

Radical Change Needed for Cincinnati Zoo Elephants

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The Cincinnati Zoo's approach toward elephants is about as outdated as its elephant building, which was built in 1906. The zoo ignores the wealth of scientific knowledge gained about elephant behavior and biology over the past several decades that should in fact be guiding the care of elephants in captivity today.

Field studies show that elephants are highly intelligent and complex individuals who live in tightly-knit extended family groups, with mothers and daughters staying together for life. We have discovered that elephants have a highly developed social structure approaching the complexity of humans.

Wild elephants' lives are rich. Important events like matings and the coming of the rains are celebrated, their dead are mourned. During the course of a day, an elephant can walk 30 miles or more in a natural range that covers hundreds of square miles. The wanderings of elephants are not solely to find food but also to explore their environment, socialize, and maintain their health and well-being.

In the traditional zoo exhibit, elephants are denied all that is natural to them: family, freedom of choice, space to roam. Forced to live in small groups of unrelated individuals, elephants are confined to tiny lots that are a fraction of their natural range. The Cincinnati Zoo, for example, crams three (soon to be four) elephants into a yard that is less than an acre and warehouses them during the winter months in a barn of only 5,000 square feet -- the equivalent of keeping a Labrador retriever in a tiny kennel for his entire life with only a doghouse in which to retreat.

Elephants are undeniably suffering in poor zoo environments. The inability to exercise and having to stand on hard surfaces cause elephants to suffer from arthritis, chronic foot and bone infections, infertility, obesity, digestive disorders and neurotic behaviors (rocking, swaying, head bobbing). Elephants in zoos live, on average, half their natural lifespan of 65 to 70 years. Zoos are clearly not meeting the biological and psychological needs of this species!

This is not an issue of eliminating the exhibition of animals in captivity. It is an issue of providing a good quality of life for the animals that are in captivity. If a zoo cannot do this, then it should not keep elephants in its collection, no matter what the justification. Today, the bar for caring for elephants is not being set by zoos, but by two government-approved elephant sanctuaries located in Tennessee and in California that provide hundreds to thousands of acres of naturalistic habitat and high-quality, round-the-clock care for the elephants.

Before Cincinnati Zoo goes ahead and wastes nearly \$3 million on a new elephant exhibit that will be outdated before it even opens its doors, it should join other progressive zoos in reevaluating its elephant program. The zoo should do right by its elephants, and the public should demand nothing less.

Mr. Les Schobert enjoyed a prestigious 35-year career, working as a curator at major zoos including Los Angeles and North Carolina. He is an expert in the handling, care and management of elephants. Mr. Schobert was intimately involved with the American Zoo & Aquarium Association, serving as Vice Chair of the Wildlife Conservation Management Committee and Chair for the Chimpanzee and Great Ape Taxon Advisory Group/Species Survival Plan (TAG/SSP). He also spent a period of time on the TAG/SSP for elephants.