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A 9,000-Pound Fish Out of Water, Alone in Alaska

By SARAH KERSHAW

ANCHORAGE - She played in the snow. She played the harmonica. She snacked on hot dog buns and hay, chewed on birch bark and snorted.

Still, it was impossible to answer the question that is causing so much consternation: is Alaska's only elephant happy?

Maggie, the African elephant who has resided at the Alaska Zoo here since 1983 - a creature of the tropics amid snow leopards and polar bears - is, after all, said to be rather moody and prickly.

But whether Maggie, a 22-year-old native of Zimbabwe, is depressed because she is spending another dark and freezing winter in Alaska has been the subject of a long and charged debate, here and across the country.

Facing growing demands that she be moved to a warmer climate, where she could socialize with other elephants and get much more outdoor exercise, Alaska Zoo officials decided to keep her in Anchorage for now but came up with an unusual proposal to improve her exercise situation: They plan to build this 9,120-pound elephant a treadmill.

"I just don't know where you are going to put her where she's happier than she is here," Rob Smith, Maggie's trainer and manager for the last seven years, said on a recent frigid afternoon at the zoo, as Maggie stomped around her concrete barn.

The zoo has been under fire from national animal rights groups and some Alaska residents, who, in atypical acceptance of outside interference, have called for a boycott of the zoo until Maggie is moved south. Other zoos across the country, including those in San Francisco and Detroit, facing similar criticism and internal debates about the treatment of elephants in captivity, have closed their elephant exhibits in recent months, saying they were relocating the animals to warmer climates and to wide-open sanctuaries where they could roam for miles, as they do in the wild.

The plan here is to complete the treadmill, a first-of-its-kind \$100,000 elephant exercise machine, by the summer. It would be 20 feet long and 5 feet wide, according to the plans,

with a conveyer belt strong enough to allow Maggie, who is kept indoors here during most of the long winter, to get her blood flowing and move her creaky joints, zoo officials say.

A donor has already paid for the treadmill, the officials say, part of a roughly \$500,000 "elephant house" improvement plan that would double the space in Maggie's 1,600-square-foot barn and add other amenities. Maggie, who has been trained to play the harmonica and to paint in watercolor on cardboard with her trunk, would have to be trained to use the treadmill.

If it keeps Maggie in shape, preventing the arthritis and foot infections that have plagued other elephants in the nation's zoos, then remaining in Anchorage is best for her, zoo officials say. Maggie has a history of not getting along with other elephants, and is easily made anxious by change, so the risks in moving her from "the only home she has known" outweigh the benefits, they say.

Mr. Smith contended, as did other zoo officials, that when the Alaska Zoo had two elephants - Annabelle, an Asian elephant, died of a foot infection in 1997 - Maggie was miserable and unusually aggressive.

But animal rights groups and outside elephant experts say it is cruel to keep an elephant alone, particularly a female who is meant to socialize with other elephants. Worse than Anchorage temperatures, which can dip to 20 degrees below zero in the winter and require Maggie to spend much of her time indoors, they say, is her lack of elephant companionship.

"A lone elephant is clearly not a good thing," said Ron L. Kagan, director of the Detroit Zoo, which last month decided to move its two arthritic elephants, Wanda and Winky, to a sanctuary in California because officials decided the cold Detroit weather and the lack of space at that zoo was not healthy.

"The fact that she's without elephant companionship - we shouldn't fool ourselves that somehow humans are the equivalent," said Mr. Kagan, who said he had seen Maggie in Anchorage a few years ago. "I'd say that's a very challenged elephant."

The Detroit Zoo has decided to close its elephant exhibit permanently. The San Francisco Zoo sent one elephant, Tinkerbelle, to a sanctuary in November and plans to send its last remaining elephant, Lulu, there too, officials there said. In December, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors approved a law requiring the city's zoo to have a 15-acre habitat before the elephants can return.

"People's expectations of a zoo are to see animals like lions and tigers and elephants," Mr. Kagan said. "But also, I think that now the expectation is to only see elephants that are thriving."

Nicole Meyer, an elephant specialist for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, which has made Maggie a cause célèbre in recent months, derided the Alaska Zoo's decision to keep Maggie as "selfish" and said the treadmill plan was a "truly ridiculous concept."

"The fact that she is in solitary confinement as a social animal is unacceptable," Ms. Meyer said. "She is in a completely inappropriate environment for an elephant. You certainly do not find elephants in the Arctic in the wild." Even elephant experts who support keeping the widely popular elephant exhibits open, for educational reasons and for conservation of the vulnerable species, say they do not support keeping Maggie alone and are skeptical of the treadmill.

"People use treadmills," said Mike Keele, deputy director of the Oregon Zoo and chairman of the elephant species survival program for the American Zoo and Aquarium Association, which accredits zoos in North America. "I guess it's an interesting concept. But I'm not sure what the message is - for visitors to come up and see an elephant on a treadmill and somehow make a connection with nature? That's a tough one for me."

Officials here say the Alaska Zoo has not sought accreditation from the association, which strongly recommends keeping no fewer than three female elephants in a zoo.

Tex Edwards, director of the Alaska Zoo, said officials here had been anguished during a yearlong debate over what to do about Maggie, and he acknowledged that among the many experts consulted there was great concern about her being alone. But Maggie is in good health, Mr. Edwards said - her doctor said she had a pocket of fat along her belly but had no other health concerns.

"I think we're trying to do the right thing," he said.

Mr. Edwards said the zoo planned to keep Maggie in Anchorage for at least three years, but that by the end of that time it would evaluate whether the treadmill and the renovations to her barn had improved her quality of life. Then, he said, they will decide if the elephant should leave Alaska.