In Defense of Animals Releases 2015 List of “Ten Worst Zoos For Elephants.”

In Defense of Animals has released its respected annual list of the “Ten Worst Zoos For Elephants” in North America for 2015. In its twelfth-year, the list exposes the hidden suffering of elephants in zoos, where lack of space, unsuitably cold climates and unnatural conditions condemn Earth’s largest land mammals to lifetimes of deprivation, disease, despair, and early death.

As part of an encouraging trend, 2015 was the year that four more zoos closed their cruel elephant exhibits, three of which appeared on the 10 Worst Zoos for Elephants list in previous years. Despite the callous and inane decision of Woodland Park Zoo in Seattle to send elephants Chai and Bamboo to the Oklahoma City Zoo (our #3 worst zoo this year) instead of a sanctuary, we can count that as one less horrific excuse of a living space for an elephant. We celebrate that the remaining three elephants were transferred from Nashville Zoo to a sanctuary. And last year’s #1 worst zoo, Natural Bridge Zoo in Virginia, was temporarily closed to the public in 2015, as a result of Animal Welfare Act violations. Even more violations have been recently discovered, which we hope will lead to a permanent shutdown of this roadside atrocity.

Despite these encouraging developments, this year’s list highlights a particularly dark and devastating entry; three zoos colluding in a highly controversial attempt to import 18 young elephants from Africa to be incarcerated for life in dismal zoo displays. As a result of this terrible trio’s barbaric plans, we have the first-ever tie for the #1 spot on the Worst Zoos for Elephants list: Dallas Zoo in Texas, Omaha’s Henry Doorly Zoo in Nebraska, and the Sedgwick County Zoo in Kansas.

In Defense of Animals Elephant Scientist, Toni Frohoff, Ph.D., states, “Evidence shows that elephants are not thriving or self-sustaining in zoos. Urgent action must be taken to stop greedy corporatons from plundering elephants from the wild so they can restock elephants dying out in zoo displays faster than they can reproduce. If you want to help protect
elephants, don’t visit zoos and instead help support real conservation efforts that keep animals in the wild where they belong.”

In Defense of Animals President, Dr. Marilyn Kroplick, says, “We call on all remaining zoos with elephants to join the many others that have closed their archaic exhibits, and to send the elephants to sanctuaries where they can live in peace.”

While most zoos that house elephants are completely inadequate and deserve to be on the 2015 Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants List, In Defense of Animals considers a number of factors to narrow down the very worst, including events that have happened during the year. Criteria include lack of space, excessively cold climates, signs of severe psychological distress through stereotypic and other behaviors, egregious disregard for the social and medical needs of elephants, breeding issues, premature deaths, and management style.

1. **Tie: Dallas Zoo, Dallas, Texas; Henry Doorly Zoo, Omaha, Nebraska; and Sedgwick County Zoo, Wichita, Kansas – Shady Swaziland Swindle**

   For the first time ever, the #1 position is a tie: Dallas Zoo, Henry Doorly Zoo, and Sedgwick County Zoo are the “terrible three.” These zoos win the award for putting the “con” in conservation for their despicable efforts to import 18 young elephants who were captured in the wild in Swaziland and traumatically taken from their mothers and families. The zoos are working with Big Game Parks, a questionable family-run outfit that runs the parks containing the elephants. Big Game Parks last exported elephants to U.S. zoos in 2003, claiming they would have to otherwise kill elephants because the population had grown too large. Did we mention that the “too-large” population was only about 40 elephants? At that time, U.S. zoos paid $100,000 to Big Game Parks for 11 elephants. The stakes are even higher this time. The data shows that elephants are not thriving in zoos, where they die prematurely due to captivity caused problems. As a result, elephant displays are quickly emptying. In exchange for the 18 elephants, the zoos are offering Big Game Parks $450,000, purportedly – and most dubiously – for them to use for rhino conservation. Further, the zoos are even claiming to be rescuing the elephants, when the reality is that they conveniently “overlooked” options to keep the elephants in Africa – where they belong.

   It seems highly unlikely that Big Game Parks would threaten to kill elephants if the zoos were not willing to give such vast sums. After the global outcry over the murder of Cecil the lion, the senseless killing of young elephants by Big Game Parks would not only draw worldwide condemnation, but threaten tourism and revenues for Big Game Parks. Even more outrageous is the fact that a viable offer has been made that would keep the elephants in Africa, where they would have the greatest conservation value. The *U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service* will determine whether to grant a permit for the import, which is opposed by many of the world’s leading elephant scientists and conservationists. It is yet to be seen whether the agency will abet zoos in perpetuating the unethical and antiquated practice of raiding the wild to restock U.S. zoos for public entertainment and profit. As Sedgwick County Zoo director Mark Reed stated, “It’s not a question of ‘if’ but a question of ‘when’ we will have young elephant calves born here. That’s going to skyrocket the attendance like nothing ever has here.”

   Don’t fall for the zoos’ con job. Let’s not make a zoo out of conservation.

2. **Natural Bridge Zoo, Rockbridge County, Virginia – Nothing Natural About It**

   Natural Bridge Zoo in Rockbridge County has created a most unnatural life for an African elephant named Asha. This 32-year old female lives in solitary confinement and is forced to give rides to paying customers. After being spotlighted last year by In Defense of Animals for being a roadside atrocity, owner Karl Mogenson’s not-so-Natural Bridge Zoo continued to be investigated by the USDA, which cited the zoo for a whopping 44 violations of the federal Animal Welfare Act. In April, the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries suspended the zoo’s permit, but only temporarily. As a result, poor Asha was back to work for yet another summer season, lugging humans around for rides on her back in the hot sun. Not surprisingly, the USDA cited the zoo again this month for
even more animal welfare violations. It’s time to close down Natural Bridge Zoo and ensure that Asha, and the many other animals who remain in this terrible place, will be placed in more compassionate care in 2016.

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3. Oklahoma City Zoo, Oklahoma – Reckless Breeding and Birthdays Behind Bars

It should have been no surprise that the Oklahoma City Zoo suffered the loss of Malee, a four-year-old Asian elephant, to the Elephant Endotheliotropic Herpes virus (EEHV). This virus attacks young elephant calves and causes massive internal hemorrhaging and horrifically painful deaths. Malee’s mother, Asha (a different Asha from Natural Bridge Zoo, above), was exposed to the disease at an early age when her half sister, Chandra (who also lives at the Oklahoma City Zoo), was treated for EEHV and survived. The zoo acknowledges that it doesn’t know why some elephants contract the disease and others do not, nor do they know much about how the disease is transmitted. Yet, the zoo recklessly forge ahead with its breeding program.

The zoo now holds another elephant captive, Chai, who lost her only offspring to EEHV while at Seattle’s Woodland Park Zoo. She and Bamboo arrived in Oklahoma City last year, after coming within an elephant’s eyelash of being retired to a sanctuary. Bamboo, despite her exposure to the virus in Seattle, and possibly now in Oklahoma City, is marked for possible future breeding. Apparently, the ticket sales that a baby elephant can generate are much more valuable than the welfare of the elephants themselves. This reckless breeding is a risky business that costs elephants lives.

Media source for image.

4. Wildlife Safari, Winston, Oregon – Clueless and Callous

Two elephants acquired by Wildlife Safari from Six Flags Discovery Kingdom in 2015 have gone from one abusement park to another. In Defense of Animals spotlighted Wildlife Safari’s horrendous elephant “car washes” and elephant rides in last year’s list. While it is a relief that we didn’t see signs of either of those ridiculous stunts in 2015, Wildlife Safari was still wielding barbaric bullhooks around the elephants—a menacing device resembling a fireplace poker that is used to hook, jab and strike elephants, used by keepers to control elephants through fear of painful punishment. Still advertised is demeaning and dangerous elephant “petting”, having elephants paint for people, circus-like performances at birthday parties, and most recently, elephant selfies (which it calls “Elphies”).

Unlike the pool the zoo finally constructed for the elephants, its claims of being “dedicated to education, conservation and research” just don’t hold water. The wondrous nature of wild elephants is not what visitors learn or what drives Wildlife Safari. The message the zoo sends is that elephants are here for our entertainment, rather than instilling the respect that is necessary to protect and preserve elephants in the wild. As if this weren’t enough, two elephants have died at Wildlife Safari over the past five years, at ages 40 and 44 – when female African elephants would naturally be in their prime. There is nothing amusing or educational about clueless and callous Wildlife Safari in Winston.

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5. Buttonwood Park Zoo, New Bedford, Massachusetts – Irreconcilable Differences

Asian elephant Ruth remains the prisoner of another prisoner at Buttonwood Zoo, with no
escape. Cage-mate Emily continues to display aggression toward her, which the zoo now calls "assertion" or "agitation." So, was Emily simply showing "assertion" when she bit off six inches of Ruth’s tail in 2006? Ruth’s poor tail was further amputated due to frostbite and a bone infection in 2014. During her recuperation, Ruth was placed in with Emily because the zoo lacked proper holding facilities for separation, and Emily continued to go after Ruth’s wounded tail and to intimidate her in other ways.

The zoo no longer reports the injuries that Ruth endures, and her injuries are even called “self-inflicted.” Instead of doing the right thing and removing Ruth from an abusive and dangerous situation, the zoo continues to keep Ruth as a “companion” to Emily. Sadly, the USDA has not intervened, despite the fact that this intolerable and unsafe situation violates the federal Animal Welfare Act by knowingly forcing two clearly incompatible Asian elephants to live in the same enclosure together. Let’s face it; these two are not warming up to each other in their cold, cramped winter wasteland of an exhibit. It’s time for the city of New Bedford to show that it is a “compassionate city,” as it claims to be, by granting an early release and sending Ruth and Emily to a sanctuary where, if they so choose, they can stay safely far, far away from one another.

6. San Antonio Zoo, Texas – Let Lucky be Lonely No More

Lucky, the solitary elephant, was lucky only in having a strong advocacy base and her own legal defense team trying to win the case for her freedom in 2013. But the stubborn San Antonio Zoo continues to refuse to release her to a sanctuary despite substantiated claims that the zoo is violating the Endangered Species Act (ESA) through its “inhumane” treatment of her because of her life in solitary confinement. Yet the unchanged substandard exhibit, lack of space, and solitary confinement Lucky has been subjected to for years continues to be the cause of her suffering. Maybe luck will finally be on her side in 2016.

Photo license.

7. Oregon Zoo, Portland, Oregon – Bullhook Bullies (Just in a Bigger Yard)

In 2015, two male Asian elephants died prematurely at the Oregon Zoo: Rama, 31, and Tusko, 45 – both of whom were treated for tuberculosis. Asian elephants have a lifespan of 65-70 years old. The zoo claims that both elephants died of injuries sustained earlier in their lives, yet they occurred while in captivity. Living on concrete, and being confined to tiny outdoor and indoor spaces, likely exacerbated their conditions and hastened their deaths. Tusko had the added misfortune of spending his earlier days in the circus, where he would have been kept chained for much of his life. Tusko leaves behind offspring Sam and Lily, who face a similarly bleak outlook, considering the short life expectancy for elephants in zoos. Even the recently opened “Elephants Lands” exhibit, at a cost of $59 million dollars, won’t help. At barely more than four artificial acres, it is inadequate for the seven current elephants, much less the 19 elephants that the zoo plans to hold in that same space.

Shamefully, this zoo also insists on the continued use of the barbaric bullhook to control the elephants through intimidation, fear, and pain. This marks the sixth time in ten years that Oregon Zoo has appeared on In Defense of Animals’ Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants list, and for good reason. The Oregon Zoo is still stuck in the dark ages when it comes to elephant care and welfare.

8. Monterey Zoo, Salinas, California – Shameful Sham
This marks the first appearance on our list for the Monterey Zoo – essentially a roadside zoo in Salinas, California, created by exotic animal trainer Charlie Sammut. Five African elephants are kept on a dusty and barren plot of land. Not only are they on display to be gawked at by members of the public (who can feed them for an extra $5), but they are forced to be used as “props” at fundraising parties; give rides to, and be touched by, the public; and required to perform demeaning circus-style tricks (even spinning roulette wheels). In addition, Sammut offers costly “animal training” sessions with the elephants that involve unnecessary and risky contact with the public.

Clearly the message about wild animals that Monterey Zoo’s elephant exhibit is imparting is not only warped – it is shameful. While Sammut keeps the elephants under his Elephants of Africa Rescue Society’s (EARS) non-profit (we suggest that EARS really stands for “Elephants at Risk in Salinas”), it’s hard to tell where the nonprofit business stops and the for-profit starts. The zoo claims it is “evolving,” but there is more to evolution than creating bigger exhibits. True evolution starts with a change in mind and heart that puts the welfare of the animals ahead of profits and performances.


Frozen in time, the Buffalo Zoo continues to keep Asian elephant captives Jothi and Surapa inside the tiny cage they call a barn for yet another brutal Buffalo winter, where they will spend nearly all their time. The Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) standards require that elephants who are exposed to temperatures below 40°F (5°C) for longer than 60-minute intervals be monitored hourly to assess the potential for hypothermia. Over three consecutive winters (2013-2015), daytime maximum temperatures in January and February went above 40 degrees only 30 out of 177 days. Following AZA criteria of no exposure below 40 degrees over an hour, without taking extensive counter-measures, means the elephants would spend only 17% of January and February having any meaningful outdoor time. The short walks in winter, often in snow, are like “yard time” in human prisons. Further, by holding just two elephants, the zoo is failing to meet the low-bar social standards of the AZA that require a minimum of three elephants.

Donations were wasted on remodeling the small “Elephant House” because the money was used to install barriers dividing the claimed 1,850 interior square feet into much smaller enclosures, instead of moving Jothi and Surapa to a warmer-weather sanctuary where they would live infinitely better lives. Zoo reps failed to mention how small and ecologically barren the building really is – and that it does not even meet the elephants’ basic needs as evidenced by their stereotypic and other stress-related behaviors indicating their suffering and inability to cope in their cramped and cold environment.

Buffalo Zoo mis-educates the public into believing elephants celebrate Halloween, are innately meant to paint on glass and canvas, carry logs, and perform all sorts of other unnatural behaviors highlighted in Buffalo Zoo’s marketing. It’s time for the Buffalo Zoo to thaw out this shameful elephant freezer and warm up to sending them to a sanctuary.

Photo credit.

10. Southwick’s Zoo, Mendon, Massachusetts – Tragedy of “Have Trunk Will Travel”

Each summer, Southwick’s Zoo in Massachusetts hires a California-based company to truck in elephants over a treacherously long distance in order to sell elephant rides to their customers. The zoo has been using Have Trunk Will Travel (HTWT), an elephant “rental” company, HTWT has a history of being notoriously brutal and violent to its elephants who are also rented out to be used in

other forms of entertainment including appearances in movies, events, and theme parks.

Animal Defenders International caught HTWT was caught on video viciously beating elephants, using an electric shock device, and striking a baby elephant over the head and pulling her trunk. These elephants were also observed chained for 12 hours a day, barely able to move back and forth, let alone walk. Last summer, Southwick’s Zoo rented elephants Rosie and Tai. The same elephant, Rosie, is pictured here in a photo from the same video, apparently being jabbed with a sharp bullhook to make her run faster by HTWT.

Not only does Southwick’s Zoo show a blatant disregard for elephant welfare, it apparently doesn’t care about human health either. An elephant named Dondi was previously used to give rides. After her death in 2010, she was found to have had tuberculosis. Dondi was the second elephant at the zoo who carried the disease. An elephant named Judy performed at Southwick’s Zoo, despite having been exposed to tuberculosis-positive elephants. Upon her death in 2007, it was confirmed that she had the disease.

Even multiple County Fairs that exist purely for recreation have chosen to discontinue their elephant rentals from HTWT; so why would a zoo — with a mandate to inform and educate — not cease giving elephant rides to an unsuspecting public? Southwick Zoo – Have Trunk Will Travel continues to be a traveling hell for these elephants, yet still sells tickets to ride on their aching backs and broken spirits.

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Dishonorable Mentions

Edmonton Zoo, Alberta, Canada - Northern Over-Exposure

Our list wouldn’t be complete without mentioning the intolerably grave, chilling, and lonely life that continues to be inflicted upon Lucy. In solitary confinement, this Asian elephant languishes her life away in a frigid prison in one of the coldest cities in Canada. As last year’s Hall of Shame winner, Edmonton Zoo has not improved life for this solitary elephant. She still suffers from foot disease, arthritis, and an undiagnosed respiratory condition that is causing a narrowing of the airway passages in her trunk. Lucy now apparently wheezes when she breathes, forcing her to breathe only through her mouth, which, according to the vet that examined her, is “totally abnormal” for an elephant. But captivity is also totally abnormal for elephants – especially for an Asian elephant designed by evolution for a tropical climate, but forced to breathe sub-zero air for six months of the year.

This year, Lucy was even deprived of a waterproof insulated winter coat that was generously donated by concerned elephants activists to warm her up on her short snow-covered walks around her prison yard, accompanied by her keeper with his nasty bullhook in tow. He wears a winter coat and gloves of course, to warm himself. Elephant sanctuaries have offered to give Lucy a chance to defrost and live her life in comfort, but the zoo will not grant this, claiming that she could have a respiratory crisis from the stress of relocation. Ironically, the only solution to Lucy’s respiratory challenges might actually rely on her being relocated to a warmer environment.

Edmonton, warm up your hearts and send Lucy south to a sanctuary where she may breathe easily again. The world will also sigh a hearty breath of relief from no longer having to watch your zoo force poor Lucy to spend most of her time alone in her barn or in the snow with no other elephants with whom to fight off the chronic chill of her captivity.

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Hall of Shame Winner

Bronx Zoo, New York: Mirror, Mirror... Still Waiting for a Happy Ending

This year the Bronx Zoo has been demoted to the Hall of Shame for keeping an Asian elephant, ironically named Happy, in solitary confinement for almost a decade. Perhaps more ironic is that Happy’s horrific life is her “reward” for her significant contributions to science. In 2005, she proved that an elephant could recognize herself in a mirror during a research experiment. Self-awareness was a cognitive characteristic previously and naively attributed only to humans and a handful of other species, until her now oft-cited achievement in this area. Despite this, the Wildlife Conservation Society, as the owner of the Bronx Zoo, has abandoned Happy in an outdated exhibit, leaving her to rot in loneliness and the cold – with only the distant memory of her own mirrored reflection for companionship.

In the most tragic of ironies, now that Happy has proven she’s self-aware, she is being denied the most basic and essential of psychological needs for elephants – any reasonable resemblance of elephant companionship. In 2015, The New York Times highlighted “The Bronx Zoo’s Loneliest Elephant,” documenting Happy’s controversial confinement and intolerable relationship with the other two elephants at the zoo. The Bronx Zoo already announced it will eventually close this outdated exhibit upon the death of one or more of the elephants. Must they wait for Happy to die from despair when they could so easily give her story a happy ending? Shameful indeed...

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

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