. Human zoos are the most common name for projects that exhibited non-white peoples as animals. Sometimes the exhibited people were caged or chained, and sometimes their dwellings and home communities were replicated. The purpose of

human zoos was threefold a) they profited from the public's desire to see "exotic" peoples b) they showed non-white peoples as not being as "advanced" as whites and as existing in a pseudo-scientific space between whites and animals and c) they justified colonization by exhibiting non-white peoples as trophies of conquest who were inferior to the whites who gazed upon them and thus needing white guidance.

The cultures exhibited in human zoos are always either past, present, or planned future targets of racism, colonialism, neo-colonialism, displacement, slavery, Westernization, globalization, "development," forced cultural change, or genocide. To give just a few examples, Ota Benga, a Mbuti pygmy widower who was bought by Samuel Verner, (Mr. Benga had been enslaved by the Belgians) and exhibited at the Bronx Zoo alongside an orangutan was the only member of his family to survive a slaughter carried out by the forces of Leopold II, the king of Belgium.<sup>ii</sup> Leopold's forces would ultimately kill up to fifteen million Congolese black people. Ishi was a Native American man exhibited in the Museum of Anthropology at Parnassus. He was the last surviving member of the Yana people – the result of massacres after gold was discovered on his people's land. Saartjie Baartman was a Khoi-San woman exhibited in a cage by an animal trainer because the buttocks and genitals of her people's women were thought by Westerners to be freakish.<sup>iii</sup> At the time when Ms. Baartman left South Africa, a British traveler noted that he hadn't seen more than twenty of Ms. Baartman's people "not in servitude of the Dutch."<sup>iv</sup> Filipinos were exhibited in the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. Between 1899 and 1902 nearly one and a half million Filipinos were killed by the U.S.<sup>v</sup>

As these examples show, there are two rules human zoos follow. First, only non-whites are exhibited as or alongside animals. Second, human zoos allowed and still allow

targeted non-whites to be redefined as animals in Western, European, or First World spaces in order to justify white past, current, or planned mistreatment of non-white peoples in the non-white peoples' homelands.

Now that you have some historical context, let's examine the human zoo in question. According to the Zoo's website, The African Forest includes an "African Marketplace Plaza" selling gifts from "from all over the world" and offering dining with a "view of giraffes;" a "Pygmy Village and Campground" showcasing "African art, history, and folklore" where visitors can stay overnight; "Pygmy Huts" where visitors will be educated about pygmies and "African culture," hear stories, and be able to stay overnight; a "Storytelling Fire Pit;" an "Outpost" where visitors, while getting refreshments, will view posters "promoting ecotourism, conservation messages, and African wildlife refuges;" a "Communications Hut and Conservation Kiosk" where "visitors will use a replicated shortwave radio and listen in on simulated conversations taking place throughout Africa;" a "Rustic Outdoor Shower" representing the fact that the fictional "Pygmy Village" "recently got running water" where children can "cool off;" a section of the "Pygmy Village" where children can handle "African musical instruments and artifacts;" and "Tree House Specimen Cabinets" that showcase "objects, artifacts, and artwork."<sup>vi</sup>

Clearly The African Forest falls neatly into the contemptible tradition of its human zoo predecessors, replicating a non-white community, a place where non-white humans live, in a zoo among the habitats where animals live, but it's problematic for several more reasons.

First, Africa is not a monolith. Africa is a continent of fifty-three nations and even more cultures. One may speak of a Ugandan forest, Yoruba marketplace, or Xhosa culture, but Africa is such a diverse continent that the idea of, for example, an “African marketplace” is meaningless. A promotional video on the Zoo’s website goes on to say that “The African Forest” is really the central African forest, but geographical detail is missing both in the project’s name and in descriptions of its various facets, clearly indicating that the Zoo considers Africa and its various parts interchangeable.

The ironic part of representing all Africa in the context of the central African forest is that certain aspects of both Africa in general and central Africa in particular are conspicuously absent from this “everything but the kitchen sink” approach. For example, why are the large cities, skyscrapers, boutiques, and movie theaters of Africa missing while The African Forest shows off the village that just got running water? Why is only folklore being shared? Why not teach about the epic poems that rival the *Odyssey* and *Iliad*? I am emphatically against the idea that there is anything less modern about a “Pygmy hut” than a glass and steel tower, but the Zoo is only showing aspects of Africa that fit Western stereotypes of “primitivism.”<sup>vii</sup>

Beyond the fact that Africa is not a monolith, central Africa is also not a monolith. Central Africa contains Burundi, the Central African Republic, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Rwanda. Therefore, it’s problematic that in a website video the Zoo refers to “the culture of central Africa” as though there were only one.

I said earlier that non-white peoples are the peoples deemed worthy of being placed in the zoo – but whites place one particular people in the zoo more frequently than any other – pygmies. If Africans in general are seen as being exotic, less than human,

and physically different from whites, pygmies are viewed as Africans par excellence. Pygmies are treated by many whites as though their smaller physical stature represents a smaller share of humanity. For example, when Newt Gingrich wanted to criticize would be Republican presidential candidates he called them “pygmies.”<sup>viii</sup>

The Zoo may try to dishonestly claim The African Forest is not part of the human zoo tradition, but the legacy of older human zoos directly informs the Zoo’s decisions about which people to exhibit.<sup>ix</sup> The Zoo chose to include African peoples because that’s who older human zoos showed, and of all the peoples in Africa, the Zoo is choosing to focus on pygmies because, again, they’re the preferred people for human zoos.

What’s particularly chilling about this legacy is that pygmies, like Jewish people, are victims of genocide. Up to fifteen million people, including six million Jewish men, women, and children were killed in the Holocaust, and up to fifteen million pygmy and other black Congolese men, women, and children were killed under King Leopold. Both Jews and pygmies, at the time of their holocausts, were being compared to animals to justify their treatment, and pygmy culture was being exhibited in zoos – pygmy culture is *still* being exhibited in zoos.

Human zoos past and present, including The African Forest, both exist in a context of and perpetuate racism. A recent paper “Not Yet Human: Implicit Knowledge, Historical Dehumanization and Contemporary Consequences” written by psychologists at Stanford, Pennsylvania State University, and University of California-Berkeley states that blacks are still subconsciously linked to apes by people born after the civil rights movement.<sup>x</sup> A 2009 article from a parenting website describes the true experience of a black elementary school boy being called a monkey by his non-black classmates.<sup>xi</sup>

Recently a Republican activist said that a gorilla who had escaped from the zoo was an ancestor of Michelle Obama. Her husband, President Obama, was compared to a chimpanzee in a comic run by the New York Post. The Dresden Zoo did the New York Post one better by naming a real baby baboon after Obama.<sup>xii</sup> If you couldn't make it to Dresden, there was no need to fear – David and Elizabeth Lawson started selling Obama monkey toys in 2008.<sup>xiii</sup> In Europe, black soccer players are regularly taunted with bananas. Costco recently sold a black baby doll called “Lil’ Monkey” that held a banana.<sup>xiv</sup> LeBron James was photographed for Vogue playing King Kong to Giselle Bundchen’s Fay Wray.<sup>xv</sup> This movie poster for *The Blindside* <http://www.imdb.com/media/rm3647637760/tt0878804> is part of the King Kong cannon as well.

The Southern Poverty Law Center states that racist websites “offer a window into some of the most important ideological and other discussions going on in the racist movement.”<sup>xvi</sup> Members of Stormfront, a major neo-Nazi/white supremacist forum, liken blacks to all manner of non-human primates and other animals, and it is frequently said that we belong, of all places, in the zoo. Special opprobrium is directed at Africans, and, naturally, pygmies. On Stormfront threads members celebrate historical and contemporary human zoos.<sup>xvii</sup> How can anyone think that exhibiting African cultures in a zoo is a good idea in this context?

In his satirical article “How to Write About Africa,” Binyavanga Wainaina mocks the ignorant and stereotypical way Westerners write about his home continent. The Houston Zoo’s discourse on The African Forest almost slavishly commits the blunders Mr. Wainaina describes. In his article, Mr. Wainaina suggests, “Always use the word

'Africa' or 'Darkness' or 'Safari' in your title.” Check. He continues, “In your text, treat Africa as if it were one country.” Check. Mr. Wainaina says, “Subtitles may include the words 'Zanzibar', 'Masai', 'Zulu', 'Zambezi', 'Congo', 'Nile', 'Big', 'Sky', 'Shadow', 'Drum', 'Sun' or 'Bygone'.” And, lo and behold, the Zoo’s website promises that visitors to The African Forest will hear the sound of drums in one of the first sentences describing the project.

There are two clichés Mr. Wainaina denounces that are particularly problematic. They are “Establish early on that your liberalism is impeccable, and mention near the beginning how much you love Africa... Africa is to be pitied, worshipped or dominated. Whichever angle you take, be sure to leave the strong impression that without your intervention and your important book, Africa is doomed” and “Animals, on the other hand, must be treated as well rounded, complex characters... Any short Africans who live in the jungle or desert may be portrayed with good humour (unless they are in conflict with an elephant or chimpanzee or gorilla, in which case they are pure evil).”

Earlier in my essay I said, “The cultures exhibited in human zoos are always either past, present, or planned future targets of racism, (neo)colonialism, etc.” This human zoo is no exception to the rule. Mr. Wainaina’s article provides us with a helpful frame for analyzing the Zoo’s statements on Africa.

1) The Zoo says on its website, “The African Forest will transform the way Houstonians view the world providing visitors with a glimpse into the remote forests of central Africa and the distinctive people that call it home. By understanding and appreciating the challenges these people face, we will be better equipped to work with them to preserve our fragile world and to make it a better place for future generations.”<sup>xviii</sup>

2) A spokesperson for the Zoo stated in the *Houston Chronicle*, “This delves into habitat; conflict between man and the wild.”<sup>xix</sup> 3) The Zoo also said in its description of The African Forest that the project contains an “Outpost” where visitors, while getting refreshments, will view posters “promoting ecotourism, conservation messages, and African wildlife refuges.”

4) Finally, the Zoo’s blog states, “To that end, the Houston Zoo’s conservation efforts will focus on developing wildlife, habitat, and human community support programs in central Africa in 2010... There are also few national parks and protected areas on earth where humans did not co-exist with wildlife before these park boundaries were put in place. And there are even fewer places where the decision to designate a protected area does not somehow intimately affect the human population living around its borders.

“If the ability for native people to coexist with their habitat is taken away from them without offering a sustainable solution, then wildlife and habitat conservation efforts are bound to fail. The most successful wildlife conservation efforts are those in which indigenous communities are empowered in the management of local natural resources and supported through capacity building programs.

“Model community initiatives lead to socioeconomic and conservation gains by establishing and strengthening alternative community initiatives for sustainable development which can be compatible with the long term conservation of local natural resources...”

The Zoo is doing the things Mr. Wainaina criticizes. The Zoo has picked a liberal cause: being green by protecting wildlife. The Zoo is claiming a love for Africa – The

African Forest is about “the wonderful, rich cultures that we all can share.” The Zoo has a condescending and distorted view of Africa – Africans are in conflict with wildlife, and it’s ok to violate the human rights of Africans by making them refugees to protect wildlife as long as you give them some alternative development. The Zoo believes Africa is doomed without Western help – we have to protect imperiled wildlife from Africans. The Zoo sees African animals as more human than African humans – it condones displacing African people to protect African animals. Last but not least, the Zoo sees pygmies as in conflict with wildlife and posits them as the antagonists in those conflicts. There’s so, so much egregiously wrong and wrongheaded in the Zoo’s discourse on Africans that it’s necessary to analyze the Zoo’s words piece by piece.

Let’s start with the Zoo’s first quote which basically exhorts visitors to take up the White Man’s Burden. Anyone who comes to the Zoo is in a position to help/teach Africans. They live in central Africa and have millennia of knowledge on how to care for their environments, but we’re the ones in the position to tell them what to do. The Zoo states that the reason we should learn about central Africans is so that we can understand Africans’ challenges and help them. The only reason to learn about African cultures is to control them.

The next problem with that quote is that it is gallingly hypocritical. Is hunting recreationally generally part of an African or Western ethos? Is it primarily Africans or Westerners who own polluting industries, mining industries, the corporations that use the resources that are mined, and the corporations that create toxins – all of which threaten the well-being of animals and people alike? If the Zoo truly wanted to help African

animals – and African people to boot –Westerners could take on any of the anti-nature and anti-wildlife sins Western people perpetrate listed above.

The hypocrisy of the Zoo's quote is tied to the fact that when Western entities decide they want to "help" the environment or animals, too frequently they do not change their own behavior but rather declare they are helping by dominating Africans' and/or indigenous peoples' lives and behavior. In "Reflections on Distance and Katrina," Jim Igoe of Dartmouth College<sup>xx</sup> tells how Tanzanians are being displaced by "networks of private enterprise, NGOs, and government officials." He says, "Exxon Mobil is also sponsoring part of conservation interventions initiated by the African Wildlife Foundation" which meant that "local people targeted by this intervention are being encouraged by the African Wildlife Foundation and the Tanzanian government to enter into agreements and sign things that they don't fully understand." This "transforms these landscapes from peopled landscapes to those dominated by wildlife, which has made them attractive to private investors at the expense of locals. It also provides Exxon Mobil, and many other corporations that sponsor conservation interventions, with tax breaks and a valuable green public image enhancement."

If the Zoo truly wanted to help wildlife and truly respected African peoples, it would support the declarations of non-white people such as the Principles of Environmental Justice adopted by the People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit which says, "Environmental justice affirms the fundamental right to political, economic, cultural, environmental self-determination for all peoples,"<sup>xxi</sup> Agenda 21 which states, "Indigenous people and their communities ... have developed over many generations a holistic traditional scientific knowledge of their lands, natural resources and environment.

Indigenous people and their communities shall enjoy the full measure of human rights and fundamental freedoms without hindrance or discrimination,”<sup>xxii</sup> or the United Nations’ Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, one part of which says, “Indigenous peoples shall not be forcibly removed from their lands or territories. No relocation shall take place without the free and informed consent of the indigenous peoples concerned and after agreement on just and fair compensation, and where possible, with the option to return.” These agreements affirm that indigenous peoples have the right to remain on their land and manage their environments and wildlife as they see fit. Actions that violate those rights are human rights abuses

Instead of respecting African sovereignty, human zoos perpetuate the myth that non-whites don’t mind being dominated. When Michael G. Vann of Santa Clara University’s History Department was asked of one particular human zoo, “What image of the empire did the Colonial Exhibition set out to project?” he responded, “...There was no mention of anti-colonial agitation or the serious rebellions that were going on in Vietnam at the time... Fascinating in their strange costumes and odd behaviour, these natives were nothing to fear, rather, they were a great asset to France.”<sup>xxiii</sup> In other words, a human zoo is still a human zoo even if it claims to portray non-whites in a positive manner and those who visit the zoo don’t have any particular animosity towards non-whites. The Houston Zoo’s website describes the various ways in which the Zoo and Zoo patrons can “help” indigenous Africans to protect wildlife, but just as non-white peoples resisted imperialism in the past, they continue to resist the West’s imperialist environmental practices – including those promoted by the Zoo. I’ll delve into that further in a moment, but first, please refer to the second quote.

Inaccurately framing the culture or cultures being exhibited in a human zoo is tradition. For example, Ota Benga had teeth sharpened into points in accordance with his people's custom, but it was falsely reported that his teeth were sharpened because his people were cannibals. The African Forest dares to teach Zoo patrons that indigenous Africans are in conflict with wildlife, but falsely claiming that indigenous Africans harm animals is a well known tactic to violate their human rights and drive them from their traditional lands – often in cahoots with organizations such as the World Bank, NGOs, and corporations. Let's look at the culture The African Forest is exhibiting – pygmies. The Batwa pygmy people, according to tribal rights group Survival International, “had lived for generations before and after 1930 without destroying the forest or its wildlife, and even had historical claims to land rights... Despite legal provision for Batwa to use and even live within the national parks (Ugandan Wildlife Statute, No. 14, 1996, sections 23-6) they remain excluded from them. Access to the parks... is negotiated through 'multiple use committees' which include almost no Batwa representation. This exclusion is encouraged by the stereotype which represents the Batwa as destroyers of the gorillas. In fact, however, Batwa do not eat gorillas, and they have coexisted with them for centuries. Any gorilla-hunting they may engage in is done at the instigation of others. Nevertheless, the Batwa are stigmatised as gorilla-slayers and poachers, and get the blame for any poaching that occurs.”<sup>xxiv</sup>

Survival International also notes “the Aka, like all of the 'Pygmy' peoples in Central Africa, are under threat. More and more of the forest is being depleted by logging companies, *while huge areas of good forest have been turned into parks or wildlife reserves that are guarded by armed thugs who beat up the Pygmies and drive*

*them out of their ancestral hunting grounds.* And yet the Pygmies are the real guardians of the forest. As their proverb explains: 'We Aka love the forest as we love our own bodies' ” (italics mine.)<sup>xxv</sup> To learn more about pygmy and other African and indigenous peoples’ views on conservation see [http://www.forestpeoples.org/documents/conservation/uganda\\_review\\_cbd\\_pa\\_jan08\\_eng.pdf](http://www.forestpeoples.org/documents/conservation/uganda_review_cbd_pa_jan08_eng.pdf), [http://www.forestpeoples.org/documents/conservation/bases/p\\_to\\_p\\_project\\_base.shtml#english](http://www.forestpeoples.org/documents/conservation/bases/p_to_p_project_base.shtml#english), [http://www.forestpeoples.org/documents/ifi\\_igo/wb\\_ips\\_uganda\\_may00\\_eng.shtml](http://www.forestpeoples.org/documents/ifi_igo/wb_ips_uganda_may00_eng.shtml), and other resources on <http://www.forestpeoples.org/index.shtml> .

Now refer to the third quote. Let’s examine ecotourism first. According to Lee Pera and Deborah McLaren,<sup>xxvi</sup> tourism “has been promoted as a panacea for ‘sustainable’ development. However, tourism's supposed benefits ... have not ‘trickled down’ or benefited Indigenous Peoples. The destructiveness of the tourism industry (*environmental pollution* and enormous waste management problems, *displacement from lands*, human rights abuses, unfair labor and wages, commodification of cultures, etc.) has brought great harm to many Indigenous Peoples and communities around the world...”

They say, “*It is no coincidence that those who have lost their lands* or have no market for their crops *are forced into service-sector employment in the tourism industry* and are increasingly dependent on the whims of the global market and the corporations which run it” (italics mine.) Furthermore, The International Land Coalition says tourism “negatively affects” landless people.

McLaren adds, "Global tourism threatens indigenous knowledge and intellectual property rights, our technologies, religions, sacred sites, social structures and relationships, *wildlife*, ecosystems, economies and basic rights to informed understanding; reducing indigenous peoples to simply another consumer product that is quickly becoming exhaustible" (italics mine.)

Georgianne Nienaber writing for central African (Rwandan) newspaper *The New Times* states, "Finally, the detritus of 'civilization,' in the form of excrement, garbage and detergents, is discharged into the once pristine environment. The United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) estimates that the average tourist produces one kilo (approximately 2.2 pounds) of litter and solid waste EACH DAY! The story of tourism in Africa causes one to weep. In Kenya, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe the story of tourism is a tragedy in which western businesses sent most of the money back home to the colonialist developers... Foreign workers held the most lucrative management positions (Pera and McLaren, *Globalization, Tourism and Indigenous Peoples: What You Should Know About the World's Largest Industry*, [www.planeta.com](http://www.planeta.com)), reducing the local 'service providers' to little more than slave labour..."<sup>xxvii</sup>

A paper published by the Forest Peoples Programme in conjunction with the United Organisation for Batwa Development in Uganda – the Batwa pygmy people's own organization – quotes a Mutwa pygmy as saying, "Don't mix us with other people, leave us separate and help us."<sup>xxviii</sup> It's odd that The African Forest plans to promote ecotourism as a way to help Africans and African wildlife despite how devastating some Africans, specifically central Africans and pygmies, and allies of indigenous people find the industry for Africans and African wildlife.

Now let's examine the last two things the "Outpost" in The African Forest promotes: "conservation messages and African wildlife refuges." Conservation in Africa and the creation of wildlife refuges on the continent are notorious for the frequent creation of "wildlife refugees." That means that African governments, with the help of Western businesses and NGOs, violate the human rights of Africans, decide they have no right to their traditional lands, and literally make them refugees alongside, for example, refugees of war. In other words, in Africa it's common for conservationists to create refuges to conserve wildlife by simply kicking Africans out. Indigenous people and their allies including Cultural Survival, First Peoples Worldwide, Earthrights International, the aforementioned Survival International, and Forest Peoples Programme have vociferously denounced this practice. According to Mark Dowie, the International Forum on Indigenous Mapping created a resolution that said that conservation was the newest and biggest enemy of indigenous people which 200 delegates signed

Five of the world's most important wildlife conservation organizations are guilty of stealing land from indigenous people and making them refugees: World Wildlife Fund, The Nature Conservancy, Conservation International, Wildlife Conservation Society, and the World Conservation Union.<sup>xxix</sup> The aforementioned African Wildlife Foundation is yet another conservation organization that steals land from indigenous people. As I noted earlier, the African Wildlife Foundation partnered with Exxon Mobil to displace Tanzanians. An employee representing Exxon Mobil Corporation is on the Houston Zoos' Board of Directors. In other words, you have a company that worked with a conservation/refuge creation foundation in Africa to steal land from Africans on the board of a Zoo that promotes conservation and wildlife refuges in Africa.

Exxon is known for the Valdez Oil Spill, the Brooklyn Oil Spill, and the Greenpoint Oil Spill, and despite its eagerness to support the Houston Zoo and create a wildlife refuge in Tanzania, the company is currently harming endangered gray whales. In other words, Exxon doesn't sincerely care about protecting animals – only about its superficial pro-environment image. Organizations that allow corporations like Exxon to mask their anti-wildlife actions become accessories to crimes against nature – they're ultimately harming animals and the environment. If its crimes against nature aren't enough, the company is currently being accused of sharing responsibility for " Indonesian Military Killings, Torture and other Severe Abuse in Aceh, Indonesia" such as rape and murder according to the International Labor Rights Forum.

An employee representing Shell Downstream, Inc. is another of the Zoo's board members. Royal Dutch Shell is a multinational petroleum company notorious for committing crimes against humanity, abusing African indigenous people, torturing people, and poisoning the environment. This is the company that is widely believed yet never has admitted to helping facilitate the execution of legendary environmental and indigenous rights leader Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other indigenous Ogoni Nigerians who protested the theft of Ogoni land for oil extraction. (Exxon settled for millions to the victims' families.)<sup>xxx</sup> The company was condemned by the Nigerian High Court and activists as recently as 2005 and 2008 for "violating the constitutional 'rights to life and dignity.'" Shell, in addition to its other crimes against human rights, creates conservation refugees.<sup>xxxi</sup> If the Zoo wanted to help Africans and animals in one fell swoop they could try to change the behavior of Shell. Instead, the Zoo is working with Shell, a company that commits human rights abuses and first displaced indigenous Africans to extract oil

and harm the environment and is now displacing Africans ostensibly to help the environment and Africans.<sup>xxxii</sup>

And lest I forget, one of the Zoo's donors is Chevron.<sup>xxxiii</sup> As you might expect, Chevron also makes indigenous people conservation refugees.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Seeing a pattern? Furthermore, Chevron is currently being sued for 27 billion dollars by an indigenous Amazonian community whose rainforest was polluted by the corporation's oil-drilling.<sup>xxxv</sup>

Basically, among the corporations that fund the Houston Zoo are some of the most human and wildlife rights abusing corporations in existence. These same businesses try to clean up their images by creating wildlife refuges – but they create those refuges by forcing indigenous people off their land. Then the Zoo, which receives funding from those corporations, claims that the indigenous people who are getting kicked off their land are the ones who harm wildlife and promotes conservation and conservation refuges.

The conservation refugee problem is so bad that, according to Mark Dowie, hundreds of thousands of people have been made refugees due to conservation and conservation refuges. Beyond the fact that making people refugees in the name of conservation is evil – it doesn't even help conservation. As Mark Dowie says in *Paradigm Wars*, “More and more conservationists seem to be wondering how, after setting aside a ‘protected’ land mass the size of Africa, global biodiversity continues to decline... 90 percent of biodiversity lies outside of protected areas. If we want to preserve biodiversity in the far reaches of the globe, places that are in many cases still occupied by indigenous people living in ways that are ecologically sustainable, history is showing us that *the most counterproductive thing we can do is evict them.*”<sup>xxxvi</sup>

The African Forest and the practices it promotes are neither about respecting Africans nor protecting animals. They're about claiming authority over African land, wildlife, and human lives. The African Forest's version of multiculturalism teaches that respecting other peoples means that you can force those peoples off their land as long as you play in a replica of their villages first.

Refer back to the Zoo's fourth group of quotes. The Zoo freely states that indigenous people's right to coexist with their habitat is being "taken" from them. And, as can be expected, they promise to throw a few scraps indigenous peoples' way as a consolation prize for violating their human rights. But what do "sustainable solutions" for indigenous people really mean? As Jim Igoe says, after being made refugees in the name of conservation by one of the Zoo's donors, Exxon Mobil, Tanzanians were then told "their only way out of poverty is to become junior partners in conservation-oriented business ventures on grossly unfavorable terms." This treatment is the rule, not the exception, when it comes to treatment of conservation refugees according to Mark Dowie.

Bushmen leader, Right Livelihood (alternative Nobel) prizewinner Roy Sesana, described the condition of his people after having been made conservation refugees<sup>xxxvii</sup> as follows, "I say what kind of development is it when the people live shorter lives than before? They catch HIV/AIDS...Some become prostitutes...They fight because they are bored and get drunk. They are starting to commit suicide."<sup>xxxviii</sup>

Mark Dowie quotes Bernhard Grzimek, who was the director of Hitler's Frankfurt Zoo, as saying of conservation in Africa, "We Europeans must teach our black brothers to value their own possessions (speaking of wildlife.)" The Houston Zoo agrees. And when

it comes to violating the human rights of blacks, the Zoo also agrees with Chief Justice Roger B. Taney who stated, during the infamous Dred Scott case, that blacks “had no rights which the white man was bound to respect.” The Houston Zoo, through The African Forest, is espousing the belief that it’s perfectly fine to displace Africans and make them refugees. After all, in the eyes of the Zoo, Africans don’t have land rights. They don’t have human rights. They’re simply another group of creatures in the zoo. As people of conscience we cannot let assaults on the humanity of African indigenous peoples or any other peoples go unchallenged. Stephen Corry, the Director of Survival International, says of the situation of conservation refugees, “What is happening to these people is not some kind of inevitable doom; it is a crime, and must be resisted.”<sup>xxxix</sup>

Africans and indigenous people being made refugees by the West is imperialism and a violation of human rights. Human zoos are one of imperialism’s favorite tools. A one sentence summary of this paper would be this: The Houston Zoo, which is funded by corporations notorious for destroying the environment, harming wildlife, violating human rights, and creating conservation/wildlife parks by making Africans and other indigenous peoples conservation refugees, is creating a human zoo called The African Forest that supports and promotes the creation/continuation of conservation parks *and* the attendant perpetuation of the conservation refugee crisis. This paper was not meant to be a journey through historical and present day manifestations of prejudice, but a call to action. Please consider opposing The African Forest, human zoos, and the creation/perpetuation of the conservation refugee crisis in one or more of the following ways:

1. Tell the Houston Zoo you are against The African Forest human zoo and the creation of conservation refugees as well as the continuation of the conservation refugee crisis by contacting the Houston Zoo here: <http://houstonzoo.com/contact/>. Tell the Houston Zoo that you will boycott zoos

that host human zoos and/or make/keep Africans conservation refugees. If you have an affiliation, credential, or detail about yourself you feel is relevant, feel free to mention it i.e. a university you work for, a social justice group you work with, being indigenous (black or not), African, or of African descent, being a parent or educator, etc. **Be sure to send a copy of your message to [nohumanzoo@yahoo.com](mailto:nohumanzoo@yahoo.com) so that we have a record of your letter in case the Zoo doesn't respond and to prevent the Zoo from deciding to claim that no one is protesting.**

2. Send your name and, if you want, affiliation to [nohumanzoo@yahoo.com](mailto:nohumanzoo@yahoo.com) if you want to be put on a petition stating, "We, the undersigned, do not support The African Forest human zoo, the creation of conservation refugees, or the continuation of the conservation refugee crisis."
3. Raise awareness about The African Forest through your website, blog, email list, livejournal, etc. and encourage others to write the Zoo and sign the petition.
  - Please be aware that, naturally, the letter you send or your signature on the petition may be made public.
  - The original version of this paper is twice as long and has much more information. If you would like the full version of this paper email [nohumanzoo@yahoo.com](mailto:nohumanzoo@yahoo.com).

Thank you so much for your help!

- <sup>i</sup> For more information (in no particular order) see: "African Culture and the Human Zoo" by Prof. Dr. Nina Glick Schiller, Dr. Data Dea, and Markus Hoene (PhD candidate at the time the paper was written) at <http://www.eth.mpg.de/events/current/pdf/1120750934-01.pdf>; "Uproar trails plans to exhibit Africans in a German zoo" by Uduma Kalu of the Nigerian newspaper *The Guardian* at <http://www.antropologi.info/blog/Arkiv/En-2005/AfricanVillageGuardianNigeria>; The Parade of the Vanquished by Jan Nederveen Pieterse at <http://www.africansocieties.org/n4/eng/pieterse.htm>; *Biopiracy: The Plunder of Nature and Knowledge* by Vandana Shiva, *Paradigm Wars: Indigenous Peoples' Resistance to Globalization* edited by Jerry Mander and Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, and "On A Neglected Aspect Of Western Racism" by Kurt Jonassohn at <http://migs.concordia.ca/occpapers/zoo.htm>.
- <sup>ii</sup> The tradition of exhibiting pygmies began with the aforementioned Ota Benga. After he was bought by Samuel Verner, he was exhibited at a human zoo at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, dressed in a duck costume and showcased at the American Museum of Natural History, and exhibited in the Bronx Zoo's Monkey House.<sup>1</sup> Madison Grant, defending the dehumanization of Ota Benga against the protests of black preachers in his racist pseudo-scientific work *The Passing of the Great Race*, said that he and other whites should not take orders from black religious leaders. (I should mention that some of this essay comes from a letter I sent to the Houston Zoo weeks ago which has not received a response.) At age thirty-two Mr. Benga committed suicide.
- <sup>iii</sup> After her death she was dissected. Her brain and genitals were pickled and kept in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, and the French did not return her remains to South Africa until 2002 despite Nelson Mandela having begun an international campaign for their repatriation in 1994.
- <sup>iv</sup> [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m2838/is\\_n4\\_v31/ai\\_20425715/pg\\_2/?tag=content;coll](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2838/is_n4_v31/ai_20425715/pg_2/?tag=content;coll)
- <sup>v</sup> <http://www.politicalaffairs.net/article/articleview/2274/1/134/>
- <sup>vi</sup> <http://www.houstonzoo.org/naming-opportunities/>,  
<http://www.houstonzoo.org/attachments/wysiwyg/3/NamingOppsFeb3.pdf>
- <sup>vii</sup> Some might argue that features of urban life wouldn't be appropriate to include as urban dwellers do not live in harmony with nature. That argument ignores the fact that The African Forest teaches the lie that rural indigenous Africans in fact don't live in harmony with nature either.
- <sup>viii</sup> <http://www.bostonherald.com/news/national/politics/view.bg?articleid=1013180>
- <sup>ix</sup> The Zoo might also try to claim it has the support of African peoples. As Dr. Sylvester Ogbechie, a Nigerian man, notes at <http://www.antropologi.info/blog/Arkiv/En-2005/AfricanVillageGuardianNigeria> "The ultimate irony is, of course, as someone pointed out, that the Zoo will not find any shortage of Africans to act as objects in these exhibits, since all they need to do is go to some impoverished Francophone African country and cart in the usual number of "tribal" entities who always seem to be too willing to trade in their dignity for the right to be exhibited as animals. I don't say the above lightly but my research on Western exhibitions of Africans shows that the largest number of African peoples included in such exhibits mostly seem to come from Francophone Africa (and also from Cameroon which was a former German colony). "The colonial mentality and complete subjugation of these people to the myth of white supremacy is absolutely abhorrent, which is why I am not too fond of research in my own field that focuses on these areas. They are too easily spoken for, and too often the wrong thing is said in that process."
- <sup>x</sup> <http://www.scienceblog.com/cms/americans-still-linking-blacks-apes-15428.html>
- <sup>xi</sup> <http://preview.niot.org/blog/brooklyn-parent-what-do-you-do-when-your-child-being-bullied> (The article notes Malik Jones is a pseudonym.)
- <sup>xii</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/barackobama/5799568/Dresden-zoo-forced-to-rename-primate-called-Obama.html>
- <sup>xiii</sup> [http://www.denverpost.com/breakingnews/ci\\_9587847](http://www.denverpost.com/breakingnews/ci_9587847)
- <sup>xiv</sup> <http://contexts.org/socimages/2009/09/03/concerns-about-racism-are-weird/>
- <sup>xv</sup> <http://www.racialicious.com/2009/12/22/die-already-king-kong-racism-lady-gaga-edition/> Giselle's dress is even the same very specific shade of green as Fay Wray's in an original King Kong poster
- <sup>xvi</sup> [http://www.splcenter.org/search/apachesolr\\_search/forums](http://www.splcenter.org/search/apachesolr_search/forums)
- <sup>xvii</sup> <http://www.stormfront.org/forum/showthread.php?t=480150>, <http://www.stormfront.org/forum/showthread.php?t=317405>, <http://www.stormfront.org/forum/t210716/>, <http://www.stormfront.org/forum/t210993/>, <http://www.stormfront.org/forum/t409931/>
- <sup>xviii</sup> <http://www.houstonzoo.org/en/photos/albums/v/63>
- <sup>xix</sup> <http://www.chron.com/dispatch/story.mpl/breaking/6551657.html>
- <sup>xx</sup> At the time his paper was written, he was affiliated with the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center.
- <sup>xxi</sup> *The Quest for Environmental Justice : Human Rights and the Politics of Pollution* edited by Robert Bullard
- <sup>xxii</sup> <http://www.planeta.com/planeta/99/1199globalizationrt.html>
- <sup>xxiii</sup> <http://www.port.ac.uk/special/france1815to2003/chapter6/interviews/filetodownload,18533,en.pdf>
- <sup>xxiv</sup> <http://www.survivalinternational.org/material/20>
- <sup>xxv</sup> <http://www.survivalinternational.org/news/93>

- <sup>xxvi</sup> <http://www.planeta.com/planeta/99/1199globalizationrt.html>
- <sup>xxvii</sup> <http://www.nextbillion.net/news/ecotourism-greedy-lover-or-savior>
- <sup>xxviii</sup> [http://www.forestpeoples.org/documents/ifi\\_igo/wb\\_ips\\_uganda\\_may00\\_eng.shtml](http://www.forestpeoples.org/documents/ifi_igo/wb_ips_uganda_may00_eng.shtml)
- <sup>xxix</sup> Conservation Refugee by Mark Dowie
- <sup>xxx</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8090493.stm>
- <sup>xxxi</sup> <http://commonsblog.org/archives/000578.php>
- <sup>xxxii</sup> <http://www.treehugger.com/files/2008/10/green-inc-book.php>
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> <http://www.houstonzoo.org/donors/>
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> <http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/161/>
- <sup>xxxv</sup> <http://www.businessweek.com/ap/financialnews/D9EPOS7O0.htm>
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> Again, in the interest of keeping this long essay from being any longer than necessary, I encourage those wanting more information on conservation refugees to read Mark Dowie's work in *Orion Magazine*, and his book *Conservation Refugees: The Hundred-Year Conflict Between Global Conservation and Native Peoples*.
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> <http://www.survivalinternational.org/news/699>
- <sup>xxxviii</sup> <http://www.survivalinternational.org/news/1230>
- <sup>xxxix</sup> <http://www.survivalinternational.org/news/93>