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Open letter to:

Miguel Trepát
Director Barcelona de Servies Municipials
Divisio Zoo – Barcelona Zoo
Parc de la Ciutadella, s/n
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Spain

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Dear Miquel Trepát,

Thank you for taking time to meet with us at the Barcelona Zoo on 9th and 10th June to discuss the two elephants, Susi and Yoyo, and for explaining to us your plans for alleviating their current suffering. We appreciated the opportunity to have a direct and open dialog with you and your colleagues, Curator, Conrad Enseñat, Veterinarian, Hugo Fernández, and press attaché, Vicenç Sanclemente, about the Zoo, in general, and about the elephants, in particular. We also welcome your invitation for a continued constructive dialog, both with us and with representatives of FAADA, Libera and others, for the best interests of Susi and Yoyo.

We clearly have a difference in opinion regarding the principle of keeping elephants in the middle of a large city. That said, improvements, expansions and enrichment that can reduce the suffering of the animals concerned are always welcome. We would like to commend the zoo on the positive changes made for the elephants and upon some positive management practices.

We also wish to take the opportunity to give our reflections regarding our observations as well as some facts, statements and policies mentioned in the two meetings.

Management style:

We were pleased to learn that the zoo uses protected contact to work with the elephants, as this removes the use of the bullhook and other punitive instruments to control the elephants and offers them at least some autonomy.

Importation of animals from the wild:

We were gratified to be told that the Barcelona Zoo is totally against the importation of any animals from the wild. We are aware that Spain, unfortunately, is listed as one of the destinations for wild caught animals from Zimbabwe, recently confirmed by Zimbabwean officials. Zimbabwe is currently facing worldwide condemnation for having captured wild animals for imminent shipment to North Korea. The gruesome practice by zoos of purchasing wild caught animals for their collections goes against the conservation and education that zoos purport to stand for and is severely detrimental to the welfare of the animals concerned. We are pleased that the Barcelona Zoo has come out strongly against this practice.

Outdoor enclosure:

Since we first became aware of Susi's plight two years ago, the elephants' outdoor exhibit has been significantly enhanced by the replacement of concrete flooring with natural substrate. It is tragic, though, that the death of Alicia had to occur before the Barcelona Zoo took this very necessary step.

We noted that you acknowledged that the elephants' current space is inadequate and that you intend to expand their pen to more than double its current size within the coming year, if funding is made available.

While this will be a great improvement, we wish to go on record as stating that, in our opinion, this expansion is not nearly enough and will not significantly change the lives of the elephants. We base this statement on our long study of elephants in the wild. This is because within this space it is impossible to introduce the kind of mental engagement in social interactions and prolonged natural foraging that should form the essence of an elephant's life.

Elephants are exceedingly large, long-lived and highly social mammals. Indeed elephants have the largest social network of any land-mammal yet studied. During the course of a day in the wild elephants roam over many kilometers, feeding on scores of different plant species and meeting and interacting with literally hundreds of individuals. Along the way they hear and recognize the individual voices and detect the individual scents of scores, or even hundreds, more. These social and survival challenges in the wild keep elephants healthy and active in mind and body.

We know, too, that elephants are highly emotional and intelligent. They are self-aware and are capable of empathy, of taking revenge, of reconciliation and they have an understanding of death. All of these qualities mean that elephants have an enormous capacity to suffer when they are kept captive with no one to meet and nothing to do. Elephants are simply not suited to life in an urban zoo.

Indoor enclosure:

We were, admittedly, disappointed and surprised that you wouldn't allow us see the indoor facilities, as you had agreed during our discussion on the 9th. Our request to see these facilities was related to trying to understand Susi's and Yoyo's overall living environment. It is tempting to assume that your change of mind was related to the inappropriateness of the current underground indoor facility, particularly in relation to Alicia's death, which necessitated her dissection in close proximity to Susi in order to remove her body.

At the same time we noted with satisfaction that by December 2010 you will have replaced the unsuitable under-ground enclosure with a new and better above-ground facility that will permit the elephants free access 24 hours a day.

Physical condition of the elephants:

It is fair to say that the elephants look in better condition than we expected to find them. Yoyo's skin has improved and both elephants are at a good weight. That is not the same as saying that they look well, however. We noted that Susi is lame and Yoyo, though only middle-aged, looks very elderly. She is lame, has poor skin, appears stunted and her spine is severely misaligned. While her condition is not the fault of the Barcelona Zoo, Yoyo is not an atypical product of captivity.

Psychological condition of the elephants:

The toll of captive life can be seen in the behavior, posture and expressions of both these elephants. Yoyo spends the majority of her time bobbing her head up and down, while Susi engages in walking back and forth in a set circuit or standing at the gate swinging her head from side to side.

Susi has had a neighbor in Yoyo for a year, but she does not yet have a companion and every effort should be made toward facilitating their integration. While the exhibit in total is larger than it was a year ago, until such time as they can share the same pen, Susi has access to less space than she did in her old enclosure and no real companionship.

In the context of the elephants' psychological state we wish to raise two issues. During the meeting we queried the Veterinarian, Hugo Fernández, about his alleged comment that elephants are not capable of emotion. His fury at our question was surprising, considering his statements to *La Vanguardia* in August last year. In that interview he expressed that happiness is a human emotion, and that animals do not care if they are inside or outside (the zoo). Based on solid science we would like to state that the attitude indicated by these statements does a great disservice to the zoo, to the animals and to the public.

We also wish to add that in speaking of Susi to *Time* in May last year, you stated, "she's in a perfect state of health." We actually hope you were misquoted – based on photos and videos taken at the time, it was obvious that Susi's physical and emotional health was far from perfect. If you really said this, based on input from Dr. Fernandez, we are concerned about the quality of advice you are given in regard to the welfare of the animals in the zoo.

Number of elephants and breeding:

In our meeting you stated that the Barcelona Zoo would not be getting more elephants. Yet, in the article in *La Vanguardia* last year, and repeated in an interview with TVE aired 10th June – while we were there, Dr. Fernández clearly speaks of increasing the number of elephants. Since neither Susi nor Yoyo is likely to make successful breeders at this stage of their captive lives it seem obvious that you intend to bring in other elephants. This is in direct contradiction of what you informed us in the meeting and leaves us concerned about the Zoos real intentions.

Education:

The educational outreach of the elephant exhibit was, to be frank, pitiful. There was a sign merely stating what species the animals were and three short sentences saying they lived in groups in forests and savannas and were threatened by uncontrolled ivory trade. In our meeting we passed by the educational value of keeping elephants in urban zoos. We actually think that the value is extremely limited and, most likely, even negative.

May we challenge you to contemplate the following questions: What do children learn by observing animals existing in conditions that are totally alien to their natural habitat, who show few signs of natural behavior, and who are deprived of their most basic social, motivational, and foraging possibilities? Does such an experience instill in these children the kind of respect needed for people to do the right thing to ensure their survival in the wild? Does this experience demonstrate how to treat elephants, or other animals, with respect and with compassion?

We believe that more and more zoo visitors will realize that seeing natural behavior is a bigger attraction than numerous species presented in more or less cage-like exhibits. Deprivation, frustration and odd behavior caused by captive situations is not attractive, nor it is ethically acceptable. As the public becomes better educated through TV documentaries we believe that those zoos not taking account of this mind shift in public opinion will be forced out of business.

Used in the context of the traditional zoo terms like "habitat" and "population" are mere window-dressing for the *exhibit* of wild animal *collections*; a way of getting the public to digest something that is actually quite unpalatable: incarcerated and deprived animals. Susi and Yoyo have lived a life of deprivation and continue to suffer.

The number of species - and space:

As mentioned in our meetings we recommend that the zoo drastically reduce the number of species that it holds and expand the space available for the remaining animals. With around 2,200 animals of 138 different species in very limited space in the middle of an urban jungle the zoo is not suited for its purpose. We were shocked by the space offered to many of the animals and the situation for the primates was particularly noteworthy. Not only was the space available for many of them too small, but we are reliably informed that due to lack of space many animals are rotated into the exhibits from small cages out of view.

Conclusion:

As we argued in our meetings and based on sound science - we are of the opinion that elephants do not belong in urban zoos. Susi and Yoyo show signs of frustration, sadness and misery. We simply do not believe that the Barcelona Zoo is able to offer these intelligent, socially complex animals what they need to thrive. They are not the only elephants in this condition in Europe and our strong recommendation is that an elephant exhibit worthy of the name "habitat" be built and populated with a number of elephants worthy of the name "bond-group." Spain has the best climate in Europe for elephants and we challenge the zoo community to provide properly for elephants by creating an elephant habitat on the order of hundreds, or better yet, thousands of hectares. We look forward to working with anyone willing to make this vision a reality.

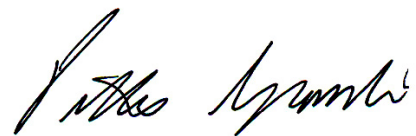
We wish you the best in your efforts to further improve the conditions for all animals in Barcelona Zoo – an effort that we think will also be in the best interest of the zoo's visitors. We look forward to hearing positive news in this direction from you and our other contacts in the beautiful and vibrant city of Barcelona.

Please visit our website ElephantVoices.org and [The Elephant Charter](#) for more information about the interests of elephants. Another resource that puts our perspective into context is the book chapter "[Mind and Movement – Meeting the Interests of Elephants](#)".

Kind regards, for ElephantVoices,



Joyce Poole, PhD



Petter Granli

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