

Mayor and Members of Council
City of Toronto
100 Queen Street West
Toronto, Ontario
M5H 2N2

Dear Mayor and Members of Council:

November 10, 2011

I have spent a great deal of my career studying elephants in Africa. On the 7th of September 2006, when I last visited Toronto Zoo, there were seven elephants in the enclosure. I spent time looking at the elephants and I particularly marveled that you have had an elephant named Thika after my home town in Kenya. I remember observing the elephants wander across the two sections of the enclosures and thinking about what their life would have been if they had remained in the vast savannas of East Africa. I remember making a note that compared to other elephants I had seen during visits to zoos in Canada, the elephants in Toronto were in good condition. I did not observe any stereotypic behavior in the two hours that I spent looking at the elephants and this was a sign that the keeper were doing a good job keeping the elephants stimulated.

I was shocked to learn a few years later that Toronto Zoo lost four of the seven elephants I had observed to various causes. This brought home to me the reality that even in zoos where keepers do their best to look after elephants, it is practically impossible to offer adequate care and ensure long term survival. I was also reminded that according to the stud book, Toronto Zoo had been home to a total of 10 elephants and three of them had died before my visit in 2006. This means that Toronto Zoo has lost 70% of the elephants under their care.

At this juncture, I want to congratulate the city council for the overwhelming vote backing the transfer of the Thika, Iringa, and Toka to the PAWS Sanctuary in California. I am convinced that this decision was made with the best interests of the elephants at heart. I would have recommended the same thing in 2006 and perhaps all seven elephants would still be alive. Toronto Zoo is seven elephants late already, you have no time to waste with side shows. It is obvious that the keepers who have loved and cared for these elephants feel that your decision challenges their competence. This is actually unfortunate. As an observer in 2006, I would have said with no hesitation that the Toronto Zoo keeper knew what they were doing even with the limitations inherent in maintaining Africa elephants in a temperate climate with severe space limitations.

Please reassure your keepers that your vote was not a vote of no confidence. Your vote was a vote for life. You are seven elephants late. Toronto City Council you cannot afford to go down in history as the Zoo that lost 10 out of 10 elephants.

Yours sincerely,

Winnie Kiiru
Elephant Biologist
Nairobi, Kenya