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Source: BioScience, 56(9) : 714-717

Published By: American Institute of Biological Sciences

URL: [https://doi.org/10.1641/0006-3568\(2006\)56\[714:DEBIZ\]2.0.CO;2](https://doi.org/10.1641/0006-3568(2006)56[714:DEBIZ]2.0.CO;2)

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# Do Elephants Belong in Zoos?

JEFFREY P. COHN

Zoos and animal welfare advocates differ over elephants in captivity. Critics say zoos lack space to house elephants. Zoos argue that they are expanding and improving exhibits, and that elephants live better in captivity than in the wild with disease, drought, habitat loss, poaching, and conflicts with people.

**B**ob Jenkins, animal care and conservation director at the San Francisco Zoo, shakes his head slowly as he ponders the loss of elephants from the city-owned zoo. “Every day,” Jenkins responds when asked if he misses having elephants at the zoo. “Not a day goes by when someone doesn’t ask where the elephants are or when they will be back. People remember coming to the zoo to see elephants. They want to see elephants at their zoo.”

Jenkins expresses his personal frustration and sorrow over a controversial decision by the zoo’s director to send its elephants to a sanctuary for former zoo and circus animals in San Andreas, California, in 2004. The decision followed intense political pressure from the city’s Board of Supervisors as well as charges by critics that the zoo could not adequately care for its pachyderms.



*Crowds of people line up to see Shanti, an Asian elephant at the Houston Zoo. “Our visitors want to see elephants,” says Los Angeles Zoo director John Lewis. “There is nothing like seeing a real live elephant.” Photograph: Michael Hutchins.*

The San Francisco controversy is part of a larger nationwide debate that has been growing over the last decade between zoos and animal welfare groups over elephants in captivity. At issue is whether zoos can provide enough space

to properly exhibit and care for elephants. The dispute has led several zoos to eliminate or phase out their elephant programs, while others are expanding their enclosures to accommodate the world’s largest land animal.

Altogether, 78 North American zoos hold 286 elephants, says Michael Keele, deputy director of the Oregon Zoo in Portland and head of the elephant group of the American Zoo and Aquarium Association (AZA). Of those 286 elephants, 147 are African and 139 Asian. Most of the zoos' African elephants were wild caught, but most of the Asian elephants under 25 years old were captive born. The zoos in San Francisco, Detroit, Madison, and four other cities have sent elephants to sanctuaries in recent years, while the Bronx Zoo will phase out elephants as their current animals die.

### The tug of war

The debate over elephants in zoos is complicated by the precipitous fall in the number of wild elephants over the last several decades because of poaching for ivory, habitat loss, and human–elephant conflicts. The number of wild African elephants has dropped from an estimated 1.3 million in 1971 to between 300,000 and 500,000 today, and only 34,000 to 50,000 Asian elephants remain in the wild.

Animal welfare advocates argue that current and planned elephant quarters are too small. Zoos cannot house a sufficient number of elephants, they say, to constitute the kinship groups—mothers, aunts, juveniles, and babies—that wild elephants form, let alone encourage the natural behaviors wild elephants display. The money zoos spend on elephants, they state, could be better used on conservation in the wild and on animals that zoos can house properly.

Another problem, animal welfare advocates say, is that too often baby elephants born in zoos are later separated from their mothers and sent to other zoos. Similarly, elephants that have lived together for years are sometimes split, especially if one is an African and the other an Asian elephant. Further, adult males are rare in zoos because they require separate and costly enclosures because of their size and aggressiveness. And too many zoos, especially those in northern climes, have indoor facilities with concrete floors and outdoor yards with compacted soils that foster foot infections. A foot infection forced the



*Pictured here are two of the eight elephants that roam more than 100 acres of open space at the 2300-acre Performing Animal Welfare Society sanctuary at San Andreas, near Sacramento, California. Here, their habitat includes forested hillsides, woodlands, open grasslands, and lakes similar to what some wild elephants encounter in Africa. Photograph: Janice Clark.*

Smithsonian's National Zoo in Washington, DC, to euthanize one of its elephants earlier this year.

"Elephants need to be in constant motion," states Nikia Fico, director of Save Tucson Elephants and a law student at the University of Arizona. "They walk up to 50 miles a day. When they don't move, that's when they have physical problems." Fico also contends that elephants in captivity typically die at about age 40, while those in the wild live into their 70s.

"Elephants should not have to live in freezing climates," argues Patricia Derby, a former elephant trainer for movies and television who is founding director of the Performing Animal Welfare Society (PAWS), which runs the San Andreas elephant sanctuary. "We can provide more space and better care," Derby says of the advantages of sanctuaries over zoos. "You have to treat each elephant as an individual. They need space, companions, and a variety of things to do."

"It is unconscionable that we would keep elephants in captivity," adds Gretchen Wyler, a retired actress and vice president of the Hollywood, California, office of the Humane Society of the

United States. "All I want is for our species to be ethical." Wyler cites the Los Angeles Zoo's efforts to separate its two elephants, one African and one Asian, which had been housed together for 16 years. The African elephant was sent to the Knoxville, Tennessee, zoo in 2003 to join an all-African group, a move animal welfare advocates opposed, but she is now back in Los Angeles. Wyler also says the zoo's planned \$38 million, 3.7-acre elephant enclosure is too little for too much money.

"Baby steps!" declares Leslie Schobert, a retired general curator at the Los Angeles Zoo, of that and other zoos' planned expansions. "Three acres is better than 1800 square feet [the standard set by AZA for one elephant, 900 more square feet for another], but it is not enough. They really need at least 100 acres. Some zoos are better than others, but none really does it right. If you are going to have elephants, do it right."

Schobert says zoos should create their own sanctuaries for elephants. Zoos could buy large areas in southern states away from cities, yet still accessible to visitors, with enough space to house herds of ele-



phants. He suggests that several zoos collaborate to build and run regional sanctuaries in different parts of the country. Such zoo-run sanctuaries would be a better, and probably more successful, venue for breeding elephants than their current facilities. "If you're going to spend millions of dollars [on elephants]," Schobert adds, "don't do it on a three-acre exhibit."

Responding to that idea, John Lewis, director of the Los Angeles Zoo, argues that once an elephant goes into a sanctuary, it never comes out. "Sanctuaries would be inaccessible for people with limited money or ability to travel," Lewis says. "And some [visitors] don't appreciate large enclosures with animals far away. They want to see the animals close up."

For now, the only sanctuaries for elephants are the 2300-acre PAWS site in San Andreas; a 30-acre PAWS sanctuary in nearby Galt, California; the 2700-acre Tennessee Elephant Sanctuary in Hohenwald, southwest of Nashville; the Black Beauty Ranch in Texas; and Riddles Elephant and Wildlife Sanctuary in Greenbrier, Arkansas. Not one is run by a zoo.

### The question of space

At issue in the debate is how much space elephants need in the wild or in zoos. For one thing, says Robert Wiese, formerly with the Fort Worth Zoo and now director of collections at the San Diego Zoo, most elephants do not walk 50 miles a day. Elephants only go that far if necessary to find food, water, or mates. If they don't need to travel 50 miles, they don't. "When they have food and water right next to them, they stay put," he states.

In terms of space, no zoo animal has as much space in captivity as its brethren do in the wild, says Christen Wemmer, retired director of the Smithsonian's Conservation and Research Center in Front Royal, Virginia, and an expert on Asian elephants. "It is highly selective [of critics] to apply the space question just to elephants." More important than the amount of space is how elephants use their space, says Michael Hutchins, formerly AZA's conservation and science director and now executive director of The Wildlife Society. They need to walk

throughout the day for exercise and muscle tone, but not nearly 50 miles, Hutchins adds.

Most zoos now walk their elephants daily for several hours, usually before the gates open. At the Los Angeles Zoo, keepers take their female Asian elephant on a 1.5- to 2-mile trek around the park every day, says Michael Dee, the zoo's current general curator. Similar walks and proper medical care at the Oregon Zoo have eliminated elephant deaths or euthanizations caused by foot infections since 1998, Keele says.

Zoo supporters also dispute statements by animal welfare advocates about how long elephants live. The former argue that critics confuse maximum life span with life expectancy. Although both captive and wild elephants can live into their 70s (one zoo elephant lived to age 86), drought, disease, poaching, and slaughter in retaliation for raiding crops keep the life expectancy of wild elephants to 40. Zoo elephants average 44 years, says Wiese.

Beyond walking their charges, most zoos now encourage natural behaviors. Keepers at the Reid Park Zoo in Tucson, for example, often hide treats around the elephant yard, forcing the animals to



*Keepers at the National Zoo in Washington, DC (pictured), and at other zoos around the country now walk their elephants daily to help prevent foot infections and to provide the exercise elephants need to remain healthy and alert. Photograph: Michael Hutchins.*

search for food, says Susan Basford, the zoo's administrator. At the Oregon Zoo, keepers moved a log that had been in the tigers' enclosure into the elephant quarters. The elephants immediately sniffed the log, sounded alarms, and moved to protect their calves, Keele says, just as wild elephants would if they smelled a predator's scent.

Most zoos that house elephants have replaced concrete in their indoor quarters with rubberized flooring and added a sandy loam to outside yards to reduce foot problems. The Reid Park Zoo and other southern zoos now keep the doors of their indoor facilities open at night to give their elephants 24-hour access to the outside, says Scott Barton, Reid Park Zoo's general curator.

Some 40 zoos either have already expanded or are planning to expand their elephant enclosures, Keele says. These include the Los Angeles and Reid Park zoos. They aim to create sufficient space to double the number of elephants individual zoos display, which should, in turn, further encourage natural behaviors, including breeding, and show visitors a true elephant group, complete with adult males.

### What zoos can do

Take the Sedgwick County Zoo in Wichita, Kansas. The zoo is planning to build a new four-acre, \$8 million to \$10 million exhibit, says Mark Reed, the zoo's executive director. The new exhibit will feature a 3.5-acre outdoor enclosure that will "immerse our visitors in elephants," Reed enthuses. Later, the zoo hopes to add another 16 acres to accommodate pregnant cows and adult males.

"We want to use the elephants as our flagship species for conservation," Reed says. "There is nothing like seeing a real live elephant. Most people in Wichita cannot afford or will never have the opportunity to see an elephant in the wild. Our zoo is cheap and open to the public." The Oregon Zoo's Keele seconds that. "We use elephants to get our visitors to care not only about elephants but [about] other wild animals and wildlife conservation," he says.

Some zoo officials suspect that the real aim of animal welfare advocates is not

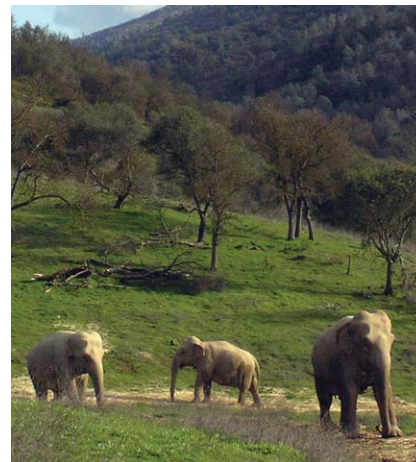
merely sending elephants to sanctuaries but closing zoos altogether. The critics “are really campaigning against zoos,” warns Los Angeles Zoo’s Lewis. He cites previous campaigns against displaying marine mammals in aquariums and current ones against keeping rhinos and hipopotamuses in zoos. “Elephants are big animals that generate a lot of attention” for animal welfare advocates, he charges.

Not so, say most zoo critics. “I don’t subscribe to the view that zoos are bad or sanctuaries necessarily good,” PAWS’s Derby says. “It’s much more complicated,” Tucson’s Nikia Fico agrees. “There are a lot of wonderful zoos like the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum” in Tucson, she says. “But zoos should keep only those animals they can take care of.”

Zoos that do keep elephants are actively sponsoring research on elephants both in captivity and the wild. “We have given more than \$800,000 since 1999 to support more than 50 projects in at least

eight countries on four continents,” says Deborah Olson, executive director of the International Elephant Foundation and director of conservation and science at the Indianapolis Zoo. Research projects include developing ways to reduce human–elephant conflicts in Africa by planting crops such as chili peppers, the smell of which elephants don’t like. Elephant conservation centers in Sumatra are helping determine to what extent poaching adds to mortality in Asian elephants. Also, much of what is known about elephant communications, reproductive physiology, and behavior was originally gleaned from studies on zoo animals.

The bottom line in the elephant debate may revolve around one reason supporters give for zoos in the first place. “I would rather have elephants in zoos than have them go extinct,” says Robert Hoage, retired public affairs director at the National Zoo. “What’s the alternative?



*Asian elephants Wanda, Minnie, and Rebecca head toward the barns at the end of a day of exploring the hills and woodlands of PAWS’s San Andreas sanctuary. The barns are where the elephants are fed, examined by keepers, and housed. Photograph: Janice Clark.*

There is less and less room for them in Africa and Asia. If zoos don’t get involved, elephants might exist just in museums. Zoos are not great places for elephants, but they are better [there] than dead.”

Visit these Web sites for more information:

- American Zoo and Aquarium Association: [www.aza.org](http://www.aza.org)
- Los Angeles Zoo: [www.lazoo.org](http://www.lazoo.org)
- Humane Society: [www.hsus.org](http://www.hsus.org)
- Save Tucson Elephants: [www.savetucson elephants.com](http://www.savetucson elephants.com)

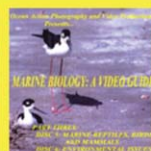
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