Worst Zoos for Elephants – Hall of Shame

The Hall of Shame is a special honor reserved for the worst repeat offenders that have made little or no progress improving conditions for elephants.

2015

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 Despite this, the Wildlife Conservation Society, as the owner of the Bronx Zoo, has abandoned Happy in an outdated exhibit, leaving her to rot in loneliness and the cold – with only the distant memory of her own mirrored reflection for companionship.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 The Bronx Zoo already announced it will eventually close this outdated exhibit upon the death of one or more of the elephants.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...

Photo license.

2014

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.

2013

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.

2012

Topeka Zoo (Kansas) – Topeka Zoo joins the notorious Hall of Fame for its refusal to address the plights of Tembo and Sunda. The elephants endure shamefully inadequate conditions, which includes a lack of space. Years of cramped confinement and long winter months indoors have led to health problems in both elephants, especially Sunda, who suffers from chronic foot disease, which can quickly turn deadly. Last July, IDA urged the USDA to remove Sunda from the zoo after observing gaping holes in the nails on two of her feet. In addition to health problems, both elephants neurotically sway and rock, a sign of psychological distress. The stress of living in a small space has also led to aggression between the elephants, who are different species. In September, a television report documented Sunda (Asian) ramming Tembo (African). Instead of prolonging the elephants’ misery, the zoo should send them to a spacious, natural-habitat sanctuary with the company of elephants of their own species. The Topeka Zoo has made four appearances on IDA's list of the Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants.

2011

San Antonio Zoo (Texas) – This zoo remains intransigent in its selfish desire to keep elephants, Lucky and Boo, on display. Given all that we know about elephants and their great physical, social and psychological needs, it should be ashamed to keep these two elephants in such a tiny, outdated exhibit. Making problems worse is that they don't get along, creating a stressful, unhealthy and dangerous situation. In 2010, the San Antonio Zoo was named one of the worst zoos in the world because of its treatment of elephants, and there is nothing to indicate that anything will soon change for Lucky and Boo.

2010 (Included updates for existing Hall of Shame entries)

2009

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 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.

Update: The zoo is now managing the elephants using the protected contact method, which is more humane for the elephants and safer for keepers. This system uses only positive reinforcement and eschews use of the bullhook. The $42 million exhibit renovation provides 3.5 acres for the elephants, an improvement from the previous quarter acre enclosure for elephant Billy, but still not enough space for elephants. Unfortunately, the enclosure is subdivided into five yards, presenting a maze of gates and fences that bears no resemblance to the promotional illustrations depicting plenty of open space. This is an exhibit built for the control and management of elephants, rather than better meeting their needs. The zoo borrowed elephants Tina and Jewel from the San Diego Zoo, barely avoided opening the exhibit with just one elephant, Billy.

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.

Update: IDA filed a complaint with the USDA in 2010, citing the Woodland Park Zoo’s irresponsible breeding program that puts calves at risk of contracting the lethal elephant herpes virus. The zoo continues to repeatedly perform invasive artificial insemination procedures on Chai, who had a miscarriage in 2008. Chai reportedly has undergone nearly sixty of the procedures, none of which has produced a successful pregnancy.

2008

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.

**Update:** The Dickerson Park Zoo is a known "hot spot" for the deadly elephant herpes virus; now you can add tuberculosis to the diseases found there. In January 2010, 60-year-old "Ol' CC" was prescribed nine months of quarantined treatment for the disease, which is found in elephants in zoos and circuses. In July Ol' CC fell and injured her back, possibly due to the anti-tuberculocidal medications. She died three weeks later, in August.

**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.

**Update:** Juno and aging Savannah continue to endure a sad life in their small barren exhibit, when they should be enjoying life with former El Paso Zoo resident Sissy at the spacious, natural-habitat Elephant Sanctuary.

**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. In 2008, young Jade was struck by the deadly elephant herpesvirus but managed to survive, though she suffered a relapse in December 2009. Half-sister Maliha has tested positive for the disease but did not show clinical signs. No significant change is on the horizon for St. Louis’s seven elephants who are cramped into a half-acre or less of outdoor space and spend long stretches behind locked doors in concrete stalls at night and 24/7 during cold midwest winter days.

**Update:** IDA filed a complaint with the USDA in 2010, citing the St. Louis Zoo’s reckless breeding program that puts calves at risk of contracting the deadly elephant herpes virus. Ellie’s daughter, Rani, is pregnant and expected to give birth in mid-summer 2011. In July 2010 Ellie suffered a miscarriage. Though the zoo is expanding the exhibit, the elephants still will have to spend the majority of the icy, long winters crammed into small indoor quarters, standing on unnaturally hard flooring that causes foot and joint disease and leads to premature death.

**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
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.

**Update:** Most of the elephants continue to live in this abysmal amusement park, forced to give rides and do circus tricks for the public. Two elephants were moved out: Malaika was sent to a privately owned facility owned by an exotic animal trainer in California, where she is still subject to circus-style management with the bullhook. Joyce was sent to the Brookfield Zoo in 2009 to be a companion for Christy, whose pen-mate Affie had died at only age 40. Four months later Christy died, leaving Joyce alone. In September 2010 she was moved to Six Flags Wild Safari in New Jersey, the sixth home she's known since being taken from her native Zimbabwe. In January 2011, Taj died at age 71. Though she lived longer than other elephants in zoos, she certainly did not enjoy a high quality of life.