

The Death of Gita The Elephant - No One Would Listen!

By Les Schobert

June 10th was a sad day for the City of Los Angeles – the beloved Asian elephant Gita died at the Los Angeles Zoo. The saddest part of the story is not that she died but how she lived in the months prior to her death, and the irresponsible treatment of her by the elected officials and the zoo.

For over two years Gita was warehoused in a tiny off-exhibit area of the zoo with Ruby, an African female elephant in a pen adjacent to her. She had little room to move about, no pool, wrought with pain from an infected foot and was on massive doses of painkillers. Yet zoo officials say that she was “loved, not abused.” Now, I am confident that no one beat her, they didn’t deprive her of food and certainly did what they could medically about her foot infection. What they did not do is to listen to her needs.

Elephants are a highly intelligent, social species built to wander long distances on a daily basis. Their psychological health will have an impact on their physical health. The beloved elephant, Gita, 48, died a sad and lonely death with no one around her when she collapsed in her tiny closet of a pen. The typical lifespan of an elephant should be around 60 or 70 years; in zoos they call 40 years of age old. (Tara, another much beloved elephant was around 39 when she died at the LA Zoo in 2004.) Certainly the life span of a wild elephant is cut short by drought, predation, famine and man, but in zoos the age of an elephant protected from all these maladies should be considerably longer than in the wild. It isn’t - yet **NOBODY LISTENS!**

Who is responsible for this? I know that I (along with others) spent untold hours meeting with City Council Members in City Hall this past year asking that Gita, Billy, and Ruby (the three elephants at the Los Angeles Zoo) be sent to a sanctuary. We also asked that the tremendous dollars (almost \$40 million) not be wasted on another pitiful enclosure at the zoo for the elephants. **NOBODY LISTENED!** Last September a veterinarian that has tremendous experience with exotic animals looked at Gita and her medical records and predicted that she would be dead in six months (it took 8 months) – **NOBODY LISTENED!**

This is an industry-wide problem! Zoos continue to exhibit elephants and manage them about the same way that I did when I first entered the zoo business over 35 years ago. Today we know a lot about the biology of elephants and how to better meet their needs. **NOBODY LISTENS!** Instead the new displays are again the same old 1950’s style enclosure. Sure, more glitzy waterfalls, better rubbing posts, use of hidden barriers instead of bars, better ways for the public to see them so they can’t “get out of view”, better graphics for the public, but better for the elephants – no. The Los Angeles Zoo is proceeding to build a 3.5 acre exhibit for up to ten elephants. It will be split into four yards. The vegetation will be hot-wired off to prevent them from reaching it, but will give the illusion that they are in a jungle. The ground will become hard and compacted and wreak havoc on their feet and joints. The foot infections that Gita died with will continue with the future occupants.

Zoo officials around the country want to dismiss this National campaign to improve the quality of life for elephants as a movement to close zoos – as a movement to send all elephants to sanctuaries – as an animal rights issue being proposed by a few flakes that don’t know what they are talking about. I can assure them that this is certainly not the truth – the facts are indisputable: elephants are dying at a young age in zoos, elephants are not reproducing very well in captivity, the life-threatening foot and joint problems common in captivity, are not seen in the wild – all facts! Again, **NOBODY IS LISTENING!**

David Hancocks, the former director of the Woodland Park Zoo in Seattle said in Time Magazine (June 19, 2006), “I’ve come to the conclusion after many years, that it is just not possible for zoos to meet the needs of elephants.” An increasing number of zoos are beginning to agree with him. Over the past few years five major zoos have decided that keeping elephants in their collections is not in their future: San Francisco, Chicago, Bronx, Philadelphia, and Detroit either have no elephants now or will not have them in the near

future. I personally believe that elephants can be kept in captivity in North America but not in the traditional zoo enclosure.

A few simple changes in elephant management philosophy would alleviate the suffering of elephants in captivity today:

- Elephants are big animals who need big spaces. It's as simple as that. And, they need access to space 24 hours a day year round. (Many zoo elephants are confined to barn stalls 12 hours or more a day, and 24 hours a day in cold winter months, as elephants are warm weather animals and cannot tolerate cold temperatures.)
- Elephants need to be in a herd. Wild herds are comprised of 20 or more individuals. The common two or three elephants "herd" in zoos is completely insufficient. Elephants are very social and intelligent animals and must be able to choose companions. Offspring must be allowed to stay with their families. As males enter their teens, they will naturally separate, but females stay together for life. Today, elephants are frequently taken from their mothers at the young age of three or four, an age when these babies would not even be weaned in the wild.
- Elephants need to walk on soft surfaces. They are not built to stand on hard surfaces for hours on end.
- Elephants should be managed through cooperation, not domination. Use of chains, bullhooks, blowtorches, electrical prods, and the like should be banned entirely in favor of positive reinforcement.

These are simple concepts yet they will have a dramatic effect on the way zoos manage elephants. It is indeed the wave of the future and zoos must realize that the horrible events that happened in Los Angeles this past month will continue unless they begin listening to the elephants.

If you would like to learn more about elephants go to www.zooscandobetter.com where you can link to sites that will tell you about various aspects of these wonderful creatures. The sanctuaries, conservation in the wild (both Africa and Asia), and In Defense of Animals (who is the leader in campaigning for improving the quality of life for the captive elephants) are all linked in this web page. Go there and do some listening to the elephants.

(Les Schobert was the general curator at the Los Angeles Zoo and the North Carolina Zoo. He has over 30 years experience working at zoos.)