

PLEASE DONATE

NEWSLETTER

SEARCH

ABOUT IDA

CAMPAIGNS

DIRECT CARE & RESCUE

SHOP

MEDIA

BLOG


 Share


 FUNDRAISE
FOR
ANIMALS

2006 was a year that elephants in U.S. Zoos would like to forget. After making the “Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants in 2005” list, L.A. Zoo saw the death of Gita and the National Zoo euthanized Toni, both Asian elephants who had been suffering from chronic foot disease and arthritis. Shamefully, six of the seven elephants who died at Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA)-accredited facilities last year suffered painful foot and joint disorders prior to death, ailments caused by inadequate zoo conditions. Another previously listed facility, the notorious El Paso Zoo, again showed its failure to protect elephants from abuse when Juno was struck by a handler, recalling the vicious beating of another elephant there in 1999. Yet the year wasn’t a mammoth wash for pachyderms. In 2006, three zoos – Lion Country Safari (Fla.), Philadelphia Zoo, and Gladys Porter Zoo (Texas), announced the closure of their elephant exhibits. Two other zoos—Bronx Zoo (N.Y.) and Santa Barbara Zoo (Calif.) announced the phase-out of their elephant exhibits.

In addition, a study found that elephants—along with humans, apes and dolphins—can recognize themselves in the mirror, an indication that they are self aware, leading scientists and the general public to further question the feasibility of keeping Earth’s largest land mammals happy and healthy in captivity.

IDA’s less than prestigious list of **the Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants in 2006** is an attempt to encourage these and other zoos to resolve in 2007 to put the physical and psychological needs of elephants before business interests and end the needless suffering of elephants in zoos. Aberrant behaviors, chronic joint and foot pain due to inadequate movement, and premature deaths are just some of the reasons our “winners” made this year’s “Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants” List.

1. Alaska Zoo (Anchorage) AND Birmingham Zoo (Ala.) —Solitary confinement can be a death sentence.

These two zoos share a place at the top of the list because of the shared plight of two elephants and the common callous disregard for their welfare.

Alaska Zoo’s Maggie has been alone since the 1997 death of her companion, Annabelle, caused by chronic foot infections. Months spent indoors and sedentary in a tiny stall on concrete floors during the sub-arctic Alaska winter can spell fatal foot and joint disorders. As if the thought of keeping an elephant in freezing Alaska wasn’t ridiculous enough, the Zoo has compounded the insanity by building a \$1 million elephant exercise treadmill that, a year after installation, still goes unused. The idea would be comical if Maggie’s situation wasn’t so dire.

Like Maggie, Mona has been alone at **Birmingham Zoo** for almost two years since the death of her long-time companion. Decades of scientific research tell us that elephants – especially the highly social females who live in large, tight-knit family groups – should never be kept alone and doing so has been equated to torture by at least one elephant expert. Birmingham Zoo, under the direction of former AZA president, Bill Foster, is the only AZA-accredited facility to keep a single elephant, in violation of AZA standards and in disregard of science and compassion.

2. Marine World-Vallejo (Calif.)—Still suffering at the amusement park. Through the years, elephants at Marine World-Vallejo have suffered and died from just about every problem you can imagine — from agonizing foot and joint disorders to birth complications that killed both calf and mother. The amusement park’s elephants have endured painful chronic body abscesses and been forcefully bred through surgical procedures that have led to painful infections. The elephants are trained using circus-style methods allowed by the AZA, including use of the bullhook, a device that controls elephants through force and

infliction of pain. The park's seven elephants live in the shadow of giant roller coasters and are forced to give rides to and perform shows for park customers. If there is one facility that embodies everything that is wrong with keeping elephants in captivity, this is definitely it.

3. Oregon Zoo (Portland)—Putting its worst foot forward for elephants. At least five out of six elephants suffer foot disorders at Oregon Zoo, most of them chronic in nature, according to the Zoo's own medical records. Foot disorders, like those from which Pet, who died in 2006, suffered are sadly common for elephants in zoos that provide spaces too small to allow for movement and force elephants to stand on hard, unnatural surfaces. Foot disease can be fatal in elephants, especially when chronic infections invade the bones of the feet. An IDA survey of medical records for 35 zoos holding elephants found that foot disorders occurred in 62 percent of the elephants.

4. St. Louis Zoo (Mo.)—Gateway to suffering for elephants. If the elephant exhibit at St. Louis Zoo is considered "state-of-the-art," as the Zoo proclaims, then it's no wonder that elephants in zoos are suffering from a variety of health disorders. Most of St. Louis Zoo's resident elephants have experienced joint and/or foot disorders. This includes Rani, who, at only ten years old, has experienced "chronic, intermittent lameness"; Clara, who can barely move due to painful arthritis and foot disease; and Carolyn, who suffered severe arthritis before her premature death in 2000 at age 32. The causes of these problems are the zoo environment itself: St. Louis Zoo's largest outdoor yard is only one-half acre, for a species documented to move tens of miles daily in the wild. During the winter, the elephants are held indoors in tiny stalls, where they stand on unheated concrete floors for hours on end. Lack of space and unnatural conditions spells state-of-the-art suffering for the elephants at St. Louis Zoo.

5. Abilene Zoo (Texas)—Unfriendly confines at the zoo. At Abilene Zoo, Tanzy, who suffers arthritis and foot disease, has been put on the drug Xanax after showing aggression toward keepers and the other elephant, Tanya. Tanya has suffered broken tusks from ramming doors and fighting with Tanzy through a fence. While aggression in free-ranging elephants is rare, especially in females, it is all too common in zoos. The IDA survey of 35 zoos holding elephants found aggression in 28 percent of the elephants (the actual number is likely higher since aggression is frequently not reported in medical records), and 25 percent of elephants received injuries from other elephants. Factors contributing to aggression are keeping groups of unrelated females together, small enclosure size and restricted movement, stress, and pain related to arthritis and foot infections. Given adequate space and more natural conditions, such as at an elephant sanctuary, aggression generally is not a problem.

6. Topeka Zoo—Giving 'em an inch. When the USDA inspected the Topeka Zoo in late 2005, officials cited the Zoo for failing to provide adequate veterinary care to the elephants, especially noting "poor condition of the feet." Medical records for Tembo and Sunda reveal chronic health problems including foot disorders and infections of the temporal glands on the sides of the head (both problems are associated with hard surfaces like concrete), and aberrant behaviors such as aggression. Unnatural zoo conditions and lack of space play a major role in these problems, yet Topeka Zoo's answer is to add a measly 5,000 square feet of space for both the elephants and giraffes. This is the Zoo's idea of taking its elephant management program "into the future." To make matters worse, the Zoo unwisely envisions introducing two more elephants into this tiny facility. The only future elephants will know at Topeka Zoo is one of continued suffering.

7. Rosamond Gifford Zoo (Syracuse, N.Y.)—Failed Expectations. In 2006, a risky emergency surgery was performed on Romani after her dead fetus became lodged in the birth canal. Birth complications are common for elephants in zoos. The IDA survey of medical records for 35 zoos found that 11 of out 15 pregnancies involved birth complications, including nine stillbirths. It is commonly known that elephants do not breed well in zoos due to lack of space and exercise, obesity, and stress, and there is a high risk of complications that can result in death of the calf and the mother. While zoos like Rosamond Gifford Zoo boast of their breeding "success," the facts present a different story: Of eight calves born at Rosamond Gifford Zoo, three were stillbirths and only three elephants remain alive today.

8. San Diego Zoo and Wild Animal Park—No class when it comes to elephants. For all its claims of being a world-class zoo, when it comes to elephants, the pachyderms are definitely given second-class treatment and worse. International controversy surrounded the importation of seven elephants from the wilds of Swaziland to the Wild Animal Park in 2003, despite offers to move the elephants to reserves elsewhere in Africa. Prior to the import, three resident elephants accustomed to San Diego's warm clime were shipped to chilly Chicago's Lincoln Park Zoo, despite welfare concerns. All three elephants died within two years. The Wild Animal Park now houses nine elephants on a cramped 2.5 acres. At the San Diego Zoo, three elephants live in a 17,000 square foot enclosure built in 1963. The Zoo reportedly plans to expand to a stingy two acres – for an animal that walks tens of miles a day in the wild and requires movement for foot, joint, and overall health.

9. Jacksonville Zoo (Fla.) AND Lee Richardson Zoo (Kan.)—Trading elephants like baseball cards. These zoos have the dishonor of sharing a place on IDA's list because of their recent elephant swap. After more than 20 years in sunny Florida, two female African elephants, Missy and Kimba, were exiled to frigid Kansas. What did they do to deserve this? Both have become infertile at abnormally young ages, 37 and 24 respectively, a problem common to elephants in zoos. In the wild, African elephants can breed into their 60s. The other two female African elephants in the trade, Moki and Chana (both 24), were shipped off to Jacksonville Zoo. If they fail to breed, these elephants just may end up on the trading block once again.

10. Maryland Zoo—Show me the money. This Baltimore zoo faces decreased attendance, a record budget deficit of \$3 million, and is hoping for a bail-out from a state that already faces a daunting \$1 billion annual revenue shortfall. So what does it do? The Zoo, which already holds two elephants and can't even afford to stay open during the winter, commits to taking on three more elephants from the Philadelphia Zoo. Never mind that elephants are the most expensive animals to maintain and that keeping five elephants can cost as much as half a million dollars annually. In the long run, it's the elephants who will suffer from this desperately poor planning. The Zoo should forget about exhibiting elephants, use the money to renovate other outdated exhibits, and move the elephants to a sanctuary instead.

Dishonorable Mentions

El Paso Zoo—As if the memory of Sissy's vicious beating in 1999 wasn't enough, a long-time zoo employee was fired in 2006 for striking one of the elephants, raising questions about the zoo's management and possible on-going abuse. In addition, the City of El Paso, which runs the zoo, has yet to produce promised funding to "expand and enrich" El Paso Zoo's outdated elephant enclosure, as promised well over a year ago. It's time for the City of El Paso to admit it cannot provide for the needs of Juno and Savannah and send them to a sanctuary.

Los Angeles Zoo—Gita, an Asian elephant, died in 2006 after collapsing and suffering for as long as 17 hours. IDA exposed the Zoo's failure to provide timely veterinary assistance after uncovering information that zoo personnel had spotted Gita in the "downed" position and did nothing to help her. Gita had suffered severe arthritis, an abscess on her back so large that a vet was able to put an arm up into it, and painful chronic foot disease prior to her death. Gita's companion, Ruby, cruelly remains alone at the Zoo more than six months later, despite calls to send her to an elephant sanctuary.

Woodland Park Zoo—This zoo has ignored the compassionate pleas of elephant advocates, a former director of the zoo, and local media, and refused to send an elephant named Bamboo to a sanctuary. Bamboo was transferred to Point Defiance Zoo in 2005 because she was deemed "aggressive," only to be returned in 2006 after efforts to integrate her failed. Bamboo now faces an uncertain future at Woodland Park Zoo and may possibly be shipped off to yet another zoo.



IN DEFENSE OF ANIMALS

3010 Kerner Blvd,
San Rafael, California 94901

T: +1 415 448 0048
F: +1 415 454 1031

E: info@idausa.org
EIN: 68-000-8936

Privacy Policy

SUPPORT

Terms of Use

General Contact

Media Inquiry