

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 14 December 2011

[MR PETER BONE *in the Chair*]

Zoos (Regional Economic Development)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—(*Bill Wiggin.*)

9.30 am

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): Good morning, Mr Bone. As chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on zoos and aquariums, I am delighted to have the opportunity to discuss the economic growth potential of the magnificent zoological institutions and live wildlife sites in all regions throughout the United Kingdom and Ireland. That potential extends to aquariums and wildlife and safari parks, and is evolving rapidly, opening up to all forms of imaginative partnership, a fact that is not always self-evident to Government.

I therefore thank the Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr Prisk), for attending this important debate on the future beneficial role of the widespread community of zoological organisations and the important part that they play in society, especially for our economy and future growth. I will make one specific request to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills at the culmination of my speech. My fundamental contention is that, especially given the current focus on economic growth and rebalancing our economy, UK zoos, in their relations with Government, have been categorised for too long exclusively within the brackets of tourism, leisure and the environment. I argue that such sites should extend beyond those brackets and into a more holistic economic development arena.

A recent outline economic impact study on the sector carried out for the British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums—the national association that looks after the interests of zoos throughout the British Isles—using the most conservative formula available, showed an annual contribution of £645 million to our tax base and the stimulation of 11,000 lasting jobs. I will deal with the study in more detail shortly, but I strongly suggest that with proper encouragement, aquariums, zoos and similar wildlife sites can become even more dynamic engines to help our economy in many ways. They can boost local employment, drive long-term tourism growth, enhance a positive image of regional culture and leisure that encourages inward investment, champion environmental technology, assist in the internationalisation of our economy and the mindset of our population and promote and protect native wildlife and our overall UK tourism landscape, as well as providing the more exotic biodiversity with which zoos are traditionally associated. They can also act as community hubs and focuses, supporting volunteering, community activities, hobbies and special interest groups of all kinds.

A glance at any region's blueprint for economic growth and environmental responsibility will reveal few desired outputs that cannot be delivered by the sufficiently

imaginative development of a zoo. I am especially taken by the unexploited potential of our great zoological institutions to act as shop windows championing cutting-edge research carried out by the UK's leading research universities. I am aware that moves are being made to partner zoos and aquarium sites with specific cutting-edge research programmes at neighbouring universities, and I am struck by the fact that the science and technology areas involved go far beyond the easily anticipated disciplines of zoology and biology.

The National Zoological Society of Wales, for instance, is developing ideas in partnership with the universities of Glyndwr and Bangor. The National Marine Aquarium is linked closely to Plymouth university in terms of marine science and regional economic growth acceleration. Edinburgh zoo, which has been in the news recently due to the arrival of the pandas, already has a successful alliance with Scottish universities, particularly St Andrews in respect of primatology. Twycross zoo in Leicestershire is exploring potential with Nottingham in a variety of areas, including veterinary science and animal health.

I foresee a compelling future in which zoos and similar wildlife sites are assisted in taking the excellence of our universities' research and training and placing it firmly in the public arena, in the path both of those who initially pay for it and those who ultimately benefit from the shared affluence produced. The zoo sector's traditional departmental relationship has been with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and has involved regulation on health and safety and animal welfare, as well as the zoo community's role in conservation. That is a highly valued dialogue, and I am not suggesting that it be downgraded in any way. Equally, the work of the zoo community maps on to that of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, in terms of tourism and cultural and heritage identities.

Tony Cunningham (Workington) (Lab): Last summer, having spent all year based in London for most of the week, I decided to have a family holiday in London, in order to bring my family to London zoo. Does that not demonstrate the economic importance of organisations such as zoos?

Andrew Rosindell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, which emphasises the point that I am making. Zoos are the heart of everything in our country. People love to go to zoos and see the animals. However, it is not just about tourism. These days, it is about a wide range of things. It is important to ensure that the public understand that zoos are about more than just animals; they are about conservation and tourism. This debate focuses particularly on how zoos help to strengthen our economy in certain regions of the country.

To return to the point that I was making, zoos involve more than one Department: the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, in terms of tourism and cultural and heritage identities; the Department for Education, in respect of education and the family dynamic; the Department for Communities and Local Government, in respect of zoos' powerful role in promoting community values and as a hub for volunteering; the Department of Energy and Climate Change, in terms of their championship of environmentally sustainable buildings and the ultimate aim of a zero-carbon society; and the Department for International Development, as massively attended public

[*Andrew Rosindell*]

sites connecting the UK electorate and taxpayers with the realities of populations in developing countries who live alongside and interact with the animal kingdom.

In championing this debate, it is my firm and overriding ambition that a practical dialogue should ensue between officials in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and the British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums, or BIAZA, the zoo sector's official representative body. The public goods presented by safari parks, zoos, aquariums and all wildlife institutions are almost too numerous, but in these difficult times, surely a wealth-creating agenda in the context of environmental responsibility should be our priority.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman know what is being done to market our zoos and wildlife parks? I speak particularly of those that are not so high-profile, such as Penclacwydd in my constituency, where the emphasis is on pond dipping. It has the most fantastic array of pond life and a wild bird collection. Such attractions do not, perhaps, have the same appeal as a large safari park. Does he feel that enough is being done to promote and market the whole range of wildlife parks?

Andrew Rosindell: I agree that not enough is being done. That is why I called this debate: to talk not about the welfare of animals, which is normally the topic of debate when zoos are mentioned, but about the promotion of zoos as part of our economic regeneration. I have never had the privilege of visiting the zoo in the hon. Lady's constituency. Maybe I will visit it at a future date. I look forward to doing so.

In addition to strategic partnership with research universities, there is much further evidence that zoos and zoo projects are net generators of prosperity, with the potential to do a lot more. First, let me point briefly outside the zoo world to Cornwall's Eden project. Based on the appeal of the living world and predicated on an environmental ethos, the site attracts large numbers of paying visitors. As a model, it is very close to our great zoological sites. Surely, no one could doubt that the Eden project has made a huge contribution to Cornwall's overall economy and society in an organic place-making sense that embraces and extends far beyond tourism and leisure. Indeed, it is striking that of the millennium capital projects, the Eden project and BIAZA member, The Deep—a sub-marium—have been some of the greatest successes, demonstrating their self-sustainability and viability. Clearly, large numbers of the UK public are prepared to pay to visit sites where they can imaginatively re-engage with nature and the living world. In doing so, they also guarantee their very financial continuity in a virtuous economic circle.

Secondly, BIAZA's initial economic impact analysis, which scopes the overall sector, reveals a current economic contribution to the UK of £645 million a year. That was calculated at the most modest level possible and is thrown into relief by the figure of \$8.4 billion arrived at by the American Association of Zoos and Aquariums. The study's results also unveil the far greater potential for such sites if they are given sufficient encouragement and focus. It also underlines that the 11,000 jobs generated, both directly and indirectly, are permanent or at least

long lasting—not vulnerable to international outsourcing, as so many other sectors are today. Jobs in tourism are, after all, by definition rooted to a specific place.

Thirdly, I refer to the confidence of, and major investment from, the recent regional development agencies and the devolved Administrations in specific zoo sites and projects lying in their respective regions. One might mention zoos in Edinburgh, Bristol, Chester, Wales, Twycross and Paignton, the leading aquariums in Hull and Plymouth, and other sites in this context. It shows that in all such quarters, authorities have already accepted the economic development logic of zoo and aquarium sites.

Fourthly, such organisations support, improve and communicate a certain fundamental quality of life, a clear and positive sense of place and a celebration of locality. Their development helps to retain and attract knowledgeable, skilled graduates and high-earning professionals. Employers and inward investment will follow the people. Many leading zoos and wildlife sites are non-profit charities, and almost all are to some degree mission, rather than profit led, adopting a social enterprise ethos and reinvesting all or much of their annual surplus in wildlife conservation, education, science, the community and other public goods. Thus the prosperity generated by zoo activity largely tends to remain of local benefit, rather than be shipped off by multinational interests.

In addition to the traditional identity of such sites, they can also act as cultural organisations. The National Marine Aquarium in Plymouth is a key partner in cultural and social events such as the “blue mile” and a recently initiated international marine festival. The cultural role of wildlife venues also expresses itself in architecture and local community heritage based in native species and the much-loved landscapes of Britain. Capitalising on large numbers of visitors concentrated at a single venue, such sites can function as tourism hubs and dynamic promoters of the overall landscape, wildlife and heritage of the UK that extends to both domestic and foreign visitors. They are socially embracing institutions that in all sorts of ways provide a positive impact on a large audience.

Finally, such sites are financially stable organisations. They are not holding out a begging bowl for revenue, but offering attractive platforms for partnership and investment. Indeed, the zoo industry has seen strong, long-term growth for more than 20 years. The fundamental zoo proposition has withstood the challenge of changing fashion and competitive technology for 150 years. It is embedded in our British way of life; it is part of our British tradition and it is here to stay. Nobody claims that this relatively small sector of UK enterprise can perform at the massive economic level of, let us say, aerospace, biotech, manufacturing or other industrial powerhouses of the economy. Such an assertion is not plausible.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. Before he elaborates on the niche that zoos and aquariums fit into, does he agree that the sector offers our children and young people—primary or post-primary—an opportunity to expand their horizons that the other sectors he outlined cannot offer in terms of scale and access throughout the year?

Andrew Rosindell: I agree entirely. Zoos provide a wonderful opportunity for young people to learn about wildlife and the animal kingdom, conservation and the environment. They are accessible and good value, given what a family gets from the cost of visiting a zoo or a site.

Tony Cunningham: We have spent a lot of time on zoos, but does the hon. Gentleman agree that people have exactly the same experience in aquariums? An aquarium in Maryport in my constituency specialises in fish from the Solway firth and is a huge educational attraction.

Andrew Rosindell: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. I have mentioned aquariums; BIAZA, of course, covers both zoos and aquariums. It promotes all wildlife sites, whether safari parks, zoos or aquariums, or any other institution that promotes the conservation of animals and education about the animal kingdom.

Niche activity can, in its own framework and at its own level, be encouraged to raise radically its economic and fiscal contribution to the UK. Surely, there is a subtler point: the zoo site may not be the largest employer or the chief economic driver within a given constituency or region, but it is often one of the most visible and certainly the best loved. The celebration and the development of a city's aquarium, such as in Plymouth or Hull, or of a safari park—Knowsley for Merseyside, Woburn for Bedfordshire or Blair Drummond for Stirling and central Scotland—is subtly, but profoundly, linked to a generally enhanced sense of confidence, enterprise and aspiration, national and international attention, and resurgence for the surrounding socio-economic fabric as a whole. To quote a particular example, only two years ago, the citizens of Hampshire voted Marwell Wildlife

“that thing of which we are most proud”.

It was the foremost aspect of living in Hampshire that residents chose to celebrate.

In closing, I look to colleagues on both sides of the House to offer their perspectives and perhaps to refer to individual zoos or wildlife institutions in their constituencies. I request that the Minister and his officials now enter into dialogue with representatives of BIAZA to work towards a mutually agreed policy statement on the wealth-creating identity and unused potential of zoos across the UK and to discuss how Government can encourage and nurture their further potential for the greater good of our economy.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Order. It might be useful for Members to know that I intend to start the wind-up speeches at 10.40 am. There is a great deal of interest in Mr Rosindell's debate, so could Members keep their comments reasonably short? I call David Tredinnick.

9.49 am

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): I am most grateful to you, Mr Bone, for allowing me to speak first after my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell). The debate is well supported this morning, perhaps because of his efforts. He has already mentioned twice the famous Twycross zoo in my constituency. I would

like to discuss the twin aspects of developing economic activity in respect of zoos: what they are doing at home and, in the case of Twycross, what they are doing abroad.

In my area, we feel strongly about my zoo. I claim Twycross as a zoo of my own because I have represented the area for many years and know the zoo's founders and staff, whom I have tried to support for a long time. Twycross receives 400,000 visitors a year and has nearly 1,000 animals—500 mammals, 220 birds and 135 reptiles. It has the widest range of animals in captivity in the area, but they are not in cages. We also have the best laid out area, which consists of 40 acres where elephants, giraffes, lions and leopards can roam around outside.

If we are to develop economic activity in the zoo industry, we must ensure that there are open spaces and that zoos meet the modern requirements that people expect. They do not want to see all animals in cages. I congratulate Molly Badham, Nathalie Evans and Suzanne Boardman and her team on managing to take things forward, so that we have a new paradigm in zoos. We are talking about economic activity at home and what is happening abroad. If someone wants to have a successful business as a zoo, they need to be very forward thinking. I submit that that is exactly what Twycross has done. I shall cite three or four projects in which it has engaged that have increased visitor numbers and set a very fine example.

The first is the Borneo longhouse project, which is part of four projects where the public are immersed in animal activity. Rather than just looking through the window, the public are part of the experience. That first experience was opened by Liz Hurley in 2005. I was very lucky to be there and she did a fantastic job of drawing publicity to the zoo. The longhouse has not only simulated rain and steam, but simulated thunder and lightening. It is a very exciting place to be, and of course zoos must be exciting if we are to attract younger people and prevent zoos withering on the vine, like our public houses; that is a very sad thing. We must have exciting venues for people to visit. I can assure hon. Members that coming back through the bat cave is exciting because one can see the bats, although some people might not like bats that much.

The second very exciting development at Twycross that I would like to mention is the amazing snow leopard outdoor park, which is a massive outside cage that is about two cricket pitches long. Visitors in the extensive visitors' centre, where people can buy a range of animal souvenirs, can see snow leopards out on the rocks. That has been a fantastic draw for people and the experience has been combined with what I was going to call corporate entertainment, but it is done in a slightly different way. People can book the venue to have lunch, dinner and receptions while watching the snow leopards and the birds in the wetland wader bird enclosure that is next door. That 40 acres is a dynamic, exciting, forward-looking area, where animals can roam and people can enjoy them and go around on a little train if they want to.

The project has brought great success to Twycross. In fairness, I should mention that it has received top British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums awards this year for best educational project, significant advances in husbandry and welfare, best new zoo enclosure and best research project for entamoeba

[David Tredinnick]

histolytica—I will send my notes to *Hansard*. That award was for maintaining animal welfare and dealing with that tricky bug.

There is greater economic activity at home at Twycross, but what is it doing abroad? Twycross takes the lead in conservation abroad. It does conservation in situ at home in terms of trying to protect endangered species, and it currently has 67 species of animal in the European endangered species programmes or European studbooks. That is significant because, in the past, zoos have been under attack by people who do not like animals in cages. As I have said, Twycross is a very open area. There is open access and it is forward looking. Also, if we do not have organisations such as Twycross zoo, we will not have some of those species.

We are all worried about endangered species, and I absolutely applaud what Twycross has done to protect specific endangered species abroad such as the gibbon that lives on the Vietnamese-Chinese border that was discovered by Fauna and Flora International scientists some years ago. Only 150 such gibbons remain in the wild, but Twycross has an outreach programme to support them. It has a gibbon conservation centre and a community-based range of patrols. That is an example of what Twycross has done abroad.

Twycross is doing something else abroad. In areas where it is helping animals, it is encouraging and assisting local people to develop skills that will prevent deforestation, for example, by explaining the benefits of fuel-efficient stoves to reduce the amount of fuel wood collected from the forest. It is also helping local people to grow feed plantations to reduce the free grazing of livestock, which denudes the landscape and threatens the lives of the animals. In addition to the ecological research to which I have referred, it is also planting new trees to help supply sustainable firewood for the future.

I shall not speak for any longer because I do not want to be selfish and take up time. As I said, I am grateful to you, Mr Bone, for allowing me to speak first after my hon. Friend the Member for Romford. I will sum up by saying this. Some two-thirds of a billion pounds is annually put into our tax base by zoos across the UK and, at the last count, there were 11,000 lasting jobs in the sector, including those created by the 400,000 visitors at Twycross in Leicestershire. Some 28 million people a year—one third of our entire population—had some connection with zoos last year. Surely, that is enough for my hon. Friend the Minister to take this issue very seriously indeed.

9.57 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) on bringing the matter to the House. I spoke to him yesterday about it and I am keen to contribute in support. The key issue is the regional economic development aspect that is included in the title of the debate. The zoo sector has created jobs. I should like to focus on two locations in my constituency, because they have experienced economic growth as a result of aquariums and wildfowl centres. The wording of the debate title is clearly the key to the matter, because economic development comes off the back of the jobs that are created. We have an opportunity

to get ourselves out of these difficult times. I feel that the sector could be used to the betterment of my constituency.

Others may disagree, but I represent what I consider to be the most beautiful constituency in the United Kingdom: Strangford. I say that for a number of reasons—not only because I live there, but because every morning I wake up and look out over Strangford lough, which is recognised as an area of outstanding natural beauty and as a Ramsar site as well. People all over the world are aware of the area and, for that reason, I am pleased to be here to talk about it.

Ards borough council—wearing a hat that I had for some 26 years; I resigned from it only a year and a half ago—was part of the area's economic development. The council and its development officer—along with the Northern Ireland Assembly and Down district council, which also has a part of Strangford lough is within its area—recognised the good news that there was an opportunity for economic development, which would create jobs and financial stability.

The hon. Member for Workington (Tony Cunningham) is not in his place, but Exploris in Portaferry is part of the group that he spoke about earlier. It is an aquarium in the south of my constituency that attracts approximately 200,000 visitors a year. My hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) mentioned educational advantages and the hon. Member for Romford responded to his question. Exploris focuses on education and is an attraction for schools, which keep coming back, and the format changes every couple of years to keep it new and fresh. The seals in Strangford lough have been the key to promoting the aquarium—they are the stars of Exploris. About three years ago there was an outbreak of seal flu. There was a concern that a lot of the seals would die, but the seal population is back and attracts many people to the area. Exploris can grow: private enterprise is keen to be involved and Government money will be spent. Arlene Foster, the Minister with responsibility for tourism policy in the Northern Ireland Assembly, is working with councils to bring further economic development and growth.

Our second jewel in the crown is Castle Espie. At least one hon. Member in the Chamber is aware of Castle Espie. The gentleman who was originally responsible for the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust harvested, from a shooting point of view, wildfowl in Strangford lough and further afield—something that I have done, too. Although Castle Espie provides an opportunity to shoot geese and ducks, its wildlife centre also has a clear responsibility as a conservation area. People can visit the area and enjoy seeing ducks, geese and waders. Strangford lough is one of the areas in Europe and the United Kingdom that is visited by Brent geese. They come in large numbers, which continue to grow. Perhaps the Government will have to consider whether Brent geese stay on the protected list or become a quarry species, but that is for the future. More than 100,000 people visit Castle Espie every year. There has been substantial expenditure to attract new visitors, and to make the convention centre more attractive to people from outside the local area. For a nice exciting day, it is clearly a place to visit.

There is an economic benefit from tourism, and there is more to come. It is a growth industry on which we need to focus, and that is why I am pleased to speak

in the debate. The two local councils have created 400 jobs off the back of tourism in our area. I believe that tourism can and will provide more. Castle Espie has been upgraded, and Exploris has seen substantial financial commitment. It is wonderful to have those two attractions, along with the Mount Stewart estate in the centre of the Ards peninsula. Mount Stewart is not a zoo, an aquarium or a wildlife centre, but another attraction. I encourage hon. Members, if they have not booked their holiday for next year, to do so now: Strangford lough and the Strangford constituency would be the place to come to, with Mount Stewart in the centre, Exploris down at the southern toe, Castle Espie on the other side and much, much more. They will not be disappointed. Jobs have come off the back of tourism, with potential for economic growth. We can do more.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): As my hon. Friend is issuing invitations to visit Northern Ireland, may I urge people, and urge him to urge his constituents, to come up the road to Belfast? Not only are we investing £100 million in the new Titanic signature project for 2012—a massive investment in one of the world's greatest tourist attractions—but Belfast zoo is one of the UK's leading zoos. It will, for many years, continue to attract tens of thousands of visitors from across Northern Ireland. He is right to focus on the massive tourist boost of having a zoo in the region that we represent.

Jim Shannon: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention and fully support what he is talking about. In Northern Ireland, we are very fortunate to live in much more pleasant times. We have a democratic process that is moving forward, and we have partnership government. It may not be ideal in every sense, but it is certainly the way forward. We have an opportunity for growth, part of which is tourism, as he says.

I am very pleased to be here today to speak in this debate. I encourage hon. Members to consider their holiday destination for next year. I am sure that my right hon. Friend, my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry and I will be able to supply tea and biscuits. We are pleased to speak to this matter, and we thank the hon. Member for Romford for securing the debate.

10.6 am

Mike Crockart (Edinburgh West) (LD): I welcome this debate and the opportunity to discuss the role that zoos play in our regional economies. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) for his work in securing the debate. In my maiden speech last year, I laid claim to represent more penguins than any other hon. Member. I am proud to be able to add to that list, and I must, obviously, mention Scotland's new arrivals. While I am not the only hon. Member here today to represent exotic species, I am very proud to be the only hon. Member with two giant pandas as constituents: Tian Tian and Yang Guang, or Sweetie and Sunshine. They arrived last week and I understand that they are settling well into their new home. I hope to be able to visit them in the coming weeks. I am pleased that Scottish Enterprise has wasted no time in commissioning a report to help to understand the pandas'

potential impact on tourism, and the economic impact at local and national level. I await its findings with great interest.

Today's zoos are much more than entertainment; they are centres of conservation, education and research. Yes, zoos continue to draw huge numbers of tourists, and so add directly to a region's economy through tourist revenues, supply-chain jobs and roles in the service industries. However, their ability to deliver wider and more dramatic results has been somewhat curtailed by a failure to recognise them as businesses, centres of innovation and hubs linking cutting-edge scientific research, education, technology and commercialism. I hope that today's debate marks a step change in that respect. With our focus on growth and rebalancing the economy, it is essential to capitalise on all areas to drive future development and sustainability.

Edinburgh zoo, in my constituency, is home to more than 1,000 rare and endangered animals. It is also one of Europe's leading research centres for conservation and education, working collectively with many other zoos and conservation agencies in co-ordinated programmes. The Royal Zoological Society of Scotland has also worked for recognition by the university of Edinburgh as an accredited research associate, and has signed a memorandum of understanding with seven major Scottish universities to ensure co-operation in research. As my hon. Friend the Member for Romford said, the UK's zoological institutions are uniquely positioned to act as shop windows, championing the cutting-edge research being undertaken in our universities. He mentioned excellent examples in Wales, Plymouth and Edinburgh.

In Edinburgh, pairing with St Andrews is producing excellent output in primatology. The work is not just in biology, but is pushing boundaries and discoveries in chemistry, physics, engineering, maths, design and aesthetics. Interestingly, the Budongo trail, an excellent facility hosting the chimps, also has corporate rooms available for conferences, overlooking the chimp enclosure. It is perhaps arguable who is more bemused by what they see: the chimps or the conference participants. Such research work should not be shut away in our universities and research laboratories, but shared and celebrated with the public and visitors from overseas. It seems clear that, in that way, our zoos and similar institutions can and should act as a hub, translating primary research and scientific excellence into something of commercial and educational value. In Edinburgh, that education extends not only to school visits but to the excellent summer school run for 15 and 16-year-olds from throughout Scotland. Another example of local engagement is seen in this year's 175th birthday celebrations for Bristol zoo, where sculptures of gorillas by local artists were placed on a mass public art trail for 10 weeks this summer.

As my hon. Friend said, zoos and aquariums contribute £645 million each year to the economy. A recent American report suggests that zoos have been doing better since 2008, as people increasingly look for affordable entertainment. With appropriate support and encouragement, however, such sites can become even more dynamic engines for regional growth and development, boosting local jobs, driving long-term tourism growth, championing environmental technology and enhancing regional leisure opportunities, thereby encouraging inward investment. The sector itself recognises that it has more to offer, if only its unique position were

[Mike Crockart]

recognised by others, Government in particular. To quote Dr Miranda Stevenson, director of the British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums:

“Zoos and aquariums have a great deal of potential which is not being exploited by the government. They are not only a significant tourist attraction, but are of great conservational, educational and economic value in terms of local economic development and wealth generation.”

She added that a recently produced BIAZA report was “the first step towards establishing the value of zoos to the wider economic and social good.”

The mention of social good is interesting and I want to touch on that briefly.

In no other sector are visitors so equally spread across ethnic group, age, socio-economic background and level of education. The tradition of a family day out at the zoo blithely transcends social and economic barriers, and includes nearly every child at a formative point in their education. The BIAZA report showed that in 2010, 25 million people, more than a third of the UK population, visited one of its zoos or aquariums over the year; more than 1.2 million of them on an educational visit. That is not unique to the UK. A report on Australian zoos found that more Australians visited zoos each year than any other form of cultural entertainment, apart from watching films. Yet the chance to use zoos, safari parks and the like as a place to deliver key messages on education and opportunity is often overlooked. The UK is not alone in that respect. The same Australian report concludes that

“the contributions that governments make to the zoos sector is very low compared to the way in which society values zoos.”

I hope that today’s debate will mark the beginning of a new era for the UK’s zoos, recognising them as institutions that can help us to grow economies and address skills gaps. As such, I hope that the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills will open practical and frank discussions with BIAZA.

10.13 am

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I shall be as brief as possible, given that many other colleagues want to speak in this important and popular debate.

When people ask me where my constituency is, I often say that I am the Member for Whipsnade zoo, because it is easily the best known institution in my constituency. Although I represent three towns and 14 villages including many wonderful historic houses, thriving businesses, wonderful churches and so on, the best known part of my constituency is Whipsnade zoo, which has around 0.5 million visitors a year. In common with other Members, I cannot resist giving a little plug while I am on my feet, even though it is not the main focus of our debate.

Whipsnade is the United Kingdom’s largest zoo, with 600 acres and 2,500 animals—I must say that to my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (David Tredinnick). People can walk or drive around it, or take the safari bus or steam engine. A range of attractions include cheetah rock, the lions of the Serengeti—including reference to the Selous game reserve, the largest in the world—and the rhinos of Nepal, or someone can be in with the limas or in the chimpanasium. Daily shows

include the “Sealion Splash”, where people who get too close are liable to get quite wet, but it is good fun, and the “Peckish Penguins”. So I can tell the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Mike Crockart) that Bedfordshire, as well as Edinburgh, has penguins. In Bedfordshire we also have not only Whipsnade but, close by, Woburn, with its wonderful safari parks. Bedfordshire is certainly doing its bit for zoos and for tourism in our area.

The Minister will be interested to know that in spite of our difficult times, I am told by David Field, the excellent director of Whipsnade, that visits to the zoo are on the increase and that the number of visitors has been the highest in the past 37 years of the zoo being open. That is excellent news because zoos, as many Members have said this morning, are not only wonderful institutions, where we learn about conservation and protecting our wonderful threatened animals around the world, but thriving businesses. In the summer, Whipsnade can employ up to 300 people directly, and there are many other jobs associated with such a major tourist attraction.

As far as Whipsnade specifically is concerned, it could do even better and contribute more to our local and national economies if there were improved public transport. Unlike some other zoos, which are in the middle of towns, Whipsnade is quite isolated; it is in the beautiful Bedfordshire countryside, high up in the Chiltern hills outside Dunstable. If we had better bus links, perhaps even a direct bus from Luton station, we could get more visitors, contributing even more to the local economy. Forty thousand school children went round Whipsnade last year—a significant part of their education.

Nia Griffith: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is a gap between when visitors come as children and when they return to bring their own children or grandchildren? How does he suggest that we might deal with that gap in the middle—the teenage years, the early 20s and so on—when we do not seem to be drawing in the people we would like to be getting in?

Andrew Selous: One way would be an innovative membership scheme, with repeat visits at reduced prices, so that people go regularly to their local zoo. The hon. Lady is absolutely right; we do not want zoos to be places where people go once every couple of years, but places they visit regularly, without those huge gaps. Pricing schemes that are a little easier on the pocket could be one way of dealing with what she rightly suggests.

Some of the representatives of zoos who are attending the debate have put it to me that it is not as easy for zoos to apply for lottery grants or heritage funds as it is for other organisations such as museums. Perhaps the Minister will kindly agree to look at that. We realise that money is tight, but the thrust of the debate, excellently started by my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), is that zoos are looking for dialogue with the Government and the Minister’s Department. They are having a positive effect on inward investment, creating more jobs and helping to get the economic growth that we need. The Minister is committed to leaving no stone unturned to promote economic growth in this country, so I am sure that he will want to see the zoo and aquarium sector playing the fullest possible part in the important job that he is undertaking for us.

10.19 am

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): I too congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) on securing the debate.

I have always been interested in the subject, mainly because I remember as a child watching “Animal Magic” with Johnny Morris, who did those wonderful voices. I was also brought up on “The Lion and Albert”; Members might remember that on a family visit to the zoo Albert was eaten by the lion, because at Blackpool the waves were “fiddlin’ and small” and it was not at all a nice place to have ended up.

I am delighted to be able to contribute to the debate because, as the Member of Parliament for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport, I host the national aquarium, which is the largest in the country. It plays a major part in the regional economy, as well as contributing to the national economy. Last year, it received around 264,000 visitors, of whom 30,000 were schoolchildren. It employs between 72 and 75 people, some of whom work part-time, who make a significant contribution to the local economy. It had a turnover of around £2.5 million, and received a grant of £500,000 from the regional development agency for capital activity.

I was a candidate in Plymouth for a very long time—more than 10 years—and during the 2001 general election, when the countryside was closed due to foot and mouth disease, the aquarium in Plymouth became a major attraction because people could not go out to the countryside. I have been told that if it is raining in the morning, the local community knows that it will be inundated with people visiting the aquarium because they will not go to the beaches or into the countryside.

The aquarium plays a significant role as a major tourist attraction but, more importantly, it works closely with Plymouth university, which is one of the principal marine science engineering universities in the country. It is helpful that it is part of a cluster of activity, which is why Plymouth is one of the principal global leaders in maritime research. The aquarium moulds its exhibits and education programmes, and drives conservation projects very well and in a big way. It is run as a business, not as an organisation that receives Government handouts, and it ensures that it uses natural resources and encourages its suppliers and customers to act ethically. It is part of an industry that attracts paying graduates from all round the world, so it is an international organisation.

Next year, we will commemorate the death of Captain Scott of the Antarctic. Many people will know that if he were still alive today he would be my constituent. I regularly come across people who tell me that their grandparents used to steal apples from his garden—they could not do that now, as it has been built on. Plymouth will receive an enormous amount of attention because of Captain Scott’s death, and I hope that the aquarium will recognise that.

Another place that will ensure that Captain Scott’s death is commemorated is the Natural History museum, which will run a major exhibition from January to October. Next year will see an increase in the number of people wanting to go to the aquarium in Plymouth because there will be enormous publicity. In the last few weeks, we have watched David Attenborough’s “Frozen Plant”, and that too will be a major boost for the aquarium.

Without further ado, I thank you, Mr Bone, for allowing me to speak, and I wish everyone the best of luck and a very happy Christmas.

10.23 am

Stephen Mosley (City of Chester) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) for giving me the opportunity to speak on behalf of the 7,000 animals from 400 species that live in my constituency at Chester zoo. It is Britain’s most popular zoo, and generates 1.4 million visits a year. It is regularly rated one of the top 15 zoos in the world.

Since its establishment in 1934, Chester zoo and the North of England Zoological Society has always been a charity and a members’ organisation, and has always had a social enterprise ethos. Because of that, Chester zoo has for more than 75 years been a big society success story. Today, it generates some £13.5 million in visitor revenue, and employs some 300 core staff year round, and 160 seasonal staff during the summer. It is a high-quality employer that brings good, long-lasting jobs to our local economy.

Like many zoos—we heard about Twycross—Chester is a leader in conservation, both at home and abroad. In the UK, it is responsible for breeding many native species and reintroducing them back into the environment, including sand lizards, dormice and harvest mice. It is also a centre of international excellence for breeding programmes with other zoos to provide an insurance policy so that many endangered species have a large enough population to ensure genetic stability. We are looking forward to the opening within the next couple of weeks of a £250,000 giant otter breeding centre, which will include underwater viewing areas with tunnels allowing people to pop up among the giant otters. It will include a breeding programme for giant otters, which are an endangered species from south America.

Chester zoo is involved in more than 150 field projects in 50 countries. It directly runs 10 major field programmes throughout the world, involving elephants, black rhinos, jaguars, the realm of the red ape, and a Nigerian project. Through conservation and research grants from the North of England Zoological Society, it funds more than 60 field projects around the world word, including projects on cheetahs and komodo dragons.

Like many zoos throughout the world, much of the Chester zoo’s international work is based in the far east, south Asia and south America, which are some of the fastest growing economies in the world. We have brands and zoos that are doing good work in those countries, and we should use their good name and their facilities to ensure that we sell Britain and British companies to those fast-growing countries to enable and support our economic growth. We have heard about research and educational facilities offered by zoos, and Chester zoo does all that.

I turn to what Chester zoo wants to do in future. It has huge ambitions. For the past two years, it has been drawing up a £225 million natural vision project, which hopes to transform the zoo over 12 years into one of the world’s largest and greatest animal and visitor experiences. The idea is to develop a series of themed zones, and to expand the size of the zoo by one third to make it one of the largest in Europe. As part of that proposal, it is

[*Stephen Mosley*]

planning to safeguard some 500 jobs, and to create 660 new jobs in the zoo and the local economy. The total cost will be £225 million, with the first phase costing some £90 million.

Planning approval was granted in November last year, but there are difficulties because the zoo was promised £40 million from the Northwest Development Agency, and that money is no longer available. It is now looking for alternative sources, and trying to rearrange its plans to ensure that it can deliver as much as possible through its own resources. It is being successful in that. Over the next couple of years, it is hoping to use its own resources to open an islands exhibit, which will focus on Madagascar, Mauritius, Sumatra and other south-east Asian islands. It will feature an Indonesian show house, boat rides, and underwater viewing of animals. It will house Sumatran orang-utans, tigers, komodo dragons, fruit bats and crocodiles. Part of the proposal is to build a 150-bed themed hotel within one of the themed zones.

The zoo's idea in developing the natural vision project is to ensure that visitors will not have just a one-day experience, but stay the night in Chester, go to restaurants, and spend money in the local economy. We have noted that the zoo attracts a huge number of visitors, but many of them are day visitors. They catch a train or drive to Chester, visit the zoo and then go home again. We want to try to ensure that people come and stay the night. If they spend several days in Chester, they can visit not only the zoo but the other attractions that Chester has to offer. They might also visit Liverpool or north Wales in the wider sub-region. Chester zoo sees itself as an engine for growth locally. With its large, high-profile projects planned for the future, it can deliver real economic benefits.

The North of England Zoological Society at Chester zoo has huge ambitions, which is down to the work of the zoo's director general, Mark Pilgrim, and Barbara Smith, the managing director. If the Minister is interested in seeing the good work that zoos do in the local economy and the good work that is planned for the future, Chester and the zoo will be happy to welcome him.

10.30 am

Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) for giving us an opportunity to talk about places and things that we are passionate about: economic activity in our areas, tourism, and, in my particular case, the subject of learning outside the classroom, which has been mentioned by other speakers.

I will mention two examples of progressive zoos as opposed to zoos in the more traditional sense in Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire. We have heard about the conservation and education benefits, so I will not repeat those points. My two examples are perfect illustrations of those. However, we have not touched on the areas of job creation and job sustainability. In the two examples that I will refer to, there are jobs in marketing, finance, IT, animal husbandry, catering and retail, and jobs in the wider community in the secondary industries that rely on our progressive zoos. It is not just about tending animals and teaching kids about the wider world. There is a vibrant, important and sustainable

job market in and around progressive zoos, even in small pockets of west Wales such as those I am lucky enough to represent.

My two simple examples include Folly Farm, tucked away in the village of Begelly in west Wales. I remember it as a farm by the road in 1988 where someone could call in and watch the Williams family milking their cows. A few years later, we had 400,000 visitors going through that establishment. It is renowned throughout Wales and the rest of the UK, and it is known further afield as a centre of excellence as a progressive zoo. It is now Wales's largest paid-for tourist attraction. It has 60 employees—160 when it is at full speed in the summer months—and it is not too far down the road from the other classic example, which is the Manor House wildlife park run by Anna Ryder Richardson and her family.

I used the Folly Farm example to highlight economic benefits; I will use Manor House to highlight educational benefits. One or two colleagues know of my interest in learning outside the classroom. My point, which I hope the Minister will take on board, is that there is increasing evidence that learning outside the classroom brings profound economic benefits further down the line. These establishments take kids of varying abilities from all sorts of backgrounds and enable them to learn things in a different set-up from the traditional classroom scenario. The effects of this on the children and their teachers are fantastic. Some children are not particularly brilliant at classroom activity, but find that when they are in the company of animals or experts and other visitors in the zoo, it brings something out in them that a traditional education has not been able to discover. It improves their knowledge of food sourcing and nature, and their physical fitness and self-confidence in many different ways, and it makes them more rounded individuals. It means that they are more likely to be economically productive when they grow up rather than a drain on the nation. We must not underestimate the value that zoos offer. I hope that the Minister will see that the benefits amount to more than what is on the tin when we read about the zoo in our local paper or on a website. The contribution that zoos can make through the education system, which has an economic benefit, must not be understated.

I will mention the three things that we would like. We want recognition, which I am sure is forthcoming, of the sustainable economic activity, both primary and secondary, that the establishments provide, especially in more isolated rural areas. We want recognition of the value of learning outside the classroom, not as an alternative to a traditional education or as an alternative entertainment to which children can be subjected, but as something that brings real long-term economic value locally and nationally. We also want it recognised that, for some strange reason, zoos do not seem to be attributed the same value as museums or sports and science centres when it comes to funding from either national or local government. Their contribution and potential are obvious at every level, so it is strange that, for some reason, zoos get a second-class deal when it comes to potential funding.

The debate has been very worth while. I suspect we will hear more. I hope that we do, because history has shown that zoos are an active and positive element of economic growth, which we refer to in so many other areas.

10.35 am

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): I too congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) not only on securing the debate, but on his very hard work on the all-party group.

Like many hon. Members, I am keen to contribute because I have in my constituency not just a zoo and an aquarium but an entire safari park. I am delighted to see the director of wildlife, who has come to see this debate, in the visitors gallery. We have been hearing about zoos making a local impact, but I can confidently say that a whole safari park does a huge amount more. Having an institution and tourist attraction like the West Midland safari park is important, because it adds to a comprehensive mix of local tourist attractions. Alongside the safari park is the Severn Valley railway, one of the biggest heritage railways in Europe and also an important tourist draw. Between them, they complement a tourist day out that comprises a visit to the Wyre Forest and to towns such as Stourport-on-Severn and Bewdley with their amazing riverside characters.

The tourist offering is significant to the local economy. As we know, one of the fastest ways of drawing in economic activity is through the tourism industry. It is estimated that these local attractions, which form part of the West Midlands key attractions group, bring in many millions of pounds of economic benefit locally and some 750,000 visitors to Wyre Forest every year. The West Midland safari park is more than just a tourist attraction. As a seasonal employer, it provides 250 extra jobs for school leavers every year. It seems there are few people in Wyre Forest who have not worked at the safari park at some point to gain early job experience. Indeed, the current leader of Wyre Forest district council was a ride operator in the amusement park.

An organisation like the WMSP has a huge amount more to offer. The safari park makes a massive contribution to animal research in a number of ways, from allowing researchers access to study animal behaviour and collecting physiological measurements, to supplying them with biological samples and animal records. The park also collaborates in projects initiated by endangered species breeding programmes, and with other zoological parks, national and international conservation bodies and university staff. In a measure to help educational projects, the park spends six months of the year hosting students from local universities who collect data for MSc and BSc dissertations on focal topics chosen by the WMSP. The park also encourages applications from professional researchers and postgraduate students who are involved in projects that are in line with their research missions.

The safari park hosts many rare and endangered animals. However, it is the economic commitment that the safari park makes to the local economy that I am most in awe of. When the main house of the estate, Spring Grove House, burnt down a few years ago, the managers of the park received an insurance payout. They took that money and tripled it to create an incredibly impressive local venue that in itself draws much economic activity. The managers also created the single biggest seated venue in Worcestershire with a tented function facility that can seat more than 400 people.

Finally, but most impressively, there are plans to create a 250-bed conference venue that takes advantage of the “Out of Africa” theme that only a safari park can

offer. This will be the biggest conference centre in Worcestershire and will add to the incredible array of offerings that Worcestershire can make. The economic impact of the WMSP is incredibly important. I visit it frequently with my young family. It is a truly wonderful experience. To my constituency, it is an important local economic driver. It is an opportunity for school leavers to get work experience and a centre of excellence for research.

In conclusion, I am reminded of a conversation that I had with a constituent. He used to live in Karen in the suburbs of Nairobi. He told me that, despite living in Kenya for 15 years, it was only when he moved to Kidderminster that he could have a sundowner gin and tonic in his garden and listen to the lions roaring in the distance.

10.39 am

Mr Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): It is a delight to serve under your chairmanship Mr Bone, and I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), who has added to his well-justified reputation as a champion of animal welfare in the House by presenting a cogent and compelling case for the economic role of zoos and aquariums. His case has been echoed by the wide and extraordinarily positive range of contributions that have come not only from my colleagues in the Opposition, but from across the Chamber, and included a cameo appearance by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham). He reminded me of his previous involvement with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, not least with Knowsley zoo. We heard about an array of places: the east midlands, Cumbria, Wales, Northern Ireland, Whipsnade, Plymouth, Chester, and West Midlands safari park—I beg the forgiveness of hon. Members if I have left any out.

Together with the obvious promotions and the pride that hon. Members have shown for zoos and aquariums in their constituencies has been an underlying economic theme. Again, I congratulate the hon. Member for Romford because he put his finger on many of the issues concerning the blueprint for economic growth. Zoos can be used for outreach into other disciplines and can forge links with universities or research and development bodies. Perhaps the Minister will pass that message to his hon. Friend the Minister for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning, because research in STEM subjects—science, technology, engineering and maths—involves not only higher education but further education and will be a key area in the future.

The hon. Member for Romford mentioned all the Departments that are involved with zoos, and I warm to that theme. Before becoming a Front-Bench spokesman, I spent 13 years working with Members from all parties to promote the seaside and coastal towns, and the Government need to work across silos to encourage and support such places. We have the same issue with zoos, and I warmly support and endorse the hon. Gentleman's comments about the practical dialogue that is needed between officials from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and zoo organisations. I am sure that the Minister will respond positively on that point.

The hon. Gentleman described the Eden project as one of the most successful of its kind, and he put his finger on the fact that zoos often provide a point of

[Mr Gordon Marsden]

entry to much broader economic activity, not only for tourism but in terms of educational and environmental activity. Hon. Members may smile initially at that point, but it is a central role for BIS and other Departments, especially in the context of grants and their close involvement with the Department for Communities and Local Government.

All hon. Members in the debate have their own personal anecdotes and background. I am a native Mancunian, and my fondest memories of the late-lamented Belle Vue zoo are not so much about the animals—although I am sure that they made an impression—as about the walk-through concrete whale that was a central feature of the zoo. It stimulated me at a precocious age to set up a bring-and-buy stall outside my parents' house in aid of the World Wildlife Fund. As a reward for my efforts, I received an enamel panda badge, which goes to show that then, just as now, pandas were an iconic symbol.

It is clear that zoos play a crucial role in the local economy. According to statistics from Visit England, in 2010, zoos made up a quarter of the top 20 fee-charging visitor attractions in the UK, with well over 6 million visitors. As hon. Members have noted, that was recognised by the regional development agencies, some of which played a key role in boosting tourism in the regions and promoting zoos as part of an overall tourism programme. Sadly, however, the Government's hasty abolition of RDAs led to some funding not going through, as with Chester zoo, and perhaps more subtly, it removed some of the expertise and internal, informal architecture that brought together further education, higher education and entrepreneurs to seek investment for new projects. If zoos and aquariums cannot find other local mechanisms to replace that investment, they will miss out. James Ramsbotham of the North East chamber of commerce recently said that One North East had done a particularly good job of promoting the north-east as a tourist destination, and as I know from my experiences in Blackpool, tourism initiatives are a key spur for economic growth.

Other hon. Members have mentioned their local zoos, so I will mention Blackpool zoo. It has a proud lineage and used to be owned by the council, although since 2007 it has been operated by Parques Reunidos, one of the largest operators in Europe. It, too, has a weird and wonderful collection of attractions such as the giraffe heights, wallaby walkabout and the dinosaur safari—the dinosaurs are not living, of course, but the safari exists. It also has Maisie, who in 2010 became the first western lowlands gorilla—an endangered species—to be born in the zoo. Such zoos work as a point of entry to other attractions in the town such as Stanley park, an iconic park from the 1920s and 1930s that has undergone major renovation in recent years and is adjacent to the zoo. Visitors to Blackpool are brought from the seaside and into the country and to Fylde, and that shows how points of entry can be used.

The Library has risen to the occasion, as always, and provided a brief for the debate. It mentions Chester zoo, which is in the constituency of the hon. Member for City of Chester (Stephen Mosley), and cites an interesting quotation from Charlie Seward, the director of regeneration at Cheshire West and Chester council:

“There is a real push in the city... We are seen as not keeping pace with the competition...from big cities such as Manchester and Leeds. We need to be putting in our own investment.”

That is a good example of how second-tier towns and cities are demanding the ability to utilise initiatives such as zoos.

A spokesman from Paignton zoo stated that it had been able

“to access grants through the South West Regional Development Agency and from Europe. Crocodile Swamp was part-financed by the European Regional Development Fund.”

If the Government do not get a move on over the European regional development fund, they might find themselves in a crocodile swamp of their own—that is a discussion for the Minister and I to hold on another occasion.

We need new local mechanisms to take forward initiatives such as zoos. That is why the recent Centre for Cities report argued that local enterprise partnerships were at a crucial stage and that the Government need to act fast to make further resources available. A start has been made with the recent announcement on cities the other week. I have always thought of the Minister of State in the Department for Communities and Local Government, the right hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), not as “disgusted” but as endlessly positive and energetic. If he were an animal, fictional or otherwise, he would be Tigger. He bounced up and down and talked about the importance of cities, but in this context, second-tier towns and cities, the seaside and rural and suburban areas adjacent to our large regional cities are also important. That is why my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna) recently called on the Government to hold a full impact assessment into the replacement of RDA funding and those groups that might have been left out, such as zoos and aquariums. It is welcome that Visit England has been allocated £20 million under the second round of the regional growth fund, and in his official discussions I urge the Minister to highlight the role that zoos can play.

Where will we be in 10 or 15 years' time? People will not be buying masses of plasma TVs for Aunt Agatha's 80th birthday; they will be buying her a trip to the zoo or another experience. We are in a world where we will be buying experiences, and zoos are very well placed for economic activity in that area, so I ask the Minister to go out and be a friend to the warthog, the wallaby, the ring-tailed lemur and possibly even the slothful panda, although given the extent of its consumption, I am sure that it would not fit with the Chancellor of the Exchequer's lean-and-mean economy today. Does the Minister realise that—to adapt the traditional Hollywood film adage—“There's gold in them thar zoos.”?

10.50 am

The Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (Mr Mark Prisk): I add my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) not only on securing the debate, but on setting out the broad issues, which a number of hon. Members have also highlighted. I am not sure about the animal analogy and I shall spare colleagues by not taking it further. Let me simply say that I have never been good with reptiles, which is why, thankfully, I do not have to spend too much time with the tabloids.

Let me refer to some of the excellent remarks made by hon. Members. My hon. Friend rightly highlighted the heritage of the institutions. Incidentally, given the time left to me, I will use the phrase “zoos and aquariums” as shorthand; hon. Members whose constituencies contain safari parks and other attractions should not feel left out. My hon. Friend raised economic and tourism issues, which I will come to, but he also highlighted something that other hon. Members mentioned, which is that the first practical contact children have with the natural world is often through the local zoo, safari park or aquarium. It is right to highlight that social role. All of us can respond to that point.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (David Tredinnick) spoke of the excellent work of Twycross zoo. I am familiar with Twycross; I have met the senior managers there. My hon. Friend highlighted, as several other hon. Members did, the international role that zoos and aquariums can play. I am talking not just about what we do in this country, but about reaching back to some of the countries from which the relevant species originated, so that we think about a sustainable future more holistically. That is an eminently sensible and good point.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) referred to what are clearly the delights of his constituency and how those local natural attractions have created some 400 jobs as part of the broader tourism industry. If we take that together with a stay-over not in Belfast zoo but certainly nearby, I think we have our Easter trip sorted out, for which I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Mike Crockart) appears to have added pandas to his penguin constituents—it looks as though his next constituency surgery will be much more interesting. He made the important point that zoos are businesses. That is part of this debate. Whether they are profit-making or charitable and therefore social enterprises, I certainly recognise that they are enterprises—businesses. That relates to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Romford. The whole of Whitehall—my Department included—needs to recognise that and engage in a cross-Whitehall dialogue.

My hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), who is, as he rightly pointed out, the hon. Member for Whipsnade zoo, among other things, made the point by saying that he identified with that zoo—that safari park. That goes to the heart of the way in which people regard their area. It is something that they take pride in. He made this very good point: the fact that visitor numbers are rising shows that the public clearly value these institutions in their communities.

My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colville) referred to the excellent national aquarium. I shall come to that. He referred in particular to links between universities and zoos. That point was well made.

My hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Stephen Mosley) raised a question with regard to the plans for Chester zoo. I understand the challenges and the ambitions, which are super to hear about. They involve not just the current otter breeding centre, but also the 10 overseas centres. My remarks in a moment will focus on the regional growth fund, of which there are two further rounds. The management may want to have a look at that to enhance the planned private sector investment.

We heard a contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart). The point about outside learning is right. It is important to understand that this is not necessarily just about an academic subject; it is about the experience gained through the learning process. Clearly, my hon. Friend has two excellent examples in his constituency.

Last but by no means least, my hon. Friend the Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier) raised the excellent work at the West Midlands safari park. It does not relate just to the conservation of endangered species; there are wider research projects. He ended with the marvellous image of someone enjoying a stiff gin while the sun sets over Kidderminster—a very good way to focus on the issue.

In the five minutes left for the debate, I want to focus on the economic and social benefits and make a couple of points about tourism, and refer to the engagement with Government and industry and to the wider issues that zoos, aquariums and other institutions face. The report by the British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums, which examines the economic issues, makes significant statements that the debate has touched on. For example, when we consider indirect and induced effects, we see that these institutions provide some £645 million in terms of value in our economy. They are significant visitor attractions; the spending by tourists on-site of some £246 million is enhanced by additional spending of some £198 million in the surrounding area. That goes back to points made by hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber about how an attraction can be a focal point for wider economic opportunity.

The question is how we can ensure that, as part of tourism, these institutions are able to benefit. In March, the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose), who is responsible for tourism and heritage, set out a clear policy for tourism. It is about ensuring that the visitor economy, which is worth some £52 billion to the economy as a whole, is enhanced. It is about recognising the role that can be played not just in urban areas but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire pointed out, in rural communities—a very important addition.

This is an area where there are real opportunities for growth, but we want to ensure that the sector is both more productive and more competitive. Our domestic tourism industry offers good growth potential because at the moment this country sees fewer staycations—in plain English, that means people wanting to holiday at home rather than go abroad. A lower proportion of our population holiday at home than go abroad. I was looking at the number of zoos and aquariums in the list of top paid-for attractions in England, and interestingly it appears that three of the top 10 English paid-for attractions are indeed zoos and aquariums. A couple have been mentioned today. The three attractions are Chester zoo of course, London zoo and Flamingo Land theme park and zoo. Together, they secured 3.5 million visitors last year. That is more than Stonehenge and—dare I say it?—more than the Houses of Parliament, so clearly we have something to learn in this institution from the zoo industry. I will sweep gently over whether the inhabitants here are more or less interesting than

[Mr Mark Prisk]

those in zoos and aquariums. I will not go into that area, because I know that you want to ensure that I do not stray too far, Mr Bone.

It is important that we consider the wider issues. That means that there is a case for considering, as requested by my hon. Friend the Member for Romford, how the industry and Government can work more closely together, beyond just tourism. I stress the opportunities that exist in relation to the national funding streams. Yes, the RDAs have gone, but we have an opportunity with the £2.4 billion RGF programme, which has two further rounds to come. Some of the plans for the institutions that we have heard about today could well be proposals for those funds. In that regard, I encourage in particular my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester: it is something that can work.

The role of local enterprise partnerships will be fundamental. Also relevant are the growing places fund and the enterprise zones. We are discussing areas where the existing institutions and future ones can play a role. Ministerial colleagues in both the Department for Communities and Local Government and my Department will want to encourage that.

Several hon. Members mentioned skills and science. These institutions are pivotal in that context.

Andrew Rosindell *rose*—

Mr Prisk: I am in the last minute of my speech, so I hope that my hon. Friend will bear with me; I must respond to this point. Science and skills are very important. Biology, zoology and veterinary science are crucial. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport, the national marine aquarium is a classic example of what can be achieved. These are fine institutions. They deserve to be looked at and engaged with by the Government as a whole, across Whitehall—I include my Department. The roles that they can play in relation to tourism, science, skills and, of course, conservation mean that they continue to deserve the Government's full support.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): I thank Members for their attendance and their self-restraint, which meant that nine Back-Bench Members have been able to speak in the debate.

Israel

11 am

Guto Bebb (Aberconwy) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I am pleased to be able to raise the issue of Government policy towards Israel in a quick, half-hour debate. Before I do, however, let me draw Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, where I declare a trip I made to Israel about a year ago.

This is an important issue. The relationship between the UK and Israel has always been strong, and the UK has always been a constructive partner. At times, it has been willing to inform the Israeli Government of the need to move faster towards an accommodation with the Palestinians. At the same time, there has always been a relationship of respect and trust between the two Governments, and that has been clear not only in politics, but, very impressively, in business. The business relationship between the UK and Israel is extremely heartening, and it was most encouraging, on my visit to Israel in February, to see how the Israeli business community saw the UK as a good partner in terms of development.

It is interesting that despite the fact that the Israeli state has been extremely effective at developing the Hebrew language and culture—we in Wales have tried to follow it in reviving our own language and culture—the English language remains an important binding issue for the business community. Traditionally, Israel has perhaps looked towards the United States, but under our current ambassador, there is a developing business link between Israel and the UK. We therefore have a strong relationship with Israel, and we have been able to be a critical friend. That is a good position.

Sir Alan Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (LD): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing forward this issue. Do some of those who, quite understandably, want to criticise particular Israeli Government policies not sometimes need reminding that there is no criticism they make that will not be heard in Israel's vibrant democracy? It is much easier to work with a country that has as vibrant a democracy as Israel, even if we have criticisms of its policies.

Guto Bebb: I am grateful for that intervention from my right hon. Friend, who is a Liberal. When my colleagues and I were in Israel, one of the things we found quite amusing was that we, as MPs, occasionally complained about the fact that we had a coalition between two parties in Westminster. Obviously, Israeli politicians said they would be absolutely delighted if they could have a coalition between just two parties. Israel's proportional representation system means that it has a vibrant political system, in which criticism of Government actions happens regularly.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): I was delighted to hear the hon. Gentleman refer, I believe, to a poem by Saunders Lewis, in which he urges Wales to follow the example of Israel, particularly in terms of reviving its language—it is a poem of great optimism. However, does he not agree that there is a world of difference between the Israel of Yitzhak Rabin and the Israel of Netanyahu?