

## Animal activists decry expanded elephant displays

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Seven lumbering elephants — four of them newcomers — are the star attractions in the San Diego Zoo's biggest, most costly expansion in its 90-plus years.

But such multimillion dollar displays as the city's \$45 million Elephant Odyssey are prompting an outcry from animal rights activists who view similar expansions in other U.S. zoos as part of a troubling trend.

"They increase the size of the exhibit and then cram more elephants in," said Suzanne Roy, program director of In Defense of Animals, or IDA. "Zoos are spending millions of dollars in exactly the wrong direction."

Within five years, the number of elephants in 77 accredited zoos across the U.S. is expected to rise from 290 to 532, according to the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, or AZA. But animal rights groups say too many elephants are already in captivity and that the expansions are not spacious enough for animals that wander by nature.

Critics also cite studies finding that zoo elephants die prematurely, contract diseases — the herpes virus, in particular — and suffer debilitating conditions such as obesity and arthritis more frequently than they do in their natural habitat.

But zoos that are expanding say they are contributing to public awareness, acting as ambassadors for these majestic animals and aiding conservation efforts for endangered Asian elephants and threatened African elephants.

"Recent science has taught us about what elephants need," said Robert Wiese, the San Diego Zoo's chief life sciences officer. "Elephant Odyssey signifies our commitment to applying what we've learned."

Several years ago, studies showed that when it came to keeping elephants, size mattered. The world's largest land mammal walks several miles a day and is an extremely social creature that needs the company of its own kind to thrive.

Elephants "stay in the same, bonded matriarchal units for decades," said Jeffrey Masson, author of the 1996 best seller, "When Elephants Weep: The Emotional Lives of Animals."

"There is no way to replicate that in captivity," he said.

Out of animal welfare concerns, at least a dozen zoos have closed elephant exhibits or plan to. A three-year fight that included dozens of Hollywood celebrities and animal rights groups broke out over The Los Angeles Zoo's decision to keep its lone elephant, Billy, until the zoo's \$42 million, six-acre elephant exhibit was complete.

But Steve Feldman, an association spokesman, said zoos now understand what is needed to keep elephants happy and healthy.

"We've really come a long way in terms of raising elephant care," Feldman said. "AZA-accredited zoos decided a number of years ago that they needed to articulate and then fulfill a vision for elephant conservation. We're well on our way to fulfilling that vision."

Since 2006, the association has required higher habitat standards for accreditation, including minimum space requirements, improved handler training, special diets, physical activity and programs to help zoo elephants stay stimulated intellectually, Feldman said.

The group said 22 accredited zoos have upgraded their habitats since 2003 and a further 33 were in the process.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture counts 488 elephants in the country, including those in circuses, sanctuaries, public zoos, private and petting zoos and rent-an-elephant operations for moviemaking and special events.

Animal protection groups have taken aim not only at zoos but also at circuses.

A coalition of animal welfare organizations, including the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, has sued the owner of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus for violating the 1973 Endangered Species Act. The groups accuse Feld Entertainment of keeping 54 Asian elephants in chains and using bull hooks, whips and other coercive means to train them.

Feld Entertainment has denied the charges. A decision on the case is expected within weeks.