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Posted on Tue, Sep. 13, 2005

The real remedy for zoo elephants is to set them free

By Elliot Katz

The growing debate over zoos' ability to adequately provide for elephants - including those in Philadelphia - demonstrates wide public concern about current conditions. Every year, zoos spend millions of dollars trying to treat elephants suffering the ill effects of zoo confinement.

Inadequate zoo conditions such as hard, compacted dirt and concrete and a lack of space lead to a host of ailments for elephants, including digestive troubles, reproductive problems, degenerative joint disease, lameness, and chronic foot infections. Evidence that such maladies do not befall elephants in the wild has led growing numbers of experts to conclude that zoo life itself is killing them. How else can one explain that elephants in zoos live just half their natural 70-year life expectancy?

Elephant-foot expert Michael Schmidt, a former zoo veterinarian who specialized in the care of elephants for more than 25 years, says in his book *Jumbo Ghosts*: "Zoo-genic foot disease remains the number one source of pain, suffering and premature death for zoo elephants."

In response to new space requirements from the American Zoo and Aquarium Association, the Philadelphia Zoo is planning to build a \$22 million, 2.5-acre elephant exhibit. While it is a significant increase to the current outdoor space of a quarter-acre, it is simply not enough for elephants, who, in the wild, can walk 30 miles or more a day with their families. Elephants, the world's largest land mammals, need space to maintain good physical and psychological health. Daphne Sheldrick, a veterinarian and leading authority on African elephants, has said that "100 miles is a mere stroll for these animals."

Another expert, Joyce Poole, who has studied wild elephants in Kenya's Amboseli National Park, concurs: "As a scientist who has studied elephant behavior and communication among free-living individuals for 30 years, I am stunned that the American Zoo and Aquarium Association is not able to perceive the empirical evidence that elephants need much more space than what is currently allotted to them." Poole notes that the ailments that plague elephants in zoos are simply unheard of in the wild creatures she has studied for three decades.

But there is a solution. Last year, after the captivity-related deaths of two elephants, the San Francisco Zoo sent its two remaining elephants to a sanctuary. San Francisco then became the first American city to mandate minimal standards for elephants, requiring at least 15 acres for any future exhibits. Next, the Detroit Zoo, recognizing its inability to provide for elephants' physical and psychological needs, became the first U.S. zoological institution to close its elephant exhibit solely on ethical grounds. The elephants were sent to a sanctuary, where they have access to more than 100 acres of

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soft soil and varied terrains, conditions that no zoo can match.


If Philadelphia residents want their elephants to have good lives, they should advocate for the elephants to be sent to one of two U.S. sanctuaries that provide up to 1,400 acres of naturalistic habitat. There, the elephants can roam, and heal from the damage caused by life in the zoo.

Dr. Elliot M. Katz is a veterinarian and founder of In Defense of Animals (www.idausa.org), an international animal-rescue and advocacy organization based in Mill Valley, Calif.

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