

Costa Rica Declares "No Caged Animals"

Dr. Ernie Ward, DVM

Ernie has more than 20 years of experience in the veterinary industry and is a well-known veterinarian, media personality and author. He is also a founding member of IDEXX's Pet Health Network team.

For more from [Dr. Ernie Ward](#), find him on [Facebook](#) or at www.drernieward.com.

As an avid surfer and environmentalist, I love Costa Rica. Its lush tropical rainforests, unspoiled beaches, and world-class surf breaks make it one of our planet's true gems. I'm now an even bigger fan of Costa Rica after their government announced they were eliminating animals in cages at all public zoos by 2014. Fantástica Costa Rica! Or is it?

Costa Rica's Minister for Energy and Environment Rene Castro said the country had decided to move away from cages in San Jose's Simon Bolivar Zoo and the Santa Ana Conservation Center. Castro is quoted as saying, "'We're going to get rid of cages and reinforce the concept of a botanical park so the biodiversity can be shown and interacted with in a natural manner. We don't want any more captivity, any more caging of animals, unless it's because they're being rescued or saved.'" Wow! I don't know this guy but I love him for saying this!

Both zoos will be converted into botanical parks next year. So far I'm completely on board with the plan. No cages unless absolutely needed, more experiencing biodiversity in a natural setting. My only question is what is going to happen to the over 400 animals currently caged in the zoos? We're talking a lion, crocodiles, monkeys, and a tapir. Where are they going?

Castro informs the media that the animals will be released into the wild or sent to rescue centers. Huh? Did I miss something? Listen, I am in total agreement on the no-animals-in-cages-issue but you can't just set them free after being raised in captivity. What about the "rescue centers?" How will the government ensure their animals will be properly cared for? I'm still with you, Costa Rica, but I need more information to make

sure this just isn't a misguided way to shut down an old zoo. The foundation that runs the zoos must feel this way as they've asked an administrative tribunal to block the closures.

Costa Rica is still one of my favorite destinations. They're a people without a military; they banned circuses with animals in 2002, and have taken real steps toward protecting their rich environment. I applaud Costa Rica for taking a stand against caged animals, I just wish they had a better solution than closing down zoos and dumping captive animals into a wilderness they've never experienced.

Keeping animals in zoos, rescue or conservation centers is always a thorny topic for me. If we're going to house animals in artificial sanctuaries, I want it to as closely approximate their original environment as possible. More natural, open surroundings almost always result in limited public viewing of many species. That's not good for charging admission. I believe we're obligated to continue searching for innovative and creative ways to make captive animals more comfortable, regardless of the effect on zoo attendees. I don't have any answers; I just ask we keep striving to make things better. Buen esfuerzo, Costa Rica! (Good effort, Costa Rica!)

If you have any questions or concerns, you should always visit or call your veterinarian - they are your best resource to ensure the health and well-being of your pets.