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Toledo Zoo Elephant Attack Was Preventable

In Defense of Animals calls on zoo to immediately switch to safer training method for three elephants

San Rafael, Calif. – Following the horrific attack that left an elephant keeper seriously injured, In Defense of Animals (IDA) is calling on the Toledo Zoo to end its use of archaic circus-style training that puts keepers at high risk of injury and death and is inhumane for the elephants. The African elephant in the attack has been identified as seven-year-old Louie.

“The Toledo Zoo could have prevented this tragic incident by employing a widely-used elephant management system that safeguards keepers and trains elephants more humanely,” said Catherine Doyle, IDA Elephant Campaign Director. “There is absolutely no excuse for the zoo to continue using unsafe and inhumane handling practices that put keepers at further risk of injury and death. The zoo should immediately change its handling methods for all three elephants.”

About half of zoos use the “protected contact” elephant management system, which relies on positive-reinforcement training and cooperation. A protective barrier separates keepers and elephants, removing the risk of bodily harm while still allowing for necessary care and veterinary treatment. IDA is urging the Toledo Zoo to adopt the protected contact system.

The Toledo Zoo uses harsh circus-style training methods that “break” young elephants and force them to submit to the keepers’ complete control. Obedience is assured with the bullhook, a device resembling a fireplace poker that is used to prod, hook, jab and strike the elephants. Even when not in use, the bullhook is a constant, intimidating threat.

“There is evidence that captive elephants are prone to deliberately attack their trainers and others associated with their care,” said zoological consultant Peter Stroud. “We might conclude that this tendency is related to the unnatural situation in which captive elephants are kept and the suppression of their natural behavior.”

Between 1990 and 2000, there were at least 21 elephant-related keeper deaths and injuries in U.S. zoos (injuries are believed to be seriously underreported). Since 2000, after more zoos adopted “protected contact” training, there have been eight incidents, a reduction of more than 60 percent.

Many zoos have transitioned to the positive-reinforcement based training system following keeper injuries and deaths, including the San Diego Wild Animal Park, Oakland Zoo, San Antonio Zoo and the Miami Zoo.

For more information, please visit www.HelpElephants.com.

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[In Defense of Animals](http://www.HelpElephants.com) is an international animal protection organization located in San Rafael, Calif. dedicated to protecting animals’ rights, welfare, and habitat through education, outreach, and our hands-on rescue facilities in Mumbai, India, Cameroon, Africa, and rural Mississippi.