

African Elephants in Indian zoos: a short synopsis

There are several cases of African Elephants being kept in Indian zoos. Two animals were kept in Guwahati Zoo, three animals in Mysore Zoo and two animals in Delhi Zoo. The Guwahati animals are all now dead and they were kept shackled. The animals in Mysore are kept in an open-air enclosure that does allow them to stretch their legs and walk and roam around in their enclosure. But the biggest concern remains, Shankar, the lone animal at Delhi Zoo who was given by the Zimbabwean Government to the Indian President as a diplomatic gift in 1998 (<http://www.accessmylibrary.com/article-1G1-53398878/indian-government-delhi-zoo.html>). He was one of a pair given to the zoo and was initially kept with his female mate in an open-air enclosure. However, his companion died after a few years and he has now been shifted to the Asian elephant enclosure. He is chained for the overwhelming majority of the day (17 hours or more) and is very seldom let out (see Figure 1). He is one of the most disturbed animals I have ever seen. He spends the vast majority of his day engaged in neurotic stereotypic behavior, swaying in his chains under the shelter (see Figure 2). He is also dealt violently and cruelly by his keepers who shackle him by his front legs and beat him with bamboo sticks (Figure 3).

The Indian Zoo Inquiry, sponsored by Zoocheck Canada, and several biologists and activists have stated that Shankar should be sent to the Mysore Zoo to live in the company of conspecifics, but it appears that since he is a diplomatic gift, Delhi Zoo is reluctant to part with him. There are major ethical questions surrounding the diplomacy issue which concern numerous live wild animals that are shunted from country to country and these have included white tigers, Giant Pandas, elephants (both African and Asian) and several other large and charismatic species. The conservation aspect of such deals is dubious and welfare implications for the individuals concerned are serious. The government of India has taken the very enlightened step of releasing elephants from the confines of zoos and it would be appropriate to extend this injunction to the diplomatic exchange of wild animals, particularly sensitive creatures like elephants (<http://www.thehindu.com/2010/04/16/stories/2010041658040200.htm>).

Many notable experts have spoken out against the capture and incarceration of wild elephants for display in zoos. Shankar is a potent example of mankind's brutality and insensitivity. He would have been best left with his own kind in Zimbabwe itself to associate and play in the wild with his kin as elephants do. In the current light of hard core scientific information that is coming out in different media on the behaviour of elephants, it would be prudent not to repeat the mistakes of the past by capturing further elephant calves only to subject them to torture and suffering in unnatural spaces. Many enlightened zoo directors have voiced their opinion on this tragic aspect of elephant captivity. Therefore it is strongly urged to leave free ranging African and Asian Elephants strictly where they belong, in the wild.

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Figure 1. Shankar in the Delhi Zoo spends most of his life in chains and is regularly beaten (note the large scar on his forehead). He was gifted in 1998 by Zimbabwe to the Indian Government as one of a pair. He is now approximately 14 years old; his female companion died a few years after shipment. Photo courtesy of Nina Kanderian of Wildlife Conservation Society Afghanistan.



Figure 2. Shankar spends much of his time in stereotypic behavior – as depicted here swaying from side to side. Photo courtesy of Sandeep Saxena.



Figure 3. Shankar, frightened (note temporal gland secretion and ear posture), is chased and beaten with bamboo sticks.

