

FAQs: Proposed import of wild elephants from Swaziland by U.S. zoos 2015

By:

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Why are zoos taking elephants from the wild?

Zoos are importing elephants to restock the dwindling zoo elephant inventory – which has nothing to do with conserving the species. Not one of the elephants will be returned to the wild, nor will their offspring if they have any. (Reintroduction of animals to the wild is the gold standard for conservation.) The zoo industry's claim that commercial exhibition of elephants inspires Americans to take conservation action remains unproven and objectively unmeasured.

What zoos are proposing to import wild-caught African elephants from Swaziland?

The Dallas Zoo in Texas; Sedgwick County Zoo in Wichita, Kansas; and the Henry Doorly Zoo in Omaha, Nebraska. The Dallas Zoo has submitted a request to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service on behalf of the three zoos for a permit to import wild elephants from Swaziland.

How many elephants do the zoos propose to import?

The zoos would each receive six elephants: one male and five females, for a total of 18 elephants. Reportedly, 15 are sub-adults aged 6-15 years old, and three are adult females aged 20-25 years old. The selection of these animals will break up family units, leaving the remaining elephants socially disrupted.

How many elephant live in Swaziland right now?

Fewer than 35 elephants.ⁱ Should the 18 elephants be exported, it is reported that only 15 elephants will remain as “symbols of Swaziland’s rich natural heritage.” The country introduced elephants between 1986 and 1994ⁱⁱ as a tourist attraction and sign of national prestige.

Why is Swaziland agreeing to export elephants?

Swaziland has long allowed a family-run organization, Big Game Parks, to manage wildlife in three of its protected areas, apparently without government oversight. Big Game Parks appears to be making the decision to export the elephants. A source at the Swaziland National Trust Commission, a parastatal of the Ministry of Tourism and Environmental Affairs which oversees four of the country’s seven reserves, claims there is space and food for the elephants in other reserve areas of Swaziland, but the Trust was never alerted to the export.ⁱⁱⁱ Big Game Parks has threatened to cull the 18 elephants if permits are not issued, claiming the elephants are destroying landscape in the parks and impacting the rhino population.

Why is there a potential conflict of interest involving Big Game Parks?

Countries that are signatories to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) are supposed to operate Scientific and Management authorities that are separate and independent from each other. The head of Big Game Parks, Ted Reilly, is listed as both Scientific and Management Authority. Furthermore, it is Big Game Parks that must apply to export the

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elephants. In effect, Big Game Parks will be applying to itself. There is thus no independent oversight, and Big Game Parks stands to gain financially from its transaction with the zoos. The zoos are exploiting this lack of oversight and the threat of culling the elephants to secure their import to the United States.

Are the elephants really a threat to Swaziland's rhinos and landscape?

This claim is a red herring. The elephants in Swaziland are confined to small areas in two parks, *consisting mainly of two elephant-proof enclosures^{iv} comprising only 6% and 19% of the fenced reserves* (Hlane Royal National Park at 142km² and Mkhaya Game Reserve at 65km²). These enclosures contain the country's populations of elephants, numbering 19 and 13 respectively in 2012.^v Their impact on vegetation and other species is confined to those areas, so it is simply incorrect to claim they pose any significant threat to other wildlife which range more widely in the major portions of the reserves. If anything, the conversion of woody habitats to grassland is more likely to create better conditions for white rhinos, one of the two African species, because they are grazers. Zoos used the same claim about rhinos in 2003 when they hand-picked and purchased 11 wild-caught elephants from Swaziland.

What other African countries are using culling to manage elephants?

None. Culling as an approach to the management of elephants has been abandoned or put on hold in all countries in southern Africa for two decades. A ban was instituted in South Africa in 1995, and although the ban was lifted in principle in 2008, it has never been resumed, under the strength of public opinion. Other, non-lethal management alternatives, including water point management, corridor creation and translocation are now accepted as best practice. For Swaziland to kill elephants it has decided are surplus would be a return to practices now considered outmoded by modern wildlife managers.

What are some of the alternatives to culling that Big Game Parks could pursue?

The proposed import is being portrayed as a choice between Big Game Parks killing the elephants or exporting the elephants to the US, when in fact other choices exist:

- Relocate the elephants to a protected park or sanctuary outside Swaziland.
- Move the fenced areas within the reserves so the elephants would have new vegetation for foraging and give landscape in the former area time to recover.
- Relocate the rhinos to the larger areas of the reserves, separate from the elephants.
- Provide supplementary food for the elephants and the rhinos. (Big Game Parks reportedly is already feeding the rhinos.)
- Employ birth control with the female elephants and not just the males.

Has any attempt been made to relocate the elephants in Africa?

The Kingdom of Swaziland, Big Game Parks, and the Dallas Zoo and its partners have offered no evidence to show they explored options for relocation of the elephants to other protected parks or sanctuaries within Africa. Only in situ relocation offers real conservation value, the promise of minimal harm and distress to the elephants, and the prospect of a natural life.

Who opposes this import?

Scientists, conservationists, veterinarians, animal welfare and policy experts around the world oppose the capture and import of wild elephants for display in zoos, as it is archaic and unethical. (See statement signed by 79 professionals in opposition to the proposed import at <http://tinyurl.com/ntn67d4>). The practice is detrimental to elephants, encourages poor conservation practices, and does not contribute to conserving wild African elephants.

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Why is the import detrimental to the elephants?

The capture and removal of elephants from their habitats and social groups is unethical and cruel. Elephants are highly intelligent, sensitive and social animals. Females (who constitute 15 of the 18 elephants) naturally remain with their mothers for life. Separation of females from their mothers and social groups causes distress in the captured elephants and those left behind. Captivity brings with it a host of physical and psychological problems (see below).

Haven't U.S. zoos imported elephants from Swaziland before?

In 2003 the San Diego Wild Animal Park in California and the Lowry Park Zoo in Florida purchased 11 wild elephants from Swaziland for more than \$100,000. At that time, Big Game Parks claimed, as now, to have too many elephants and claimed they were threatening the parks' rhino population. Big Game Parks threatened to slaughter the elephants if the sale did not go forward. The money paid for the animals was to be used to improve the country's elephant conservation practices and policies. Yet today, with a total national population of 35 or fewer elephants, parks officials are again threatening to kill elephants due to overpopulation. This indicates that Big Game Parks has persisted in its poor conservation approach, enabled by a zoo market for elephants.

Did the 2003 import help boost the zoo elephant population in North America?

Even with the 2003 import, reproduction in zoos is not anywhere close to creating a sustainable number of elephants, and eventually zoos will have no more elephants for display. More African elephants are dying in zoos than are being born, causing zoos to once again raid the wild for elephants.

Why is the import of wild elephants for display in zoos poor conservation practice?

The sales of wild elephants can create a perverse financial incentive for other countries to engage in poor conservation practices, disguising the sales as conservation, wildlife management, or as "rescues." In 2012, an Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) accredited zoo, Africam Safari in Mexico, attempted to disguise its purchase of nine African elephant calves from Namibia as a rescue, only to have the import exposed as a purely commercial transaction.^{vi} This fabrication was never publicly condemned by the AZA.

What are captive conditions like for elephants in zoos?

Think *Blackfish* for elephants. The captured elephants, taken from their mothers and social groups, would inhabit zoo enclosures that are a tiny fraction of the space they occupied in Swaziland (a few acres versus square miles). Two of the zoos are located in areas that experience long, severe winters, which would force the elephants to remain indoors in even smaller spaces for extended periods of time. Zoos commonly separate and transfer related or bonded elephants to other zoos, compounding the trauma inflicted on these animals.

What physical and mental problems do elephants suffer in zoos?

Elephants are adapted for long-distance living to meet their ecological, social and reproductive requirements. They cannot be expected to cope, physically or psychologically with the immediate and extreme change from nature to captivity and close confinement. The result is that captivity-related debilities and disease and behavioral abnormalities are prevalent in elephants in zoos, including foot and joint disorders (the major causes of death in captivity), repetitive swaying and rocking, reproductive disorders, tuberculosis, infertility, and infanticide. Elephants often die prematurely. The overall infant mortality rate for elephants in zoos is a staggering 40 percent – nearly triple the rate of free ranging

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Asian and African elephants.^{vii} Published research shows that bringing elephants into zoos profoundly impairs their health and viability.^{viii}

Is the zoo population of elephants self-sustaining?

No. Elephants are not thriving in zoos, and the zoo population cannot sustain itself. *So zoos will keep organizing captures and removing elephants from the wild.* A 2012 Seattle Times report found that elephant births in zoos failed to offset deaths, which will lead to the demographic extinction of elephants in U.S. zoos in the next 50 years. Of the 321 deaths studied by the Seattle Times, half the elephants were dead by age 23, about a third of their expected life span of 65-70 years. Most died from injury or disease associated with captive conditions.

If elephants breed in captivity would that help to conserve those in the wild?

No. Even if zoos were successful in breeding elephants, it still would not contribute to the conservation of the species. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)/SSC Specialist Group for African elephants^{ix x} has stated that captive breeding makes no effective contribution to conservation, and the group does not endorse the removal of African elephants from the wild for any captive use. Neither of the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species entries for Asian or African elephants lists captive breeding as necessary conservation measures.

Is it justifiable to cause harm to elephants for the purported good of another species?

The principle of conserving another species, even if threatened by elephants' numbers, does not justify unconscionable conduct that includes tearing young elephants away from their mothers and social groups and incarcerating them for the rest of their lives. It is callous of zoos to contend that the ends justify the means, especially when other options apparently have not been fully explored.

How much money have the zoos involved in the proposed import spent on elephant exhibits?

The three zoos combined have invested, at minimum, \$39 million on elephant exhibit construction. The Dallas Zoo's exhibit opened in 2011, at a cost of at least \$13.5 million (part of a larger \$30 million African mammals exhibit). The elephant barn alone cost \$2 million. The Sedgwick County Zoo's elephant exhibit renovation (not yet open) is reported to cost at least \$10.5 million. The Omaha Zoo's new elephant exhibit (not yet open) includes an elephant barn that cost \$15 million to build; the zoo has not released the cost of the entire exhibit, but it is part of a larger \$73 million African animals exhibit. Even a small fraction of the millions spent on elephant exhibit construction would go far in conserving African elephants, if applied directly in their range States.

How do zoos benefit from importing the elephants?

Zoos benefit through increased attendance and revenues brought by the display of elephants. For example, the Dallas Zoo reports that after the 2010 opening of its \$30 million African mammals exhibit, which heavily features African elephants, it set an all-time record for attendance that year and record net proceeds from its annual gala. It is widely known that the birth of an elephant calf in a zoo attracts even more attention and revenues – a calf can double a zoo's revenues and donations. Referring to the anticipated import of the Swaziland elephants, Sedgwick County Zoo Director Mark Reed recently stated: "It's not a question of 'if' but a question of 'when' we will have young elephant calves born here...That's going to skyrocket the attendance like nothing ever has here before."^{xi}

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How much will these zoos contribute to Big Game Parks in Swaziland?

The Wichita Eagle reports that the zoos will pay \$450,000 over five-years.^{xii} This money purportedly will go toward a rhino program about which very little information has been provided.

What is the conservation status of African elephants?

Under the U.S. Endangered Species Act (ESA), elephants are listed as “threatened,” which allows for the importation of live elephants for non-commercial purposes. There is a petition currently before USFWS to uplist the African elephant to endangered status, which would make them extremely difficult to import. Asian elephants are already listed as endangered under the ESA, making African elephants a more desirable target for importation. Under CITES, the Swaziland elephants are listed as Appendix I, which includes species threatened with extinction. Trade is permitted only in exceptional circumstances. As explained above, because there is no independent CITES oversight in Swaziland, Big Game Parks will determine whether to allow the export and, at the same time, benefit from the transaction.

What happens next?

USFWS has posted its Draft Environmental Assessment on the Dallas Zoo’s permit request and provided a brief comment period for the public. (See <http://www.regulations.gov/#!docketDetail;D=FWS-HQ-IA-2015-0157>).

Additional information: Most recent imports of wild African elephants to U.S. zoos

- In 2012, the AZA-accredited Africam Safari in Mexico imported nine elephant calves from Namibia, calling it a “rescue” and claiming the “orphaned” elephants would otherwise be killed. The government of Namibia strongly refuted the claim, stating that the elephants were not orphans and would not have been killed, and that Africam Safari had purchased the calves.
- In 2011, the Pittsburgh Zoo imported three female African elephants from Botswana. The zoo claimed to rescue the elephants, as one of them killed a person and therefore was going to be destroyed. (There was no explanation as to why the other two elephants had to be “rescued” as well.) The elephants currently are confined at the zoo’s breeding facility in Somerset County, Pennsylvania. To date, no breeding has occurred.
- In 2003, the San Diego Zoo in California and the Lowry Park Zoo in Florida imported 11 elephants from Swaziland. Two of the females were pregnant at the time. Of the 11 elephants, 10 are still alive. Female Umoya was killed by a male elephant at the San Diego Zoo Safari Park in 2011.

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Footnotes

ⁱ Elephant Database, Provisional African Elephant Population Estimates: update to 31 Dec 2013 http://www.elephantdatabase.org/preview_report/2013_africa_final/Loxodonta_africana/2013/Africa/Southern_Africa/Swaziland

ⁱⁱ <http://www.biggameparks.org/conserve/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Swaziland elephant export ignores alternatives. *News 24* (South Africa). October 28, 2015.

<http://www.news24.com/Green/News/Swaziland-elephant-export-ignores-alternatives-20151028>

^{iv} Blanc, J.J., Barnes, R.F.W., Craig, G.C., Dublin, H.T., Thouless, C.R., Douglas-Hamilton, I., & Hart, J.A. (2007) *African Elephant Status Report 2007: an update from the African Elephant Database*. Occasional Paper Series of the IUCN Species Survival Commission, No. 33. IUCN/SSC African Elephant Specialist Group, IUCN, Gland, Switzerland, vi+276pp.

^v http://www.elephantdatabase.org/preview_report/2013_africa_final/Loxodonta_africana/-2013/Africa/Southern_Africa/Swaziland

^{vi} Namibia: No orphan elephants exported to Mexico." June 11, 2012.

<http://allafrica.com/stories/201206111695.html>

^{vii} Saragusty, J., Hermes, R., Göritz, F., Schmitt, D.L., & Hildebrandt, T.B. (2009) Skewed birth sex ratio and premature mortality in elephants. *Animal Reproduction Science*, 115:247–254

^{viii} Clubb, R., Rowcliffe, M., Lee, P., Mar, K.U., Moss, C. & Mason G.J. 2008. *Compromised survivorship in zoo elephants*. *Science*, 12: 1649.

^{ix} Statement and resolutions on the role of captive facilities in in situ African elephant conservation, IUCN SSC African Elephant Specialist Group (http://www.african-elephant.org/tools/pdfs/pos_captiv_en.pdf).

^x Statement from the African Elephant Specialist Group of the IUCN Species Survival Commission on the removal of African elephants for captive use, IUCN SSC African Elephant Specialist Group.

http://cmsdata.iucn.org/downloads/pos_capvuse_en.pdf

^{xi} Salazar, Daniel. "Why do people love elephants so much?" *The Wichita Eagle*. October 17, 2015.

^{xii} Salazar, Daniel, Feds say they prefer approving elephant import to Sedgwick County Zoo. *The Wichita Eagle*. October 26. 2015.