The 2009 list of the Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants, released today by In Defense of Animals (IDA), exposes the hidden suffering of elephants in zoos. In its sixth year, the list highlights how confinement of these giants to tiny enclosures wreaks havoc on their physical and psychological health and leads to premature death for many. For the first time, the list includes a Canadian entry, the Toronto Zoo.

India took the lead internationally last year when it stunned the zoo world by banning elephants in all zoos. Authorities cited problems common to most zoos, such as lack of space, poor breeding, and the absence of any positive effect on elephant conservation.

In contrast to India’s progressive leadership, North American zoos remain mired in the past, denying the devastating impacts of zoo captivity on elephants, sinking hundreds of millions of dollars into woefully inadequate exhibit renovations, and clinging to archaic and cruel circus-style training methods. The expert testimony in federal court of Mike Keele, the Association of Zoos and Aquariums’ elephant group head, on behalf of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus and its brutal elephant handling practices is a mark of just how out of step with progressive elephant care and advocacy most zoos have become.

“The Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants list shines a spotlight on the terrible suffering of elephants in zoos,” said IDA president Elliot Katz, DVM. "It’s time for North American zoos to join India in recognizing that Earth’s largest land mammals don’t belong in urban zoos which lack the space and complex natural conditions elephants need. Zoos must follow the lead of the two U.S. sanctuaries that provide elephants with vast acreage in natural habitats and a far superior quality of life.”

IDA’s 2009 Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants List:

1. San Antonio Zoo (Texas)

Two’s really a crowd at this zoo - What could be worse than displaying a solitary elephant? Answer: Confining two elephants in a pitifully small and unnatural exhibit that’s unfit
for one, the mis-named Lucky. While keeping Lucky in solitary confinement for more than two years is incredibly cruel, acquiring another elephant for a still-inadequate “herd” of two is even worse. Elephants need room to roam as well as companionship. In the wild, these highly social animals live in large extended families that traverse enormous home ranges measuring hundreds of square miles, but the San Antonio Zoo would cram two elephants, who may or may not get along, into about half an acre. Adding to the ridiculous plan, the zoo intends to build a new exhibit for African elephants, so Lucky, and any other Asian elephant, would have to leave when it’s done. The San Antonio Zoo should retire Lucky – who has spent the last 47 years of her life on display – to a spacious, natural-habitat sanctuary that can far better meet her need for space and companionship. This is the San Antonio Zoo’s third appearance on IDA’s Ten Worst Zoos list; it holds the number one spot for the second straight year. Read more about the San Antonio Zoo. • See video of Lucky.

2. Toronto Zoo (Canada)

Deadliest zoo for elephants - Elephants are dying at an unprecedented rate at the Toronto Zoo. In less than four years, four elephants have died prematurely – two in 2009. None lived beyond age 40, even though elephants have a natural lifespan of 60-70 years. Their deaths corroborate the results of a 2008 study published in the journal Science showing that elephants in zoos die decades sooner than their counterparts in protected wild or semi-wild situations. It’s no surprise when you consider a zoo like Toronto, which lacks the space, natural conditions, and especially the climate elephants need to thrive. No amount of money the zoo spends in renovations (it’s proposing a $40 million overhaul) and no amount of care for the elephants can compensate for its inadequate conditions and frigid temperatures that force elephants indoors into tiny spaces during the long winter. The Toronto Zoo’s atrocious record of premature elephants deaths will only come to an end when it shuts down its elephant display. The Toronto Zoo’s appears for the first time on IDA’s Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants list. Read more about the Toronto Zoo. • See video of Tara before she died.

3. Honolulu Zoo (Hawaii)

No paradise for pachyderms - A Honolulu Zoo spokesman last year said that its elephants “are being cared for better than they would have been in their natural habitat.” We think the elephants Mari and Vaigai would vehemently disagree with that statement. Everything about the zoo’s antiquated elephant exhibit is wrong: it cram two of the world’s largest land mammals into a mere 6,000 square feet; lack of space for healthy movement is causing recurrent and painful foot disorders; keepers use circus-style training that relies on the use of cruel bullhooks; and it’s taken more than 10 years to renovate the exhibit – which still is not done and would provide not even an acre of space. Mari and Vaigai should be released to a sanctuary that can provide them with a good quality of life, not broken promises. This is the Honolulu Zoo’s first appearance on IDA’s Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants list. See video of the Honolulu Zoo.
4. Reid Park Zoo (Arizona)

Time to ride off into the sunset
- Several years ago, the zoo refused to relocate its elephants, Connie and Shaba, to a sanctuary, at no cost to the zoo or Tucson taxpayers. Instead, the zoo said it would build a new exhibit, to be funded in part by a multi-million dollar bond measure. Last week, the zoo announced that lack of funds has indefinitely postponed renovation of its tiny elephant exhibit, leaving Connie and Shaba stuck in a measly one-third of an acre yard. Both elephants suffer from health problems caused by horribly inadequate conditions. Connie has endured painful chronic foot abscesses since at least 1996. At one point, she had an infection in every nail on her feet. Shaba also has a history of foot disorders, which began shortly after she arrived at the zoo at age two. Foot disease is a common cause of death in captive elephants because they do not have the space they need for healthy movement and soft, natural surfaces that promote foot and joint health. A 2006 IDA survey found that 62 percent of elephants in U.S. zoos suffer foot disease, while 42 percent endure joint disorders. Abnormal behaviors such as Connie’s repetitive swaying only exacerbate these problems. Lack of space, the misery caused by foot disease, and the zoo’s failure to provide better conditions call for bringing an immediate end to the elephants’ suffering and the zoo’s elephant exhibit. This Reid Park Zoo appears for the first time on IDA’s Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants list. See video of the Reid Park Zoo.

5. Houston Zoo (Texas)

You call this a conservation message?
- At a time when Asian elephants are struggling to survive in the wild, the Houston Zoo should be sending the public a serious message that instills respect for this highly endangered species. Instead, in December the Houston Zoo chose cheap exploitation, putting a holiday wreath atop the elephant Methai’s head and offering $40 photo sittings with her. Rather than foster respect, the zoo showed that it’s okay to use an elephant as a prop for holiday greeting cards in a shameless photo op more appropriate for a roadside attraction than a major urban zoo. The public wouldn’t be quite so amused if they knew that Methai is subjected to cruel, circus-style training and controlled with a sharp steel bullhook to ensure she “behaves.” This frivolous photo op is even more inappropriate when you consider that the Houston Zoo is a deadly serious place for elephants, being a hot spot for a lethal elephant virus that claimed the lives of six elephants. None of the 14 elephants born at Houston are alive today. This is the Houston Zoo’s third appearance on IDA’s Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants list. See video of the zoo’s male elephant Thailand repetitively swaying.

6. Topeka Zoo (Kansas)

Time for a fresh start - With last fall’s exposé of horrific animal deaths and
the zoo director’s resignation, the spotlight is now on elephants Tembo and Sunda, who suffer chronic health problems, including serious foot disease, and display abnormal behaviors such as aggression and repetitive swaying. Sunda shows “deterioration of digits” (bones) in one front foot, a potentially fatal condition caused by lack of space and standing on hard surfaces. The elephants share less than three-quarters of an acre of space and are confined indoors in tiny stalls for long periods during Topeka’s long, frigid winters. (Wild elephants walk tens of miles a day and are active for 20 out of 24 hours in tropical climates.) A city spokesperson told the media: “The elephant yard is what it is… we’re providing the best exhibit that we can within the limited space that we have at that site.” When “the best we can” causes this kind of suffering, it isn’t nearly enough. The zoo must retire Tembo and Sunda to a spacious sanctuary, where conditions are far kinder for Sunda’s ailing feet and both elephants can live a life closer to what nature intended for them. The Topeka Zoo appears on IDA’s Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants list for the second time. See video of the Topeka Zoo.

7. Oregon Zoo

Birds of a Feather Stick Together - Experts agree that elephants suffer in circuses, where they are cruelly controlled with a bullhook, a steel-tipped device similar to a fireplace poker used to prod, jab and beat elephants – including innocent babies – into compliance. But that didn’t stop deputy zoo director Mike Keele from testifying as a paid expert witness for Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus in a federal lawsuit over the circus’ inhumane practices. (The suit was dismissed without addressing the abuses.) Maybe that’s because the zoo uses the same circus method to control its elephants, even though this cruel method has been rejected by about half of U.S. zoos. By its very design, the bullhook is meant to cause pain and discomfort and its use is usually hidden from zoo-goers. In fact, while Oregon Zoo keepers trained the baby Samudra with the bullhook the windows in the elephant exhibit’s public viewing area reportedly were covered up. The zoo may be planning big changes to its elephant exhibit, supported by millions in taxpayer money, but until it ends the use of bullhooks it will never be humane for elephants. New director Kim Smith must take the zoo in a more progressive direction and end this disgraceful treatment of the elephants. The Oregon Zoo makes IDA’s Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants list for the third time. See video of the Oregon Zoo.

8. Bronx Zoo (New York)

Never put off until tomorrow what you should do today - Four years ago, the Bronx Zoo announced plans to close its elephant exhibit when one or more of the inhabitants dies. The president of the Wildlife Conservation Society in charge of zoo operations cited elephants’ preference for herds of at least a half-dozen, and the difficulty of introducing unfamiliar elephants. Having acknowledged that the elephants’ needs are not being met, it is time to retire them now. Maxine, Patty and Happy – who are all nearing age 40 and have spent more than 30 years on display before the public – are held in conditions that fail to meet the needs of these tropical giants. This includes spending
the better part of the freezing New York winter confined indoors, just so visitors can grab a
brief glimpse of one or two of them (reportedly the elephants are not all exhibited together
due to incompatibility) as they zoom past in a tram during warmer weather. Considering the
zoo’s budget troubles that led to exhibit closures last year, it would be practical as well as
humane to retire these elephants to a sanctuary now. The Bronx Zoo appears for the first
time on IDA’s Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants list. See video of the Bronx Zoo.

10. Toledo Zoo (Ohio)

The lonely life of bull elephants - “Baby” Louie, the Toledo Zoo’s star attraction, is about to get hit with the hard reality of a bull’s life in a zoo. The zoo is constructing a new barn for Louie, who turns seven this year, meaning that his days with mother Renee are numbered. While male elephants eventually leave their wild herds, it’s not until about age 14, and they are always in contact with other elephants. In zoos, males as young as one year old have been separated from their mothers and shipped to other facilities. Louie can expect what is standard for bull elephants in most zoos: a solitary life in a tiny exhibit, separated from other elephants except for breeding. If natural breeding does not work, he’ll become a sperm donor, constantly subject to invasive “extraction” procedures. While Louie presumably will stay in Toledo, that’s not true for other males born there in the future who would be “sold or loaned” to other facilities, according to the zoo. Young males need interaction with other elephants to ensure healthy social development, yet more than half of zoos with male elephants hold just one. In fact, the majority of zoos don’t hold bulls at all. Still, zoos continue to breed elephants even though it is creating a growing surplus of unwanted males. It’s a lonely life ahead for Louie. This is the Toledo Zoo’s first appearance on IDA’s Worst Zoos for Elephants list.

11. Brookfield Zoo (Illinois)

The replaceable Elephant - In most zoos, elephants are treated as interchangeable units – swapped, sold, loaned and replaced. Moves are not dictated by the elephants’ complex physical, psychological and social needs but by a zoo’s need to fill an open slot or add to its “collection.” After the deaths of two elephants last year, the Brookfield Zoo is again searching for a replacement elephant. Affie, who died just as she turned 40 (a natural lifespan for elephants is 60-70 years), was quickly replaced with Joyce as a cage-mate for the lone Christy. Then Christy died, leaving Joyce alone. The zoo intends to acquire yet another elephant, but is that really what’s best for Joyce? All this elephant has known in her life is upheaval – the traumatic separation from her wild family as a one year old, then being repeatedly shipped around the country for circus shows and failed breeding attempts. Her life is nothing like that of wild elephants, who enjoy family stability, with female offspring remaining with their mothers for life. Joyce deserves to live in a large social group, form lasting bonds with elephants whom she chooses, and enjoy year-round outdoor access in a spacious natural environment – something this zoo can’t give her but a sanctuary can. The Brookfield Zoo appears for the first time on IDA’s Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants list.

Worst Zoos for Elephants – Hall of Shame

IDA’s announces two new inductees to the Worst Zoos for Elephants Hall of Shame – a special category for repeat offenders that have made little or no progress improving conditions for elephants. Past Hall of Shame inductees include Dickerson Park Zoo (Missouri), El Paso Zoo (Texas), St. Louis Zoo (Missouri), and Six Flags Discovery Kingdom (California).
1. Los Angeles Zoo (California)

The Los Angeles Zoo has a terrible history of 14 elephant deaths, but that didn’t stop it from charging ahead with a wasteful $42 million elephant exhibit that still will be too small for elephants. The zoo misled city officials into supporting the project by distorting the truth and even covering up a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) stipulated fine for failure to provide adequate and timely veterinary care in the 2006 death of the elephant Gita – critical information that may have changed the outcome of the city council’s vote to continue displaying elephants at the zoo. The zoo also violated California state law when it withheld information requested by IDA regarding the USDA fine. The zoo’s lone elephant, Billy, continues to suffer in cruel solitary confinement and display abnormal repetitive head bobbing, a sign of psychological distress. Read more about the L.A. Zoo. See video of Billy.

2. Woodland Park Zoo (Washington)

A deadly elephant breeding program, intense confinement and a host of captivity-induced ailments put this zoo – where the elephants are confined in an outdated barn for 17 hours a day, 7 days a week, 7 months a year due to the cold, wet Seattle weather – in IDA’s Hall of Shame. Chai, Bamboo and Watoto are held in roughly an acre of space divided into smaller yards (Watoto, an African elephant, and Bamboo, an Asian, don’t get along and must be kept separate), where they suffer foot disease and arthritis, abnormal behaviors such as repetitive swaying and rocking, and breeding disorders including early infertility. A lethal elephant herpes virus that mainly strikes captive elephants killed six-year-old Hansa in 2007 and remains a serious threat to any elephant born at the zoo in the future, yet it continues to subject Chai to repeated invasive artificial insemination procedures.

See video demonstrating how zoos send the wrong message to the public about elephants’ behavior. People think Chai is “dancing,” but her behavior indicates psychological distress.