

URBAN ALMANAC

GROUP PROTESTS ZOO

BY BRIAN WERNER

While most of the recent attention at the St. Louis Zoo has been focused on Maliha, the zoo's newborn Asian Elephant, a St. Louis group is trying to direct attention to Clara, the zoo's oldest elephant.

The St. Louis Animal Rights Team (START) and the national In Defense of Animals (IDA) claim that Clara's arthritis and other health problems are caused by inadequate facilities at the zoo.

"Elephants are dying everyday, far too you," said START member Trudy Cunningham, "we've got to rethink how we deal with elephants."

START and the IDA have been holding protests at the St. Louis Zoo since May and have no plans to stop. They are using Clara to highlight problems they claim are common in zoos throughout the country. According to IDA's website, www.helpelephants.com, "zoos cannot adequately provide for the complex physical and psychological needs of elephants."

The group claims that elephants need 600-700 acres to live in, as opposed to the 1.5-acre habitat at the St. Louis Zoo. They would ultimately like to see zoos send their

elephants to sanctuaries, which have more land available.

According to Bill Houston, Assistant General Curator of the St. Louis Zoo, "it's not a simple calculation of square foot to elephant."

He argued that while elephants do walk great distances in the wild, it is only when necessary to satisfy their needs, "If the living is good, they don't get up and wander all over the place."

Houston said the complexity of the elephant's habitat at the zoo compensates for the limited space. And he attributes Clara's health problems to her age.

"She's been with us for 53 years. It's not surprising that she's showing some signs of age," said Houston. For elephants, "arthritis is a fact of life all over the world."

IDA's and the Zoo's differing views on Clara's health problems are based, at least partially, on contrasting views about how long elephants should live, and there are multiple ways to calculate life expectancies.

IDA claims elephants in the wild typically live 70 years. Houston said that elephants usually live to around 40 in zoos or in the

wild (the Zoo's website says 35). A 2004 study reported by the American Zoo and Aquarium Association concluded that female Asian elephants in North American zoos live to be nearly 45 years old, similar to elephants in the wild.

Houston said that even though he disagrees with IDA's interpretation of the data, "I don't question their sincerity."

He said the Zoo would invite members of the IDA to join its elephant conservation efforts, "we need all the help we can get." >

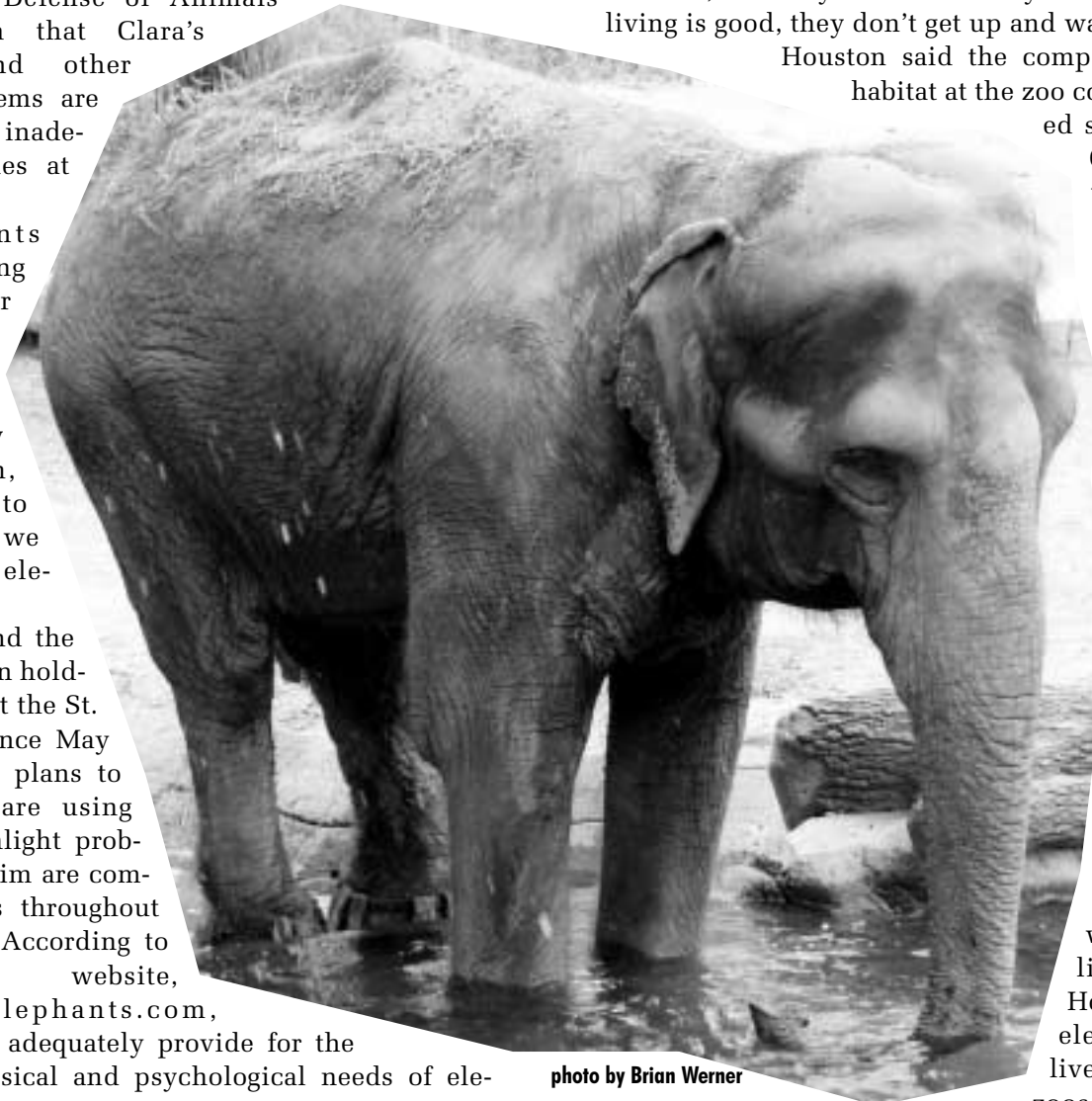



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