

The New York Times
Tuesday, September 11, 1906

TOPICS OF THE TIMES

Send Him Back to the Woods

Not feeling particularly vehement excitement ourselves over the exhibition of an African “pigmy” in the Primate House of the Zoological Park, we do not quite understand all the emotion which others are expressing in the matter. Still, the show is not exactly a pleasant one, and we do wonder that the Director did not foresee and avoid the scoldings now aimed in his direction. Ota Benga, according to our information, is a normal specimen of his race or tribe, with a brain as much developed as are those of its other members. Whether they are held to be illustrations of arrested development, and really closer to the anthropoid apes than the other African savages, or whether they are viewed as the degenerate descendants of ordinary negroes, they are of equal interest to the student of ethnology, and can be studied with profit. The display now making, however, does not lend itself well to scientific purposes, but only gratifies an idle curiosity and a rather brutal sense of humor, and can therefore be criticised with reason.

The object of it, no doubt, is to attract a crowd to the park and to increase the patronage of those holding “privileges” there – an object in itself innocent enough, but in this instance attained in a tactless way. Dr. Verner’s purpose in lending his little protégé is presumably that which leads the menagerie men to make similar loans of lions and other beasts – the purpose of getting free keep for them until a more convenient season comes around.

As for Benga himself, he is probably enjoying himself as well as he could anywhere in this country, and it is absurd to make moan over the imagined humiliation and degradation he is suffering. The pigmies are a fairly efficient people in their native forests, with enough intelligence to be successful hunters and to secrete themselves from hostile – that is, other – tribes, but they are very low in the human scale, and the suggestion that Benga should be in a school instead of a cage ignores the high probability that school would be a place of torture to him and one from which he could draw no advantage whatever. The idea that men are all much alike except as they have had or lacked opportunities for getting an education out of books is no far out of date. With training carefully adapted to his mental limitations, this pigmy could doubtless be taught many things of use to him as a tolerated member of a civilized community, but there is no chance that he could learn anything in an ordinary school. It must be remembered that he is not a child, but an adult, long past the receptive age. The best place for him is probably his native forest. His life is likely to be short and unhappy out of it, however tenderly he may be treated.