2008 TEN WORST ZOOS FOR ELEPHANTS

The 2008 list of the Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants, released today by In Defense of Animals (IDA), comes just one month after the zoo world was stung by a scientific study condemning the deadly track record of zoos with elephants. In a groundbreaking peer-reviewed study published December 2008, the prestigious journal Science documented that elephants in zoos live dramatically shorter lives than their wild counterparts. The study should be the tipping point in local controversies over suffering captive elephants in cities across the U.S., including Los Angeles, San Antonio, Dallas, Philadelphia, and Seattle.

Based on nominations made by the public, IDA's 2008 list spotlights the perils that elephants face in zoos. At least half of the 10 elephant deaths in U.S. Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA)-accredited zoos were related to birth complications, including two mothers and three calves. Birth complications are common and deadly in captivity, where tiny displays prevent the extensive movement elephants need to keep fit. For the second year in a row, a young elephant was lost to a deadly infectious disease that is striking captive elephants in zoos. Two-year-old Mac became the sixth elephant born at the Houston Zoo to die from the highly fatal elephant herpesvirus.

"Zoos can no longer claim they are conserving elephants when they are actually killing these endangered animals decades before their natural time," said IDA president Elliot M. Katz, DVM. "The Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants highlights the devastating effects of captivity on elephants, including birth complications, aberrant behaviors, lethal joint and foot disorders and premature death."

"Zoos must stop ignoring the science that reveals who elephants are, what they need, and how they suffer in zoo exhibits. It's time for mammoth changes in the housing and care of captive elephants in this country," Katz continued, urging zoos to follow the lead of the two U.S. elephant sanctuaries that provide elephants with hundreds to thousands of acres of natural habitat over which to roam and engage in more normal elephant behaviors.

"If zoos can't meet the vast physical and psychological needs of elephants, then they shouldn't have elephants at all," Katz concluded.

IDA's 2008 Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants List:
1. San Antonio Zoo (Texas)

No luck for Lucky The San Antonio Zoo continues to hold its only surviving Asian elephant, the woefully misnamed Lucky, in solitary confinement since the death of her companion, Alport, in November 2007. Elephants are intensely social animals who need companionship in order to thrive. Free-ranging elephants live in large matriarchal family groups in which females remain with their mothers for life. Unlucky Lucky has been alone for over a year, and without another Asian elephant since 2004. The zoo refuses to do right by Lucky and send her to a sanctuary where she can live in a spacious, natural environment with others of her species, even though San Antonio’s plan is to replace Lucky with African elephants. Experience has shown that solitary elephants can turn into social butterflies in sanctuary settings, yet the San Antonio Zoo stubbornly continues to isolate Lucky in an outdated exhibit far too small to meet her natural needs. The San Antonio Zoo can change this sad elephant’s luck by moving her to a sanctuary without delay. This is the zoo’s second appearance on IDA’s Ten Worst Zoos list.

2. Houston Zoo (Texas)

Breeding ground for misery Elephants breed poorly in zoos, yet another indicator that zoo conditions are inadequate for the Earth’s largest land mammals. But the Houston Zoo’s Asian elephant breeding record is by far the worst in the country. Of 14 known elephant births, not one is alive today. To make matters worse, the zoo is a “hot spot” for the gruesome and highly fatal elephant herpesvirus. At the Houston Zoo, the deadly disease has killed six of eight live-born elephants, including two-year-old Mac last November, and may be associated with six stillbirths. Despite this grim history, the Houston Zoo continues to recklessly breed elephants, playing Russian roulette with the lives of these highly endangered animals. Mac’s mother Shanti is again pregnant, potentially putting yet another young elephant at risk of a horrific death. The Houston Zoo claims that breeding must continue so the disease can be further studied, meaning that it knowingly is engaging in a grisly experiment in which 75% of the subjects have died. This is the Houston Zoo’s second appearance on IDA’s Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants list.

3. Los Angeles Zoo (California)

Learn about the wild – spending, that is The Los Angeles Zoo has a terrible history with elephants. Of the 13 who died there since 1975, more than half did not live 20 years, about a third of an elephant’s natural lifespan. The zoo’s solitary elephant Billy incessantly bobs his head up and down, a sign of psychological distress. Yet the zoo wants to construct a $42 million exhibit that still won’t provide the space and natural conditions elephants need to live longer and healthier lives. In the past 10 years, zoos around the globe have spent or committed an estimated $500 million to build or renovate displays for about 250 captive elephants, despite the gross lack of
evidence that these changes will improve health or longevity. By contrast, the Kenya Wildlife Service protects tens of thousands of free-ranging elephants on an annual budget of only $20 million. Those free-ranging elephants, despite facing the elements, habitat loss, and poachers, live an average three times as long as their cousins held captive in zoos. Fortunately, the City of Los Angeles is questioning the logic of its staggeringly expensive elephant exhibit, and will vote in January on canceling the project and sending Billy to a large, natural-habitat sanctuary. The Los Angeles Zoo makes IDA’s Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants list for the fourth time, plus an additional time when it received our Dishonorable Mention.

4. Buffalo Zoo (New York)

The emperor’s new clothes When you hear the zoo industry boast of the great number “expanded” elephant exhibits, just think of Buffalo Zoo and you’ll see that the emperor truly has no clothes. Like other zoos, Buffalo has made slight improvements in order to meet the AZA’s very minimal standards that allow elephants to be held in outdoor spaces as small as 1,800 square feet (about the size of a three-car garage) and in 20×20 foot indoor stalls. The Buffalo Zoo spent over $1 million to bring the indoor quarters for its three elephants to the inadequate 1,800 square feet standard, in which they will spend the majority of their lives, including prolonged hours during Buffalo’s frigid winters. By contrast, free-ranging elephants walk tens of miles a day and are active for 20 out of every 24 hours. While we’re glad that Buki, Surapa and Jothi are no longer chained overnight, life has not meaningfully changed for these elephants who continue to live in a cramped display and are controlled by keepers who use cruel, circus-style training methods. What they really need is the space and natural conditions that can only be found at an elephant sanctuary. The Buffalo Zoo makes IDA’s Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants list for the second consecutive year.

5. Oklahoma Zoo

Stacking a deadly deck for elephants Asha and Chandra were born at the Dickerson Park Zoo (see their Hall of Shame listing below), where they were cruelly separated from their mothers at ages three (Asha) and two and a half (Chandra) and shipped to the Oklahoma City Zoo. Now Oklahoma has temporarily shipped both to the Tulsa Zoo for breeding while it expands its elephant exhibit. IDA has long denounced the standard but cruel practice of separating mothers and calves and shipping elephants from zoo to zoo, especially considering that in the wild female elephants remain with their mothers for life. The recent study in Science magazine proves that early maternal separation and inter-zoo transfers cut short the lives of elephants in zoos. If that weren’t bad enough, the Oklahoma Zoo is recklessly breeding Chandra, despite the fact that she was one of a very few elephants to survive the highly fatal elephant herpesvirus and may be a carrier. Virtually nothing is known about the disease and its mechanisms for transmission and infection. Building on the tragic histories of Asha and Chandra, the
Oklahoma City Zoo is stacking a deadly deck for these elephants and any unfortunate offspring. No exhibit improvements will compensate for these inhumane and deadly zoo practices. This is Oklahoma's first appearance on IDA's Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants list.

6. Brec's Baton Rouge (Louisiana)

No oasis for elephants Brec's makes its first appearance on IDA's Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants list for its woefully inadequate facilities and also for its handling of elephants – an archaic and cruel training method utilizing physical punishment. While the zoo's promo for its new "Elephant Oasis" boasts a shaded pavilion, sculpture, video displays and mister fans – all to "enhance the visitor experience," – the exhibit is more desert than "oasis" for Brec's two Asian elephants. Bozie and Judy share a tiny display yard, and are chained in their concrete-floored barn during cold or inclement weather. Forty-one-year-old Judy has suffered from arthritis since she was 16, and 33-year-old Bozie has frequent foot problems. A zoo manual warns keepers to maintain dominance over the elephants at all times, including the use of physical discipline. If punishment is exacted in public, keepers are advised to tell visitors that the zoo is "trying to assist in the conservation of an animal whose existence in the wild is in question." Apparently, conservation includes circus-style shows in which elephants stand on their heads and hind legs and sit on a stool. If visitors are to learn anything at this zoo, it should be about the need to rescue its two elephants and send them to a sanctuary.

7. (TIE) Woodland Park Zoo (Seattle, Washington) and National Zoo (Washington, DC)

Breed them and weep These zoos tied for the No. 6 spot because of their repeated efforts to artificially inseminate two breeding-age females, Woodland Park Zoo's Chai, age 30, and Shanti, age 33, at the National Zoo, despite the known risks to mother and calf. Both elephants have lost calves to the deadly elephant herpesvirus, and the Woodland Park Zoo acknowledges that there is a greater than one-in-five chance that any calf produced by Chai would also be stricken with the fatal disease. In addition, both elephants are very near the age when female elephants in zoos are no longer bred due to a higher risk of birth complications. Since 2001, at least 21 elephant pregnancies in U.S. zoos have ended in stillbirths or other complications, resulting in 17 dead babies and six dead mothers. Zoos won't turn the tide on elephant welfare as long as they continue to treat these intelligent and complex individuals as little more than breeding machines to produce baby elephants at any cost. Both zoos are appearing on IDA's Ten Worst Zoos list for the third time. The Woodland Park Zoo also appeared once as a Dishonorable Mention.

8. Ft. Worth Zoo (Texas)

The secret misery of male elephants The Ft. Worth Zoo is often portrayed as having a model zoo elephant program. On closer inspection this facility is a sterling example of just how miserable life can be for male elephants in zoos. Ft. Worth holds two male elephants, Groucho and Casey, in small, separate outdoor yards where they display severe zoochotic
behaviors such as repetitive head bobbing and swaying – abnormal behaviors not seen in wild elephants. Life is generally wretched for male elephants in zoos. Few zoos even attempt to hold males because they are more difficult and dangerous to handle than females and require specialized facilities and care. Those that do hold males usually relegate them to lives of isolation, despite their social nature (zoos often dishonestly portray male elephants as completely solitary). Other zoos stick their males in impoverished back areas, similar to Ft. Worth where the public can only sneak peeks of their forlorn existence. The plight of male elephants has long been a dirty zoo secret, and one that won’t soon go away considering that half of all elephant births are males. This is the Ft. Worth Zoo’s first appearance on IDAs Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants list.

9. Dallas Zoo (Texas)

Global focus on a troubled elephant The Dallas Zoo received by far the most nominations from the public for the Ten Worst Zoos list due to its widely-publicized mishandling of its lone surviving elephant, Jenny. The zoo was blasted by elephant advocates from around the globe after it announced it would move this extremely traumatized elephant to a drive-thru safari park in Mexico, despite her serious aversion to noise and vehicles. Buckling under the fierce public outcry and intense media scrutiny, the zoo canceled the move but has resisted calls to send Jenny to an elephant sanctuary where she could live with other African elephants in a spacious, natural environment. Of all the zoos on this list, Dallas has the best chance to redeem itself by following through on a plan to build a new elephant complex for Jenny and other already captive elephants taken from worse conditions. With its southwestern climate and commitment to humane handling, Dallas could fill a pressing need for improved housing and care for captive U.S. elephants currently in severely deficient conditions, but only if the zoo provides maximum space and embraces a no breeding or importation policy. Time is of the essence for Jenny, who, at present, is still alone in a cramped and unnatural zoo exhibit. This is the Dallas Zoo’s first appearance on IDA’s Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants list.

10. Lowry Park Zoo (Florida)

Bad deal for elephants Four of the elephants at the Lowry Park Zoo were imported from Swaziland to Lowry Park, where they are condemned to live in a barren 2.5-acre enclosure far different from their 18,000-square-acre home in the Hlane National Park in their native Africa. IDA suspected dirty dealing when the San Diego Zoo and Lowry Park Zoo imported 11 of Swaziland’s fewer than 40 elephants, claiming they were saving the pachyderms from culling due to “overpopulation.” Conveniently, the zoos and Swaziland ignored the availability of reserves in Africa where the elephants would have remained free. Now the architects of that import, Lowry Park Zoo director Lex Salisbury and director of collections Larry Killmar (formerly with San Diego Zoo), have been caught red-handed with some dirty dealing on the domestic side. Both men were suspended from the AZA and Salisbury was forced to resign from his zoo post after a Tampa city audit found they had illegally transferred animals from the zoo to Salisbury’s privately-
owned animal safari park. Lowry Park Zoo’s first appearance on this list is timely as other zoos ponder importing elephants from their native lands. By paying cash-poor nations hundreds of thousands of dollars for elephants, these zoos are setting a terrible precedent for international conservation by promoting the commercial trade in this threatened species. This is Lowry Park’s first appearance on IDA’s Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants list.

**Worst Zoos for Elephants – Hall of Shame**

This year, IDA’s Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants list includes a special category for repeat offenders that have made little or no progress improving conditions for elephants. The first additions to the Hall of Shame are:

1. **Dickerson Park Zoo (Missouri)**

   This zoo has a terrible record with elephants. Of 10 elephants born at the zoo, only two are alive today. Five calves were stricken with the highly fatal elephant herpesvirus, with all but one dying from the deadly infection. Despite being a herpesvirus “hotspot,” the zoo continued its breeding program for years, often transporting female elephants to and from other zoos and circuses. Only after the death of 16-month-old Nisha in December 2007 did the Dickerson Park Zoo put a temporary hold on elephant breeding. Meanwhile the four adult female Asian elephants at this zoo languish in a cramped one-acre exhibit and concrete-floored barn. Dickerson earns additional Hall of Shame stripes for its 2001 beating of the elephant named Chai, who lost 1000 pounds, and a history of painful foot problems, psychological problems, aggression and premature deaths that have plagued its elephants over the years.

2. **El Paso Zoo (Texas)**

   This zoo admitted that its three-quarter acre elephant exhibit was too small, yet the next year a new zoo director convinced the City of El Paso that the very same exhibit was acceptable for its two elephants, Juno and Savannah. The exhibit may comply with 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, but it’s far from adequate for the zoo’s two elephants, who regularly display intensely repetitive, abnormal behaviors, such as swaying and rocking, a sign of serious psychological distress. This zoo also earns its place in the Hall of Shame due to its despicable history of elephant beatings.

3. **St. Louis Zoo (Missouri)**

   Elephants continue to suffer at this zoo, which has made repeated appearances on IDA’s Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants list. Asian elephant 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. Clara’s companion Pearl continues to languish at the zoo,
becoming increasingly debilitated. In 2007, Jade was born, but rejected by her mother, Rani. Another elephant, Sri, has survived despite her failure to expel a fetus that died in utero in November 2005. No significant change is on the horizon for St. Louis’s seven elephants who are crammed into a 1.2 acre exhibit that is subdivided into three yards and one off-view holding area. The largest outdoor space available to female elephants and calves is just ½ acre in size. The largest yard available to the zoo’s lone male elephant, an 8,000 pound bull named Raja, is even smaller. The zoo has an eighth elephant, Jade, who is rarely seen. This calf was rejected by her mother Rani shortly after her birth in February 2007. In addition to being crammed into tiny zoo yards, the zoo’s elephants spend long stretches indoors in concrete floored stalls at night, and on cold Midwest winter days.

4. Six Flags Discovery Kingdom (California)

This amusement park has a hideous history of elephant suffering and deaths, showing complete disregard for the health and well-being of the seven elephants forced to live in the shadow of roller coaster rides, amidst noisy, rowdy crowds. Nine elephants have died at the park since 1995. Five of those elephants were euthanized as a direct result of the same foot and joint disorders that afflict at least two elephants there currently, painful ailments caused by the cramped and barren exhibit. Six Flags forces elephants to perform in shows and give rides through coercion and physical punishment with a bullhook, a steel-tipped device similar to a fireplace poker used to poke, prod and beat elephants into compliance. Six Flags needs to acknowledge that forcing elephants to live in highly unnatural conditions that cause them to suffer and die prematurely is not entertaining or fun.