

Space required for elephants
by Joyce Poole, Ph.D.
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Recent statements by the American Zoo and Aquarium Association (AZA) and other members of the zoo community maintain that there is no scientific evidence that elephants require ample space and suggest that elephants only move in the wild because they have to. AZA president, Bill Foster, said that the reason animals move so much in the wild is to seek security and food, while with food, protected environments and veterinary care, elephants in zoos live enriched lives. Foster is quoted in the Deseret Morning News as saying, "Yes, they can move miles, but only because they have too." And in the San Diego Union Tribune, Larry Killmar, the San Diego Zoo's associate director of collections, commented that since zoo elephants are provided their food, water and breeding partners, there's no reason for them to roam miles, as they must in the wild. In the same article, Mike Keele, chairman of the zoo industry's committee on elephant species survival and deputy director of the Oregon Zoo in Portland, said that zoo professionals haven't seen any research showing that elephants need to walk miles to maintain their feet. He has been quoted as saying, "There's zero science to support what kind of space is needed at this point in time."

While it is true that wild elephants move greater distances (many tens of miles a day) in areas with lower food and water availability than they do in areas where resources are in rich supply (perhaps 5-10 miles), it is an enormous leap of logic to suggest that because elephants have food, water, security and semen presented "on a plate" or "in a tube" in captivity they, therefore, don't need more than the 2,200 sq ft of space that the AZA currently recommends.

Elephants in zoos currently face numerous health, reproductive and behavioral problems requiring enormous costs and frequent interventions for veterinary treatment, hormone sampling, electro-ejaculation, etc. Such interventions often lead to "disciplinary action" and the use of "bullhooks" and other instruments, when an elephant refuses to comply.

As a scientist who has studied elephant behavior and communication among free-living individuals for 30 years, I am stunned that the AZA is not able to perceive the empirical evidence that elephants need much more space than what is currently allotted to them. In the form of routine problems captive elephant managers face every day, the evidence is unmistakable: foot diseases, arthritis, weight related diseases, infertility, heightened aggression, and other neurotic behavior. In the Amboseli population where the life histories of over 2,000 free-ranging individuals have been followed for 34 years, wild elephants do not develop foot problems (zero cases); they are not seen swaying rhythmically back and forth (zero incidents in over 34,000 sightings of groups containing 1-550 elephants); they do not have difficulties conceiving (two cases of infertility out of 558 females over 10 years old); they do not kill their own infants (zero cases out > 1500 births); they do not attack and kill the individuals with whom they are bonded (zero cases; unlike captive elephants who injure and kill their keepers). All these zero cases in the wild add up to an enormous amount of evidence that elephants need space to be elephants. Rivaling chimpanzees and human beings in the complexity of their fission-fusion society, without adequate space to be social beings, they become mere objects for our entertainment.

Just a thought, by AZA logic we might suggest that human beings, being about 2% the body weight of an elephant would do just fine living in 44 sq ft, if we were provided food, water and breeding partners. Speaking for myself, I am convinced that confined in 44 sq ft, I would develop health and behavioral problems - weight gain, joint problems and neuroses, to name but a few.

I support the requirements of Section 7-12-390 of the Ordinance of the City Council of the City of Chicago.

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