In Defense Of Animals Releases 2013 List Of “Ten Worst Zoos For Elephants”

San Rafael, Calif. (January 15, 2014) – In Defense of Animals (IDA), an international animal protection organization, released today its list of the Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants for 2013. This marks IDA’s ten-year anniversary of exposing the suffering endured by elephants in zoos.

“Ten years should have been enough, but as long as zoos continue to house elephants in substandard exhibits that sacrifice the animals’ welfare, IDA will continue to call out the worst offenders,” said Nicole Meyer, Director of IDA’s Elephant Protection Campaign. “It’s high time for the zoo industry to stop paying lip service and start taking meaningful action to improve conditions for the hundreds of elephants languishing—and dying prematurely—in zoos across North America.”

IDA’s list illustrates how the zoo industry routinely ignores the needs of elephants in zoos through reckless breeding; housing them in unnatural social groupings in inadequate exhibits and cold climates; using outdated, harmful management techniques; and relying on conservation as a justification for keeping elephants in captivity when wild elephants are being slaughtered to near-extinction.

The Toronto Zoo’s appearance on IDA’s 2009 list sparked a campaign that led to the closure of that exhibit in 2013 with three elephants retired to a sanctuary. This brings the number of zoos that have closed, or will close, their elephant exhibits to 26. While zoos and the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA), the accrediting trade organization, are finally starting to acknowledge what IDA has asserted for years—that elephants need space and appropriate social groupings in order to thrive—the zoo industry continues to drag its feet by allowing countless elephants to suffer.

1. San Antonio (San Antonio, Texas)—One (Un)Lucky Elephant

The San Antonio Zoo grabs the top spot on IDA’s list this year over its stubborn and selfish insistence on keeping a female Asian elephant
named Lucky in solitary confinement following Queenie’s death in March. The AZA, which knows better, sanctioned this despicable decision by handing the zoo a variance from industry “standards,” allowing the zoo to keep Lucky alone, likely until she dies. In response to IDA’s appeal to retire Lucky to a sanctuary, the zoo’s director offered this terse response: “The San Antonio Zoo, as always, will keep Lucky’s best interests in mind. We shall act accordingly.” Really? If the zoo truly believes that housing a profoundly social animal in isolation in a decrepit exhibit is acting in her best interests, then IDA has a bridge to sell them. Meanwhile, the zoo is dumping $8 million into a centennial plaza aimed at making the place more fun for visitors, not more bearable for the animals.

The San Antonio Zoo appears for the sixth time on IDA’s list, brought forward this year from the Hall of Shame.

2. Edmonton Valley Zoo (Edmonton, Canada)—Can You Hear Me Now?

What more can we say about the Edmonton Valley Zoo’s stubborn refusal to do right by Lucy? This profoundly social female Asian elephant has lived alone for six long years in the zoo’s tiny enclosure, locked away for much of the year due to Alberta’s bitterly cold climate. Neither worldwide furor over Lucy’s cruel confinement, or the sound decisions by two other Canadian zoos to send their elephants to warmer climates, has moved zoo or Edmonton officials to move toward meeting Lucy’s social and physical needs. Lucy suffers from chronic arthritis and foot problems, displays abnormal stereotypic behavior, and is managed with an outdated circus-style method using bullhooks. Further, the zoo refuses to allow an independent veterinarian to examine Lucy, and CAZA—the zoo’s accrediting body—won’t stand up for her. Lucy’s only hope now hinges on whether new city councillors show reason and compassion for her.

The Edmonton Valley Zoo appears for the fourth time on IDA’s list.

3. Little Rock Zoo (Little Rock, AR)—Where Elephants Go to Die

The Little Rock Zoo earns a top spot on IDA’s list for its role as partner in crime in the most shameful inter-zoo transfer of 2013, for housing elephants in a tiny, antiquated exhibit, and for using bullhooks. The zoo euthanized an Asian elephant named Jewell in September after handlers found her collapsed one morning. Jewell’s was the third elephant death on Little Rock’s hands in about two years. Records obtained by IDA show that Jewell suffered from a litany of chronic and painful health issues, including debilitating arthritis and abscesses the size of softballs on her feet. IDA also uncovered that Jewell had tuberculosis and that the zoo’s surviving elephant, 53-year-old Zina, was likely exposed. Instead of doing the right thing by retiring Zina to a sanctuary and shutting down its shoddy exhibit for good, the zoo snuck in two more sick elephants from the Niabi Zoo. All three deserved better than to end up here.

4. Buttonwood Park Zoo (New Bedford, MA)—All Talk, No Action

If the latest debacle at the Buttonwood Park Zoo doesn’t drive home the point that elephants shouldn’t live in cold climates, nothing will. Ruth, one of the zoo’s two aging Asian elephants, recently wandered out into a blizzard where she stood alone for hours in frigid temperatures after zookeepers forgot to padlock the barn when they left for the night. For seven long years, a string of zoo directors has pondered what to do with the elephants, recognizing that the exhibit is cramped and outdated, but all the talk has led to no action. Emily and Ruth remain in the same miserable conditions on just 1/3 acre, locked inside for much of the winter. Both elephants suffer from captivity-caused problems including chronic foot disease and arthritis, aggression, and stereotypic behavior. The current zoo director is clinging to the idea that this small, New England-themed zoo needs elephants, while a proposed yard expansion, for which funding may not be possible, won’t provide any relief and still denies Emily and Ruth what they desperately need—retirement to a sanctuary in a warmer climate.

The Buttonwood Park Zoo appears for the fourth time on IDA’s list.

5. Bronx Zoo (Bronx, NY)—Conservation Abroad but Cruelty at Home

The Bronx Zoo’s governing body talks about helping wild elephants, but no one seems to notice the three elephants who languish at this zoo. Happy—the elephant whose mirror self-awareness proved that elephants are in the highest echelon of animal intelligence—has endured a solitary existence since 2006. Patty and Maxine, who don’t get along with Happy, have only each other. When Happy’s companion died eight years ago, the zoo announced plans to phase out its elephant exhibit, acknowledging the elephants’ need for space and companionship, but left the elephants in limbo. All three elephants continue to endure the zoo’s cramped space in a cold climate, where they are on exhibit for just six months of the year, visible only from a tram that offers tourists a quick glimpse. Conservation work is commendable, but turning a blind eye to the suffering of three captive elephants is despicable.

The Bronx Zoo appears for the third time on IDA’s list.

6. Saint Louis Zoo (St. Louis, MO)—Nothing to Look Forward to

The Saint Louis Zoo first landed on IDA’s list for its inadequate, tiny exhibit that causes elephants to suffer from chronic health problems, such as foot disease and arthritis. With yet another baby born in 2013, ten elephants are now crammed into a shockingly small space, forced indoors for long stretches during the long, cold Midwest winters, steeping in diseases including tuberculosis and the elephant herpes virus—a known killer of young
elephants. Despite these miserable conditions, and the danger of spreading infectious diseases to even more elephants, Saint Louis continues its relentless breeding program. The zoo is now proposing to put massive resources into development, but nothing will go toward improving the welfare of these elephants, including four under the age of nine, who have nothing to look forward to beyond the zoo’s cramped space, disease, and likely premature death from captivity-induced ailments.

The Saint Louis Zoo appears for the sixth time on IDA’s list.

7. Woodland Park Zoo (Seattle, WA)—The Fox Guarding the Hen House

The Woodland Park Zoo breathed new life into this old idiom in 2013 by launching a public relations ploy to ward off increasing criticism over the zoo’s archaic elephant exhibit. The “Elephant Task Force” was charged with reviewing the elephant program and the welfare of Bamboo, Chai, and Watoto, but the cards were stacked against the elephants from the start. The zoo handpicked all 20 participants, which included current and former zoo board members, and refused to consult with objective experts. Predictably, the majority of the task force recommended that the elephants stay at the zoo and continue its failed breeding program.

While mulling over how to move forward, it’s going to be hard for the zoo to ignore recent survey results, which showed that a whopping 62% of the public, recognizing the elephants’ needs for space and adequate social groupings, supports the elephants’ much-deserved retirement to a sanctuary.

The Woodland Park Zoo appears for the seventh time on IDA’s list also for its decrepit exhibit, housing elephants in a cold climate, relentless breeding program, and the fact that all three elephants suffer from captivity-induced ailments.

8. Oregon Zoo (Portland, OR)—No Relief in Sight

The Oregon Zoo spent early 2013 smoothing out a public relations nightmare after admitting that an elephant born there was contractually owned by a company that rents animals for entertainment. The zoo has yet to explain why it misled voters in selling a 2008 bond about plans for an offsite preserve to provide more space for the zoo’s elephants. The zoo pulled the rug out from under voters—and the elephants—when it quietly shifted gears to instead plan a remote center for bringing in additional elephants and ramp up a second breeding program.

Meanwhile, the zoo is spending $53 million—more than twice the annual budget for the Kenya Wildlife Service, which protects tens of thousands of elephants—to expand the exhibit from 1 ½ acres to 6 ¼. This will provide no meaningful relief for the zoo’s eight Asian elephants who suffer from a range of captivity-related problems, including foot and joint disease, and tuberculosis.

The Oregon Zoo appears for the fifth time on IDA’s list.

At a time when wild African elephants are being slaughtered in record numbers for ivory, Wildlife Safari is putting its own spin on “conservation.” Wildlife Safari, a drive-through park that holds three African elephants, has landed on IDA’s list in previous years for using elephants in car washes. Countless AZA-accredited zoos play the conservation card to justify housing elephants in captivity, but Wildlife Safari is upping the ante by resorting to cheap entertainment gimmicks. In 2013, Safari officials claimed that taking money from well-meaning tourists to see elephants paint ornaments would “hopefully” help stop poaching. Really? IDA would like to see the evidence of that. One thing is clear: these types of activities, sanctioned by the zoo industry, provide zero educational value and do nothing to engender the respect, much less galvanize the action, needed to save the species.

Wildlife Safari appears on IDA’s list for the third time.

10. Denver Zoo (Denver, CO)—What a Load of Bull

The Denver Zoo set a dangerous precedent in 2013 by bringing a young bull from Europe, making Billy (Budi) reportedly the first imported Asian elephant in more than 30 years. It’s no secret that housing male elephants is a challenge, but adding to their numbers to bring in “new blood and genes,” when existing captive elephants desperately need better conditions, defies reason. In its desperate bid to boost the number of captive elephants, which does nothing to help conserve the species, the zoo industry is ignoring what should be the priority—the welfare of individuals. At just six years old, Billy has already been moved twice, prematurely separated from his mother at the tender age of four. The Denver Zoo hopes to eventually house at least eight bulls to use them for breeding and enable other zoos to do the same. The zoo industry should instead halt breeding altogether and take better care of the hundreds of elephants already languishing in substandard zoos.

The Denver Zoo appears on IDA’s list for the first time.

2013 Hall of Shame

The Niabi Zoo has been inducted into IDA’s “Hall of Shame” for its role as partner in crime in the most shameful inter-zoo transfer of 2013. The Bowmanville Zoo grabbed a top spot on IDA’s list last year and has now been inducted into IDA’s “Hall of Shame” in part for working an elephant right up until her death.

Niabi Zoo (Coal Valley, Illinois)—The Ultimate Betrayal

The Niabi Zoo squandered the opportunity to do the right thing for two Asian elephants by retiring them to a sanctuary, but instead sacrificed Sophie and Babe’s welfare by dumping them in yet another decrepit zoo with a history of tuberculosis. These two elephants suffered for a decade in Niabi’s archaic exhibit, locked indoors.
during the long, cold winters. Prodded into action when the AZA pulled accreditation after years of overlooking the zoo’s disgraceful elephant cell, Niabi appeared to finally consider the needs of these elephants. Yet, the zoo ignored a consultant’s recommendations that the elephants needed space, enrichment, and a larger social grouping and snuck Sophie and Babe overnight to the Little Rock Zoo where the elephants’ existing, chronic health problems will likely worsen. The Niabi Zoo no longer holds elephants, but its betrayal of Sophie and Babe earns the zoo a permanent spot in our Hall of Shame.

Bowmanville Zoo (Bowmanville, Canada)—Worked to Death

It’s unusual for a zoo to make it on IDA’s Hall of Shame after just one appearance on the Ten Worst Zoos list, but the Bowmanville Zoo has earned this shameful distinction. As if housing a highly social female elephant all alone wasn’t bad enough, the zoo made money off Limba for decades by using her in circuses, weddings, and any other gig in order to make a buck. In late 2013, the zoo rallied its fans to protest Limba’s exclusion from a holiday parade while knowing that Limba was gravely ill, likely with cancer. Still, the zoo marched Limba through chilly, crowded streets and euthanized her two weeks later. Limba is the fifth elephant to die at Bowmanville in seven years, and the only one to make it past the age of 40. The good news is that the zoo no longer has elephants, and IDA will do everything we can to keep it that way.

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