In Defense Of Animals Releases 2014 List Of “Ten Worst Zoos For Elephants”

San Rafael, Calif. (January 12, 2015) – In Defense of Animals (IDA), an international animal protection organization, released today its list of the Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants for 2014. This marks IDA’s eleventh-year of exposing the excessive suffering endured by elephants in North American zoos – in what is being called the “Terrible Ten” – as well as a Dishonorable Mention and Hall of Shame inductees.

“IDA’s 2014 list spotlights zoos representing the most appalling conditions for elephants, emphasizing an extended and egregious history of disregard for elephant care standards and science,” said Toni Frohoff, Ph.D., Elephant & Cetacean Scientist for IDA. “Conservation cannot be used as an excuse for cruelty, especially when we know that elephants bred in captivity will not be released to the wild. The tens of millions of dollars spent keeping elephants in zoos could be used more wisely and compassionately for real conservation.”

This year’s list reflects the long-overdue announcement that the Woodland Park Zoo in Seattle will end its elephant exhibit, following years of public pressure, including a long-time campaign by IDA. Seattle is one of 28 zoos that have closed or plan to close their elephant exhibits. The Terrible Ten list also highlights elephants sentenced to solitary suffering for years, and those enduring extreme confinement, hypothermia and frostbite, abuse with bullhooks, being used as living “car washes”, painful captivity-related diseases, and extreme psychological traumatization. As a result of these conditions, elephants in zoos are dying prematurely.

Frohoff concluded, “At a time of greater awareness of the plight of elephants in the wild, who are dying for the illegal ivory trade, it is shocking that captive elephants continue to suffer and die prematurely at the very zoos that are claiming to help save these species. The public has a right to know what is really happening to elephants in zoos and the fallacy behind zoos ‘conservation’ claims. It is time to stop keeping elephants in zoos.”

1. Natural Bridge Zoo, Natural Bridge, VA: Roadside Atrocity

Making its first appearance on IDA’s Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants list with a straight-to-the-top (or is that
the bottom?) entrance, this largely overlooked zoo has got it all wrong. It keeps a lone female African elephant, Asha, who has been without the company of other elephants for nearly a decade. Elephants are highly complex and social animals who naturally live in extended family networks, making it cruel to keep an elephant alone. Asha is forced to give rides in sweltering heat under threat of physical abuse from bullhook-wielding handlers. The bullhook is a steel-tipped baton with a hook at the end that is used to control elephants through fear and painful punishment.

Natural Bridge Zoo elephant handlers are so brazen in the use of their bullhooks that members of the public complained after seeing Asha cruelly and repeatedly jabbed in the mouth with it. In the off-season, Asha spends the freezing, snowy Virginia winters alone in a barren barn, chained to a concrete floor. Asha's profound deprivation is evident in her repetitive swaying back and forth, an abnormal behavior indicative of poor welfare. In the past, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has fined this dreadful roadside zoo for violations of the Animal Welfare Act. At IDA, we can confidently say that the Natural Bridge Zoo has outdone itself when it comes to keeping an elephant in the most atrocious of conditions.

2. San Antonio Zoo: Shameless in San Antonio

The last surviving elephant at the San Antonio Zoo, Lucky, remains alone and isolated from others of her kind. After the death of her companion, Alport, in 2007, Lucky remained alone for nearly three years before another elephant, Boo, was introduced, though the two were not compatible. Boo passed away three years later, leaving Lucky alone yet again. Sadly, this zoo isn’t fit for any elephants due to lack of space and its inexcusable decision to keep Lucky alone for the rest of her life, rather than send her to a more suitable facility where she would have room to roam and the companionship of other elephants.

Last year the zoo had the opportunity to bring in a more enlightened director. Unfortunately, the new hire, Tim Morrow, comes from Seaworld San Antonio, an institution that has repeatedly come under fire for animal welfare issues. IDA hopes that Mr. Morrow will do the right thing for Lucky and free her from a situation so miserable it has been recognized worldwide. In 2010 the San Antonio Zoo was #5 on a list of the World’s Worst Zoos, and the only American zoo on the list, due to Lucky’s situation; it made a similar list in 2011.

The San Antonio Zoo first appeared on IDA’s list in 2007, later earning the #1 worst zoo position for three consecutive years starting in 2008 and then again in 2013. After being inducted into IDA’s Hall of Shame for failing to make any changes to Lucky’s situation, San Antonio is being listed once again because of the sheer and shameful cruelty that Lucky is forced to endure.

3. Six Flags Discovery Kingdom, Vallejo, CA: Nothing Amusing at this Abusement Park

Roller coasters, screaming people and a constant cacophony of loud noises – this is one cruel carnival for the elephants forced to live at Six Flags Discovery Kingdom. Not only do resident African elephant Valerie, and
Asian elephant Liz, have exquisitely sensitive hearing, they are also sensitive to vibrations and sounds humans cannot hear – which makes the daily assault on these elephants even more diabolical. This park has a horrific history of elephant suffering, mistreatment and deaths, showing all but complete disregard for the health and wellbeing of elephants (let alone the park’s dolphins who are forced to swim with the public), all for the sake of “entertainment.”

Now, Six Flags has upped the inhumane ante by contracting with Have Trunk Will Travel to provide elephant rides. This company was caught on video beating its elephants with bullhooks and shocking them with a stun gun during training. The footage even shows a baby elephant being struck on the head with a bullhook and being pulled by the trunk. Despite receiving such documentation of torture and abuse, Six Flags continues to use these elephants for rides. It is worth noting that Asian elephant Bertie Mae was euthanized at Six Flags in April due to a fractured hind leg. The park provided no explanation for how this unusual injury may have occurred, though the inane tricks that the elephants are forced to perform cannot be overlooked as suspect. There is nothing at all amusing about the abuse in this park. Six Flags was inducted into IDA’s Hall of Shame in 2008 following their fourth appearance in our Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants list.

4. Buttonwood Park Zoo, New Bedford, MA: Truly Frozen

Hypothermia and frostbite due to neglect, repeated abuse by keepers, and attacks by her own cellmate – even a human prisoner would be transferred out of conditions this inhumane. But this is just a small part of what Ruth, one of the two aging Asian elephants at the Buttonwood Park Zoo, endured last year. For these reasons, this is the zoo’s fifth year on IDA’s list. Buttonwood Park Zoo was even cited and fined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) for failure to protect Ruth from inclement weather. Ruth suffered frostbite on her ears, vulva and tail after she ventured out through an unlocked door into freezing weather, resulting in the partial amputation of her tail.

Emily, her fellow traumatized cellmate, has a history of attacking Ruth, sometimes causing Ruth to trumpet in pain. As if Ruth hasn’t suffered enough, the head keeper was seen hooking the limping arthritic elephant with a bullhook – a weapon resembling a fireplace poker – in order to make her walk faster. Both Ruth and Emily suffer from chronic foot disease and arthritis, leading causes of death for elephants living in small, inadequate spaces in zoos. The zoo has pledged to phase out its elephant exhibit, because clearly it is incapable of properly caring for Ruth and Emily, who need a warmer climate and the open spaces of a sanctuary.

5. Bronx Zoo – Bronx, NY – Sentenced to Solitary Suffering

In 2006, the Bronx Zoo announced it would shut down its elephant exhibit after the death of any one of its three elephants, Happy, Patty or Maxine. Nine years later, the three elephants remain, forced to endure harsh winters and absurdly small enclosures. Perhaps worse, Happy was the elephant whose mirror self-recognition proved that elephants are not only vastly intelligent – but also incredibly self-aware. When we know better we
do better, right? Wrong. Happy’s reward for her contribution to science was to be sentenced to solitary confinement for almost ten years (since 2006) – all with the zoo’s knowledge that she is aware of her suffering. She is separated from Patty and Maxine because, as disturbed as they are in the tightly confined conditions in which they are forced to live, these elephants have attacked Happy.

The Bronx Zoo does not have the space, the resources, or the weather conditions that elephants need to live a reasonably healthy life. Shame on the Bronx Zoo for sentencing “Happy” to what is likely the most unhappy of sentences for an elephant: a life of self-aware solitary confinement.

6. Buffalo Zoo, NY: Frigid Fiasco Behind Bars

As this entry is being written, it is a frigid two degrees with snow flurries in Buffalo, New York and the two female Asian elephants, Jothi and Surapa, both born in the warmer climes of India, are confined in their tiny, barn that gives them room to turn around, but not much more – even after expansion after mandated by the AZA. This is the third-oldest zoo in the United States and it shows in the dilapidated elephant exhibit. Its shocking lack of space, tragically inadequate social existence, and outdated indoor facility are indicative of just how antiquated the very minimal Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) standards are for elephants. Adding to the problem is the incompatibility of the elephants who reportedly are kept separated, and the continued archaic style of management that has, for years, relied on the cruel bullhook that only recently may have changed.

Sadly, the zoo announced in September that Jothi was being treated for a chronic neurologic disease that manifests in periodic seizures. Not long after, a solitary Surapa was featured on the zoo’s Facebook page, painting wine glasses from behind bars for the zoo to sell. This is Buffalo Zoo’s third time on IDA’s list and it likely will not be the last, unless the zoo does what’s right for Jothi and Surapa and ends its elephant program.

7. Wildlife Safari, Winston, OR: Nothing Natural About This Safari

In November 2014, IDA questioned the premature death of 44-year-old Alice, an African elephant at Wildlife Safari – and the second elephant to die at the facility in four years. Tiki died at age 40 in 2010. Both of these deaths raise a red flag because female African elephants are considered to be in the prime of their lives in their 40s. The zoo’s claim that Alice died of ‘natural causes’ was suspicious and misleading – especially when there was so little that was natural about her life at this zoo. In addition to living in a small, unnatural facility, the elephants at Wildlife Safari have been exploited as a living “car wash” for the entertainment of the zoo’s patrons, among other fundraising stunts. What people don’t realize is that keepers control the elephants through use of the bullhook, which is used to jab, stab and strike the elephants to ensure obedience.

The truth is that zoos prematurely age elephants, forcing them to live in inadequate captive conditions that include lack of space and hard flooring that induce arthritis and other problems in relatively young animals. Add to that the stress
caused by fear of physical punishment with the bullhook and you have one inhumane Wildlife Safari. This is the fourth year that Wildlife Safari has made IDA’s Ten Worst list.

8. Milwaukee County Zoo, WI: Packed In Like Produce

Milwaukee Zoo crams Ruth and Brittany, two female African elephants, into an enclosure so small that their barn resembles a plastic-wrapped produce container more than an elephant habitat. The inhospitable Wisconsin winters force them to live much of the time in this tiny facility, one wall of which is a viewing window that allows the public to see this inadequate, miserable space – not that the outdoor space is much better. As a result of conditions that cannot satisfy elephants' need to walk great distances, naturally forage, or socialize in an extended network of elephants, Ruth and Brittany exhibit unnatural behaviors such as repetitive swaying and other signs of duress.

With only two elephants, the Milwaukee Zoo fails to meet even the very minimal standards set by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA). These magnificent elephants have been cramped and cold for too long; they belong in a climate-appropriate, elephant-friendly sanctuary where they would be free to choose their companions, forage on grass and trees, and just be elephants again.

9. Rosamond Gifford Zoo, Syracuse, NY – Used and Abused

Making its fourth appearance on IDA’s list, the Rosamond Gifford Zoo exemplifies the plight of male elephants in zoos, who are subject to early separation from their mothers, multiple transfers between zoos, being exploited for breeding and then thrown away. In 2014, without public notice, the zoo cruelly separated six-year-old Chuck from his mother and transferred him to African Lion Safari, a drive-thru attraction in Canada. In the wild, male elephants stay with their mothers until about 14 years of age. Early separation is extremely traumatic for mother and calf and is known to inhibit normal behavioral and social development in calves. Chuck was born at African Lion Safari in 2008, after the zoo sent his mother, Mali, there for breeding. They were returned to their elephant group at Rosamond Gifford in 2011, but the much-heralded “family” reunion lasted less than three years. Chuck’s transfer back to Canada was his second move in his very short life and will probably not be his last. Rosamond Gifford Zoo earned a spot on IDA’s list in 2012 for sending away male Asian elephant, Indy, who had lived there for 27 years and sired offspring, and replacing him with Doc from the infamous Ringling Bros. and Barnum and Bailey Circus. The cruel joke is that there is no conservation value in breeding elephants in captivity. None will ever be reintroduced to the wild – a key part of true conservation. As for Chuck and other male elephants in zoos, the cycle of use and abuse continues.

10. Disney’s Animal Kingdom, Lake Buena Vista, FL: Tragic Kingdom

Disney’s Animal Kingdom (DAK) has made some not-so-magical decisions for its elephants that have resulted in
tragic deaths. In July, pregnant Moyo, and her unborn calf, died as a result of birth complications after being shipped from Disney’s Animal Kingdom to The National Elephant Center in Florida (a facility run by a consortium of AZA zoos). Zoos generally do not transfer pregnant females because of the great stress of travel and potential complications, yet DAK trucked Moyo – who also reportedly had a “rare hormonal issue” – to this unproven Florida center. We acknowledge another loss of a young elephant; Tufani, a 10-year-young male, who died from salmonella infection, a difficult illness to treat.

This illustrates how zoo transfers are often made with little to no regard for the physical, psychological and social effects on elephants, or, apparently in this case, the health of a pregnant mother and her baby. Maybe it’s time to “Let It Go,” as in ending the elephant attraction at Disney’s Animal Kingdom. DAK made IDA’s Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants list in 2007 for dumping two prematurely infertile elephants at a facility known for aggression between its elephants, taking a younger fertile female in return.

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**Dishonorable Mention**

**Woodland Park Zoo, Seattle, WA: Last Act – Compassion or Cruelty?**

At long last, the Woodland Park Zoo finally announced the impending closure of its egregious elephant exhibit, succumbing to years of public pressure, opinion polls showing overwhelming support for relocating the elephants, and a newspaper editorial in favor of ending the elephant program. IDA long campaigned to help Bamboo, 47, and Chai, 35, the two remaining Asian elephants who have somehow survived the severely inadequate conditions of this zoo, so we were disappointed to learn that, as a petulant child might do, the zoo insists on sending the elephants to another zoo rather than to an accredited elephant sanctuary. Sadly, this only proves that this zoo – and many others – does not make decisions that are in the best interests of the elephants. The elephants’ hope for a better life lies with the Seattle City Council and Mayor Ed Murray taking action to ensure the elephants are sent to a sanctuary where they can live a more natural life that meets their behavioral and biological needs, especially after spending so many years in substandard conditions. IDA hopes they will be wise and compassionate ambassadors of our human species – and engineer the elephants’ transfer to a sanctuary. The Woodland Park Zoo earned IDA’s Dishonorable Mention for denying their elephants a more honorable opportunity.

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**Hall of Shame Winner**

**Edmonton Valley Zoo, Edmonton, Canada: Alone Again, Unnaturally**

Born in a tropical forest in Sri Lanka, Lucy the elephant has been forced to live in one of the coldest environments in North America and in isolation from any other elephants. The average winter “high” temperature in Edmonton is in the low twenties. Only after being sued did the zoo finally create an indoor exercise area for Lucy; but she has to walk out in the freezing temperatures to get there. This is also dangerous because she has been known to slip
on ice. The zoo says Lucy is too sick to travel, yet contradicts this by saying she is happy and healthy in Edmonton. Further, the zoo has provided no evidence of their assertion. The zoo resists offers from world-renowned experts to help diagnose, and possibly treat, Lucy for this mysterious condition that purportedly makes her so unable to travel. It is outright cruelty for Edmonton Zoo to refuse a team of veterinarians to examine Lucy and, if necessary, provide treatment so she can be moved – especially when it would be at no cost to the Zoo.

Furthermore, Lucy’s solitary confinement is in violation of Alberta’s Zoo Standards that require elephants to be housed in appropriate social groups. Cruel, cold, captive conditions result in elephants rarely reaching their 40’s in Canada; this may be Lucy’s last year if they don’t act now. The Edmonton Valley Zoo has been on IDA’s list four times before. It is incumbent upon the Edmonton City Council – and the Province – who have ultimate authority over the zoo, to stop enabling this overt abuse. The province needs to revoke the zoo’s permit for such violation of zoological standards. The city needs to allow Lucy to receive appropriate medical treatment that she desperately deserves. And, when she can safely travel, to be moved to an elephant sanctuary to live out her life in weather that is reasonably suited for elephants – and – to once again be in the company of others of her own kind.

Photos of the elephants can be downloaded here

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Contact: Toni Frohoff, Ph.D., (805) 836-0496, toni@idausa.org