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Zoos in a pickle over horse meat

By Brad Haynes
Seattle Times staff reporter

Animal-rights activists campaigning to end horse slaughter in America have run up against an unexpected friend of the horse-meat industry: the nation's zoos.

After Texas shut down two horse-slaughter plants in January, the last plant in the country is fighting off closure in Illinois courts. And Congress, concerned with slaughter methods and the horse's iconic place in American history, is again considering a federal horse-slaughter ban that passed the House of Representatives last year.

That leaves tough decisions for America's zoos, such as Seattle's Woodland Park Zoo and Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium in Tacoma, which have long fed horse meat to carnivorous animals. While several zoos have dropped horse meat in favor of beef in recent years, zoos continue to be the largest consumers of horse meat in the United States.

For Woodland Park and Point Defiance, the plant closures have presented practical concerns on top of any ethical ones, and they are exploring the possibility of switching



enlarge ROD AYDELOTTE / AP Kwanzaa, a young South African lion at Cameron Park Zoo in Waco, Texas, celebrates his birthday with a cake made from 10 pounds of horse meat, plus whipped cream and a carrot.

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entirely to beef in the months ahead.

"It's definitely up for debate," said Kathleen Larson, Point Defiance's interim veterinarian. "Unfortunately, all people won't be happy until our carnivores are eating salad."

The Woodland Park Zoo, concerned about the availability of horse meat, has been examining its options since the Texas plants shut down, spokeswoman Gigi Allianic said, and will soon decide whether to switch to a beef diet or find a foreign horse-meat supplier.

Woodland Park and Point Defiance officials say horse meat is a leaner meat that better matches what their animals eat in the wild.

Some of the country's zoos have already shifted to imported horse meat. The Oregon Zoo has bought its horse meat from a Canadian company for five years, according to Mitch Finnegan, a veterinarian at the zoo.

For other zoos, though, horse meat isn't an option.

"Horses are accepted as pets," says Tanya Wyche, assistant director of the Austin Zoo in Texas. "We wouldn't feed people's cats and dogs to our animals."

Like the Austin Zoo, several zoos across the country have switched their carnivore diets in recent years to beef, as well as chicken and deer, including Chicago's Lincoln Park Zoo, the Brookfield Zoo in Illinois, the Columbus Zoo and Aquarium in Ohio, and the Smithsonian's National Zoo in Washington, D.C.

"We've seen a general shift in the philosophy about horse slaughter," said Karen Lisi, the National Zoo's nutritionist. "At the National Zoo, we decided we should support what our federal government is trying to do."

Don Winstel, the Columbus Zoo's assistant director, like representatives from several other zoos, said the switch six months ago was a pragmatic one as domestic sources for horse meat closed down. He also recognized that zoo visitors might be more comfortable knowing horse was off the menu.

"It's just more alien to people in the U.S.," he said of horse-meat consumption. "But, in reality, I'm not sure how to judge which animal should be butchered and which one should not."

The Columbus Zoo's director emeritus,

Jack Hanna, an animal expert and author who has made frequent television appearances, has joined the campaign to end horse slaughter.



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That campaign was put in the national spotlight last year with federal legislation to prohibit the sale or transport of horses to be slaughtered for human consumption, which passed the U.S. House. The bill, which would effectively end the horse-slaughter industry in America, faces reconsideration this year because the Senate did not vote on the ban.

Until the plant closures this year, roughly 100,000 American horses were slaughtered every year, purchased primarily at local auctions. Almost all American horse meat has been shipped overseas for human consumption. Horse meat is common cuisine in many parts of Europe and Asia.

The Humane Society of the United States has led the charge on the federal ban, arguing that the American horse-slaughter industry relies on purchasing people's healthy pets for inhumane slaughter, often without their knowledge. Facilities and transportation used in the slaughter of horses are meant for cattle, they say, so horses are abused by long trips and ineffective killing measures.

Wayne Pacelle, Humane Society president and CEO, said although most of America's horse meat is shipped abroad, a few thousand of the horses slaughtered in America last year ended up in zoo freezers.

"We're concerned it will be a crutch for the horse-slaughter industry," said Pacelle. "There's something confusing about these zoos that exist for the appreciation of animals and yet they're contributing to the inhumane treatment of this American icon."

"I wouldn't say we're not concerned," said Allianic of the Woodland Park Zoo, "but our priority is to provide the highest nutritional value to our animals."

Animal diets based on either beef or horse meat can fulfill the same nutritional standards for roughly the same price, according to National Zoo nutritionist Lisi.

Northwest Trek, a wildlife park in Pierce County, is facing similar questions about the horse meat in the diets of its seven feline carnivores and dozen birds of prey. As with most of the region's zoos, the park has enough meat on hand to last several months while deciding between a diet of beef and one of imported horse meat.

With zoos like the Oregon Zoo switching to foreign suppliers of horse meat, frustrated activists worry about even-less-humane conditions in foreign factories and point to the rise in American horses exported for slaughter across the border.

"I don't want animals at the zoo eating anyone's horses," said equine activist Carrie Gubernatz, communications director for a horse-rescue operation at Fair Dinkum Farm in Wyoming.

The Association of Zoos & Aquariums (AZA), which offers accreditation to zoos, has remained neutral on the question of horse meat.

"We're aware that the issue is out there, but it's not clear that there's any consensus among our members," said AZA spokesman Steve Feldman. "We're leaving it up to the veterinarians and animal-care staff."

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That leaves vets like Larson, of the Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium, with tricky decisions.

"We're not trying to support a business that's not humane, but things take time. Being such a small industry, it's not going to change as quickly," Larson said. "We don't have a lot of choices."

Brad Haynes: 206-464-3301

or bhaynes@seattletimes.com

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