

Euthanization at Copenhagen Zoo Sparks Global Outrage

by Roff Smith

On Sunday morning, **shortly** after a last meal of his favorite rye bread, an **otherwise** healthy 18-month-old male giraffe named Marius was killed with a slaughterhouse bolt gun at the Copenhagen Zoo. **Afterward**, zoo officials **performed** a three-hour-long demonstration of how to butcher a giraffe before a large crowd of visitors, **including** many children. The meat was then **fed** to the zoo's lions. "When breeding **success increases** it is sometimes necessary to euthanize," Bengt Holst, the zoo's scientific director, said in a **statement** on the giraffe's death. "We see this as a positive sign and as insurance that we in the future will have a healthy giraffe population in European zoos." Marius's death and very public dismemberment sparked **outrage** on social media, **prompted** death threats against staff at the zoo, and was seen by some animal lovers as provocative **response to** a campaign to spare the giraffe's life in the days and hours leading up to his death. An online petition asking the Copenhagen Zoo to **hold off** on killing its unwanted giraffe until an **alternate** home could be found for him **received** over 27,000 **signatures** from around the world but was **ignored** by the zoo. So were **offers** by wildlife parks in Britain, Sweden, and the Netherlands to take Marius off their hands rather than see him killed.

Inbreeding Worries

Officials at the Copenhagen Zoo, on the other hand, **maintain** they had no real **alternatives** to euthanizing Marius because he could play no role in their breeding program or in any other breeding program in Europe, due to the risk of inbreeding. "Copenhagen Zoo's giraffes are part of an international breeding programme which **aims at ensuring** a healthy giraffe population in European zoos. This is done by constantly ensur[ing] that only **unrelated** giraffes breed so that inbreeding is **avoided**," Holst said in the statement. "If an animal's genes are well represented in a population further breeding with that **particular** animal is unwanted. As this giraffe's genes are well represented in the breeding programme and as there is no place for the giraffe in the Zoo's giraffe herd the European Breeding Programme for Giraffes has agreed that Copenhagen Zoo euthanize the giraffe." The European Breeding Programme for Giraffes **oversees** zoo populations in the European Union. Holst **added** that the zoo regularly has to cull **surplus** animals and that the need to euthanize the giraffe **pointed to** an **overall** successful breeding program for giraffes. Castration or chemical birth control, Holst said, would not have been useful **options**. Marius's place in the zoo would be better served by a giraffe whose genes would add to the **diversity** of the population, he said.

Sanctuary Denied

Others are less **convinced**. "I can't believe it," said Robert Kruijif, director of a wildlife park in the Netherlands, who made a last-minute offer to take Marius rather than have him **put down**. "We offered to **save** his life. Zoos need to change the way they do business." Staff at England's Yorkshire Wildlife Park made a similar offer over the weekend, **citing** their **state-of-the-art** giraffe **facilities** that had space for an **additional** male giraffe, and the fact that they had accepted one of the Copenhagen Zoo's surplus giraffes as **recently** as 2012. They later **released** a statement saying they were "saddened" to learn of Marius's death but **declined** to comment further. The international furor over the death of the giraffe was in stark contrast to the relatively **low-key** reaction to the euthanizing of six healthy lions at Britain's Longleaf Safari Park the same day. The park **received** criticism on its Facebook page, but nothing on the level of opprobrium, let alone death **threats**, that **staff** at the Copenhagen Zoo received. A great deal of outrage was voiced about the death of the giraffe on Twitter. The old petition to save Marius closed on news of his death. A new petition—to **sack** Bengt Holst as scientific director of the Copenhagen Zoo—was started this morning and now has more than 2,000 signatures.

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