



AMBOSELI TRUST
FOR ELEPHANTS

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Councillors
Toronto City Council

I am writing to support the decisions taken by the Board of the Toronto Zoo to close their elephant exhibit and move the remaining elephants to a more suitable location, and by the Toronto City Council to confirm that the destination for the move should be the PAWS Sanctuary in San Andreas, California. I write in my capacity as an elephant ecologist, having worked in research and conservation with the Amboseli Elephant Research Project/ Amboseli Trust for Elephants, Kenya, since 1977. I have also been involved in elephant management in southern Africa and the well-being of captive elephants in Europe and North America during the past ten years.

I understand that concerns over these decisions, particularly the latter Council vote, have been expressed by keepers at the Toronto Zoo. It appears that they feel that a sanctuary is not a suitable destination for the elephants, simply because it is not accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, and that their views on this subject should count for more because they are the only true experts on the needs of elephant husbandry. I would suggest that zoo keepers are not, in fact, the only "experts" on elephants' biological needs, and that a broader view from other sources, particularly from people who have studied the behaviour of wild elephants in their natural ecosystems, is at least as relevant.

On best practice in elephant husbandry, it is important to have a bit of perspective; some idea of where current practices have come from, where they stand now and what they might aspire towards. I think we would all agree that the old role of zoo collections -- as menageries of exotic animals on display in cages simply for the amusement of urban populations -- is outmoded. This idea of zoos has evolved, both in practice and its perceived role, from entertainment (with no thought for the animals' needs) towards education and even conservation, and along with it, a greater concern to meet basic biological requirements. The questions should be: what is the goal for meeting those requirements, what are reasonable conditions for elephants, what do they need to live healthy and productive lives? It is said that zoos (I would say "some", rather than "most") have moved towards that goal for elephants by investing tens of millions of dollars in larger, better-designed enclosures. But how close do even those efforts come to reaching what elephants really need to thrive?

Modern zoo-keeping has (or should have) recognised that, since wild animals evolved in nature, an understanding of their needs has to come from knowledge of their ecology; this understanding from source is even more pertinent for tropical species kept in northern temperate climates. Elephants in the wild have large home ranges spanning hundreds of square kilometres, which they cover extensively. They are very large, with long legs, and are clearly adapted to move around a lot; they have significant intelligence, which they put to work in their search for and choices of food and social companions. With such adaptations, they clearly have a need for enough space to exercise those limbs, and to choose or avoid social partners; their large brains need the stimulation of different social partners and challenges to solve in getting food. Supplying these resources would be a huge challenge for any zoo. As an elephant ecologist, I don't see these needs being met by compounds of a few acres in size, which is the best that zoos have managed to provide so far, even with the investment of large sums. In North American cities with hard winters, the elephants are confined for long periods indoors, when the outdoor compounds get little use, and in most cases they also are confined indoors every night even in summer. It's pretty clear that zoos need to aim higher, to be thinking about how to provide space on the order tens or hundreds of acres of varied habitat, in warm climates, if they are going to give elephants anything remotely approaching their biological needs.

I am confident that the elephant keepers at Toronto Zoo have a great deal of experience with elephant husbandry, and that they are very dedicated and caring people. However, it is evident that much of their approach has been inward looking, and has been focussed on dealing with the problems of captivity, including the interventions of foot care, treatment of wounds and other injuries sustained in relation to zoo "furniture", monitoring for and treating disease and infection, managing social relations between dominant and subordinate elephants, and providing sufficient stimulation so that there is less stereotypic, repetitive behaviour. A lot of these problems would be greatly reduced, without intervention, in sufficiently large habitats that allow elephants to exercise, challenge themselves in foraging, and choose their social partners.

The only places in North America where I see something approaching these conditions at the moment are the sanctuaries. If there were zoos with similar conditions, they would be equally suitable. So, for me, it's not a choice of zoos vs. sanctuaries, but inadequate vs. adequate conditions. I struggle to understand zoo keepers who don't want these same, essential things for the elephants they have worked with. PAWS clearly provides these things (along with full-time care by highly qualified staff including veterinarians), while no zoos, accredited or otherwise, do at the moment. As an aside, "accreditation" is something that the AZA confers only on its member zoos, and specifically withholds from sanctuaries – to complain that sanctuaries are not accredited is thus more of a matter of definition than of judgement on the quality of elephants' livelihoods in sanctuaries.

There is a small but growing number of zoos around North America that have looked at the needs of elephants and their ability to meet them properly, and have concluded that they should no longer keep them. In these examples of elephants being moved from cold, cramped zoos to sanctuaries, the process has been managed to the satisfaction of the zoo keepers, as well as the animal welfare advocates. For evidence of this, I refer you to the recent letter from the Director of the Alaska Zoo to Toronto Zoo's CEO John Tracogna.

Toronto is now poised to join that select, progressive group, making a positive decision to keep only animals that are appropriate to their resources (financial, spatial, climatic), and to provide a genuine educational experience for their patrons, rather than to persist with

backward and, to be honest, inhumane practices. I applaud the recent decision to move the elephants to PAWS sanctuary and urge you to resist attempts to turn the clock back.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Keith Lindsay". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

W. Keith Lindsay