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El Paso City Council

**Re: Proposed El Paso City Council Resolution regarding  
El Paso Zoo elephants**

Dear Madam/ Sir

I am writing to you about the proposal before the El Paso City Council regarding the El Paso Zoo elephants, namely to transfer the elephants, Savannah and Juno, to a sanctuary. As an ecologist with a long background of research and conservation of African elephants, and knowledge of related conservation and welfare issues in Asian elephants. I wish to support this proposed proposal. Zoos in northern hemisphere cities are unable, and most are unlikely ever to be able, to provide an environment that could be considered acceptable for elephants.

I am a past member of the IUCN/SSC (World Conservation Union/ Species Survival Commission) African Elephant Specialist Group and have been involved in research on the movements and habitat use of African elephants in eastern and southern Africa since 1978. My studies of the literature on both African and Asian elephant species and direct observations of elephants in their natural environment reinforce my understanding that they are highly intelligent and sensitive animals, deserving of a great deal more respect from us than we often provide.

They are born into a closely bonded family environment, and spend their lives interacting with their near kin and with many other, perhaps unrelated, elephants with whom they may form life-long social bonds and networks. Females spend their entire lives in family units with siblings and cousins and their offspring, and while males may leave the family at puberty, they develop flexible new relationships with other bulls and continually visit cow-calf groups, joining and re-joining groups throughout their lives. Research observing social interactions and response to playback calls has established that an individual elephant is keenly aware of the identities of 200-300 other individuals with whom they interact. They retain knowledge of these animals, show what can only be described as joy at reunions with, and grief at the death of, family members. It is likely that the development of intelligence in a broad range of species, including primates and cetaceans as well as elephants, has evolved within such complex social environments.

In the course of a single year, an elephant may move over an area ranging in size from a few hundred to over two thousand square kilometers. One square kilometer equals 247 acres, so the area covered by an elephant with a modest 300km<sup>2</sup> range would be over 70,000 acres. The

lifetime range of an elephant is likely to be larger, and they can retain memories of areas they may have visited decades earlier during a rare drought or high rainfall year. In their feeding, they commonly select a diet composed of over a hundred species of plants and a rich variety of plant parts including roots and rhizomes, leaves, stems, flowers, bark, from a background of diverse environments on offer.

These facts point to the fact that the environments in which elephants have evolved and normally live are rich in both social and ecological terms, and present elephants with stimulating challenges that require and support their intelligence and, indeed, general well-being. The environments provided by zoos -- the relatively small enclosures (an acre is **tiny** to an elephant, even if it represents a large piece of urban real estate), the unnatural, small social groups of unrelated animals (sometimes even total solitude) -- are impoverished by comparison, and can never even marginally approximate the experience of elephants in the wild.

The fact that elephants suffer health problems in zoos – problems such as foot, nail and joint abscesses that are not seen in the wild – is beyond dispute. Intensive veterinary interventions, applied sparingly in many zoos, have failed to prevent these pathological conditions, which often lead, directly or indirectly, to the early death of some animals – other animals, perhaps less fortunate, have suffered through long years of lingering discomfort. Keeping elephants in zoo conditions is analogous to keeping human prisoners in tiny cells and/or solitary confinement. That they will rarely breed, unless artificially treated with hormones, speaks volumes to their unhappiness. They typically suffer from conditions leading from this form of captivity, among them arthritis and heart disease from inappropriate diets, standing all day (and sometimes all night – all elephants in the wild, including the largest cows and bulls, lie down to sleep for a number of hours each night) and psychological stress. They often show stereotyped behavior, rocking back and forth and swaying.

In summary, urban zoos are no places for elephants. They are much better off in the wild, or as a second-best alternative, sanctuaries, but certainly not zoos.

I strongly support the proposed resolution to relocate the two remaining elephants at El Paso Zoo to a more humane sanctuary environment and, hopefully, to keep elephants out of the zoo in future. In doing the latter, El Paso would join with an increasing number of cities – such as San Francisco and Detroit -- and serve as an example of thoughtful humanity to the American nation as a whole.

Yours sincerely

W.K. Lindsay