



Coalition for Captive Elephant Well-Being

Executive Summary

Introduction

The Coalition for Captive Elephant Well-Being is comprised of scientists, applied behaviorists, zoo management professionals, protected and free contact elephant handlers, veterinarians, animal welfare advocates, and policy analysts who have united in an effort to articulate and advocate science-based best practices to improve the care and well-being of captive elephants.

To date, no comprehensive evidence-based context for developing standards of care has been reported in the literature. Consequently, experts across all disciplines came together to review current research believing that (1) captive elephants are most likely to flourish in an environment providing conditions that promote species-appropriate behavior as revealed by the species' natural history; and (2) a training regime predicated on positive reinforcement and respect for the animal's autonomy is best suited to enhancing the lives of captive elephants and providing for their psychological well-being.

The resulting work product includes two key documents:

1. "The Case for Optimal Care and Well-Being of Captive Elephants,"
2. "Best Practices for Captive Elephant Well-Being."

The Coalition will use these documents to guide our dialogue with the zoo industry, non-zoo institutions like sanctuaries and government agencies that license or otherwise oversee such institutions.

We believe practices that have been endorsed by experts across all disciplines will help elephant holding institutions to a) improve elephants' reproductive success, b) reduce behavior problems, c) increase longevity, d) increase staff safety, e) improve image, f) increase chances of calf survivorship, and g) gain support from the nation's largest animal welfare organizations.

KEY CONCLUSIONS:

1. We do not assume that the only acceptable conditions of captivity are ones closely replicating the complexity and scale of the wild. We do suggest that we have an inherent obligation to provide captive elephants with environmental options and opportunities analogous to their wild conditions to sufficiently permit elephants to engage in the full repertoire of natural behaviors. Therefore, we embrace Forthman's (1998) ideal that zoos provide optimal conditions of confinement informed by the animal's natural history assessed in terms of discrete ecological variables, including physical, social, and occupational variables.
2. AZA's elephant management approach has produced an aging population of Asian and African elephants who cannot even sustain their own small numbers (Olsen and Wiese 2000; Wiese 2000).



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3. Evidence collected over the past thirty years by field scientists uniformly supports the observation that elephants as individuals, exhibit significant cognitive abilities, social complexity and remarkable physical vigor (Eisenberg 1981; Moss 1988; Estes 1991; Sukumar 2003).
4. A humane and enlightened captive environment must reflect an informed understanding of these key characteristics. As Mench and Kreger wrote, we must place emphasis on “designing zoo environments that meet the needs that the animal *itself* perceives to be important” (1996, 13).
5. Science-based standards should be developed and used to manage captive elephants so that they may engage in their species’ full repertoire of natural behaviors. (Note: Great Apes were once managed with little regard for their behavioral needs and biological requirements. Great Apes flourish in today’s zoos thanks to changes influenced by the species’ natural history.)

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- ✓ The Coalition’s Best Practice recommendations identify evidence-based standards and methods aimed at providing optimal conditions of confinement, including rich social, occupational and cognitive opportunities that promote elephants’ natural behavior.
- ✓ The Coalition’s Best Practice recommendations were developed with the goal of reducing captive elephants’ experience of distress.
- ✓ The recommendations...
 - Highlight the necessity of assessment-based planning to develop programs supporting individual elephant’s strengths and ameliorating deficiencies.
 - Address elephants’ occupational needs and focus on activity cycles and habitat use.
 - Recognize that elephants live in a matriarchal society with two distinct social organizations, males and cow-calf or breeding herds, with separate behavioral traits. The Best Practices acknowledge and protect, promote, and preserve the importance of the life-long bond between mother and female calf.
 - Address training systems, defining the tools and techniques used in free and protected contact. We state a preference for positive reinforcement and protected contact and prohibit instrumental physical and/or psychological punishment.
 - Address nutrition and selected topics in health care, record keeping and staff development.



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Project Team

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Project Partners:

American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
The Humane Society of the United States
The Fund for Animals
Oakland Zoo
Phoenix Zoo