Zoos are increasingly under the microscope following the San Francisco Zoo tiger tragedy and a continuing nationwide debate about the welfare of elephants in zoos. Amidst the heightened controversy, In Defense of Animals (IDA) today released its fourth annual list of the Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants in 2007.

Compiled for the first time with public input through Internet voting, the 2007 list reflects a year that zoos would prefer to forget. Of seven elephants who died at Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA)-accredited zoos in 2007, at least four suffered from arthritis and chronic foot disorders, caused by lack of space and inadequate, unnatural zoo exhibits. Among the worst cases: Clara at the St. Louis Zoo and Carol at the San Diego Wild Animal Park. Both elephants were euthanized after becoming crippled and debilitated by excruciating foot and joint disease. A deadly infectious disease that is spreading through the U.S. zoo population claimed the lives of two more young elephants in zoos in 2007. The deaths of Hansa (age 6) at Woodland Park Zoo in Seattle and Nisha (age 16 months) at the Dickerson Park Zoo in Missouri prompted IDA to demand that zoos stop breeding Asian elephants and adopt strict limits on transfers between zoos.

2007 also saw the transfer of three elephants from archaic and inadequate zoo exhibits to natural habitat sanctuaries: Ruby from the Los Angeles Zoo, Dulary from the Philadelphia Zoo, and Maggie from the Alaska Zoo. The latter two zoos are shuttering their elephant displays, bringing to 17 the number of zoos that have closed or plan to close their elephant exhibits.

“The Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants list draws attention to the fact that elephants are needlessly suffering and dying prematurely from inadequate and inhumane zoo conditions,” said IDA president Elliot M. Katz, DVM. “The problems such as aberrant behaviors, lethal joint and foot disorders, and premature death chronicled in this list speak loudly to the mammoth changes that are needed to improve the lives of elephants in zoos.”

**Top Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants in 2007**

1. **Six Flags Discovery Kingdom** (Vallejo, Calif.)

Discovering the cruelty. For the fourth consecutive year, Six Flags lands on the list thanks to its history of terrible elephant care and disregard for the health and well-being of seven elephants forced to live in the shadow of roller coaster rides, amidst noisy, rowdy crowds. Nine elephants have died at the amusement park since 1995, including five elephants who were euthanized as a direct result of the same foot and joint disorders that afflict at least two elephants currently. Painful ailments caused by the elephants’ cramped and barren exhibit. An IDA investigation revealed that elephants with diseased feet and joints are forced to stack 600-pound logs and perform in shows for the public, despite their afflictions. To force the elephants to perform and give rides, Six Flags coercively controls elephants through force and physical punishment with a
bullhook, a device similar to a fireplace poker that keepers use to poke, prod and stab the elephants into compliance.

2. Woodland Park Zoo (Seattle, Wash.)

Putting zoo profits ahead of elephant health and welfare. This zoo, on the list for the third time, made headlines in 2007 after six-year old Hansa suddenly died from the elephant herpesvirus. Despite the fact that so little is known about the highly fatal disease and its transmission, the Zoo recently artificially inseminated Hansa’s mother, Chai, placing any offspring at high risk of contracting and dying from this terrible disease that causes massive internal hemorrhaging and kills almost every elephant afflicted. Chai may have been exposed to the deadly virus when she was sent to Dickerson Park Zoo for breeding. (She conceived Hansa there.) Five elephants at Dickerson have been stricken with the virus; four died. The Woodland Park Zoo’s actions show that it apparently values the increased revenue that a baby elephant produces over the lives of highly endangered Asian elephants.

2. El Paso Zoo (Tex.)

Abandon all hope. In 2006, this zoo admitted its three-quarter acre elephant exhibit was too small and the city council formed a committee to explore expansion options. In 2007, newly-hired zoo director Steve Marshall convinced the city that the very same exhibit was acceptable. He cited the AZA’s pitifully minimal standards that allow elephants to be kept in an outdoor space about the size of a three-car garage and an indoor pen measuring only 20 feet by 20 feet. By accepting Marshall’s recommendation to essentially do nothing, the council guaranteed a never-ending cycle of elephant suffering, with elephants being held in woefully inadequate conditions until they die and are replaced like worn out appliances. Marshall once stated that zoos are messengers of hope. For El Paso Zoo’s elephants, the message is abandon all hope for a better life. The El Paso Zoo makes the notorious list for the fourth consecutive year.

3. Oregon Zoo (Portland, Ore.)

Too little too late. The Oregon Zoo has long touted its “successful” elephant breeding program, though it fails to mention that more than half of the calves born did not survive to adulthood, young calves were cruelly separated from their mothers when relocated to other facilities (including circuses), and breeding-age females have been disabled by foot disease and arthritis, with many dying during their prime. Now that Rose-Tu is pregnant and a new breeding program appears to be starting, the question is: Where will the Zoo put more elephants, especially if the offspring are hard-to-keep males? Its answer is to renovate the existing exhibit, giving its six elephants (and one on the way) a measly three-acres, which will necessarily be divided into at least four yards. Considering that elephants are earth’s largest land mammal and need space to thrive, you would think
the Zoo could do better. It can. Although the current plan is too little too late for its elephants, Oregon Zoo could take the lead and create a much larger, off-site natural refuge that would far better suit the Zoo’s elephants by providing the space and natural conditions they need to thrive. The Oregon Zoo makes the list for the second consecutive year.

4. Buffalo Zoo (NY)

Let the elephants shuffle off out of Buffalo. What could be worse than holding three Asian elephants in a 1912-era elephant house that gives the elephants less than 1,200 square feet of indoor space in which to spend their the majority of their lives? The answer: Wasting over $1 million on a token renovation that will add a miserly 600 square feet of space for the elephants. This ensures the elephants will continue to be held in too-small pens throughout Buffalo’s long and frigid winter, where the elephants are forced to stand and lay on concrete floors in their own feces and urine for prolonged periods, enduring conditions that can destroy elephants’ feet and joints. In addition, the Buffalo Zoo reportedly chains the elephants overnight, a cruel practice that seriously impacts their health and well-being. Buffalo is no place for elephants, who hail from tropical climates and need plenty of room to move. It’s time to shut down this antiquated exhibit and shuffle those elephants out of Buffalo to an elephant sanctuary. This is Buffalo’s first appearance on the list.

5. Dickerson Park Zoo (Mo.)

History repeats itself. Dickerson Park Zoo has a terrible history with elephants. Of 10 elephants born at the Zoo, only two are alive today. But it’s the five calves who were infected with the highly fatal elephant herpesvirus that makes this zoo a real hot spot for the disease, with all but one dying from the virus. Despite the deaths, which first began in 1991, the Zoo continued its breeding program until just recently, often transporting female elephants in and out from other zoos and circuses, and potentially spreading the disease widely. Only after the death of 16-month-old Nisha in December 2007 did the Dickerson Park Zoo put a temporary hold on elephant breeding. The zoo should severely restrict elephant transfers as well. History has repeated itself enough at Dickerson Park Zoo; the deadly elephant herpesvirus should never again be allowed to kill another baby elephant.

6. TIE: Los Angeles Zoo (Calif.)/San Antonio Zoo (Tex.)

One is the loneliest number. These zoos share a place on the list because of the similar plight of two solitary elephants and the callous disregard for their welfare.

Visitors at Los Angeles Zoo, adults and children alike, comment on the sad, repetitive behavior of the Zoo’s lone elephant, Billy, as he incessantly bobs his head up and down, day in and day out, a pitiable display in response to his lonely and unnatural existence. Elephants do not naturally live in isolation and require social interaction with other elephants, yet Billy has been alone for more than three years. Turning a blind eye to his suffering, the L.A. Zoo is instead focused on an outrageously expensive – and taxpayer-funded – $40 million elephant exhibit renovation that will take almost two years to complete, and will only
provide 3.5 acres, subdivided into four yards, for the earth’s largest land mammals. Billy provides a clear example of how zoos put business interests far above the welfare of elephants. This is the L.A. Zoo’s fourth appearance on the list.

Following the death of Alport last November at San Antonio Zoo, the surviving female elephant, the misnamed Lucky, now lives in solitary confinement, a condition that is particularly cruel for this intensely social species. Free-ranging elephants live in large matriarchal family groups, with relationships extending to the larger population, encompassing hundreds of individuals; females remain with the herd for life. The Zoo should bestow some luck upon Lucky and send her to a sanctuary where she can live in a large, natural environment with others of her species. The small and outdated exhibit at San Antonio Zoo is completely unsuitable for Lucky or any other elephant and should be permanently closed.

7. St. Louis Zoo (Mo.)

Not even close to what nature intended. The dysfunctional life of elephants in zoos was graphically illustrated at St. Louis Zoo, making its third consecutive appearance on the annual list. Clara was euthanized at age 54, after suffering for years from crippling arthritis and chronic foot disease, the result of decades spent in the Zoo’s tiny exhibit. In February, Jade was born, but rejected by her mother, Rani, something that is common in captivity, but unheard of in the wild, where females in the herd help to care for and rear calves. Despite the fact that Rani has the benefit of living with and learning from her mother Ellie, who has her own calf, Rani failed to display important maternal behaviors. Meanwhile, Sri apparently continues to carry the fetus that died in utero in November 2005. Elephants giving birth at St. Louis are routinely isolated and chained during labor and delivery, conditions so adverse and unnatural that tragedies are bound to occur. And what do Jade and her niece Maliha have to look forward to as they grow up in the St. Louis Zoo? Intense confinement to a half-acre or less of outdoor space and long stretches behind locked doors in concrete stalls at night and 24/7 during cold Midwest winter days. Nature never intended elephants to live like this.

8. Disney’s Animal Kingdom ( Fla.)/Riverbanks Zoo (So. Carolina)

Nothing magical about this elephant swap. Dumbo may have flown away, but the elephants at Disney’s Wild Animal Kingdom are stuck there, that is until the park decides to dump them because they can no longer breed. In October, Disney trucked Robin and Petunia to Riverbanks Zoo in exchange for Tumpe, a younger elephant whom
Disney wants to breed. Although only in their mid-30s, Robin and Petunia suffer from early infertility, a condition that plagues female elephants in zoos. (Wild elephants can reproduce into their 50s and sometimes 60s.) Transferring elephants between zoos is a dubious yet common practice that destroys social stability and often lands elephants in dysfunctional social groups where aggression is a problem. Robin and Petunia may face the latter at Riverbanks, which has a history of serious aggression between its elephants. For Tumpe, life won't be so magical either. At Disney, where illusion reigns, the elephants spend the majority of their lives in small, behind-the-scenes paddocks and not the lush-looking “habitats” seen by visitors. Aggression between adult females has led to the separation of some elephants. If these elephants could fly like Dumbo, they'd all head straight to a natural habitat sanctuary, truly the happiest place on earth for elephants.

9. Maryland Zoo (Baltimore, Md.)

Denial ain’t just a river in Egypt. This zoo made last year’s Top Ten list, with IDA correctly predicting that the Maryland Zoo didn’t have the financial resources to take three elephants from Philadelphia Zoo. The Zoo indeed cancelled plans to receive them, citing the delay of a pie-in-the-sky $11 million elephant exhibit expansion plan amid slumping attendance and a record budget deficit. At the time, Zoo president Elizabeth Grieb stated, “For the next year or two, we’ll focus on things that are not as incredibly expensive as bringing in new elephants.” Well, that didn’t last long. In December, the Zoo brought in two elephants, a male and a female, claiming to create a “breeding group.” The Zoo is making minor renovations to squeeze the pair into already tight quarters, obviously banking on a baby elephant to boost attendance and generate revenue. IDA again predicts that the elephants will suffer from the Zoo’s outrageously poor planning. This cash-strapped Zoo should follow Philadelphia Zoo’s example and close its elephant exhibit.