



Elephant Management Policies and Practices

The Detroit Zoo has maintained elephants since its opening in 1928. The zoo's attitude toward elephants has changed significantly over time, and both the facility and the type of management have changed as a result. Detroit Zoo elephants are no longer expected to give visitors rides or to entertain them with shows. Rather, elephants are recognized as intelligent, social animals without value in terms of human entertainment or benefit. The only expectation placed on the elephants at the Detroit Zoo is that by their presence, and aided by interpretive programs and materials, they educate visitors about elephant ecology, and about the history of human relationships with elephants and other animals.

After nearly 70 years of traditional free contact management, the elephant program at the Detroit Zoo was converted to protected contact in 1997. Protected contact management is a commitment to the physical, psychological and social wellbeing of the elephants and to the safety of the staff who provide their care. All care the elephants need is provided through their voluntary compliance with the trainers. In addition, the training sessions used to teach and maintain the behaviors necessary for their care provide important social and environmental stimulation for the elephants.

The 70-year-old elephant building saw significant facility modification in 1999/2000, which was completed to both improve the environment for the elephants and facilitate the conversion of the free contact management program to protected contact. Rhinos are no longer exhibited in the elephant building, and the elephants' outdoor area was enlarged, using the former rhino yard. The area from which training sessions are conducted in the outdoor yard was installed in the area that once separated the two yards. All animal doors were replaced with new hydraulic doors, and an elephant restraint device and new hallway gates were installed inside the building. An elephant unloading area was installed at the west end of the building.

Elephant Management Systems

The AZA recognizes four forms of elephant management, which are defined below:

Free contact - Direct handling of an elephant when the keeper and the elephant share the same unrestricted space. Neither the use of chains nor the posture or position of the elephants alters this definition.

Protected contact - Handling of an elephant when the keeper and the elephant do not share the same unrestricted space. Typically in this system, the keeper has contact with the elephant through a protective barrier of some type, while the elephant is NOT spatially confined and may leave the work area at will.

Confined contact - handling of an elephant through a protective barrier where the elephant is spatially confined as in an ERD.

No contact - handling of an elephant with no contact unless the elephant is chemically sedated. This is not recommended as the primary form of management.

The AZA definition of protected contact management is minimal in terms of its ability to describe the elephant management program of the Detroit Zoo. Protected contact is a program that utilizes positive reinforcement in operant conditioning training to both provide the husbandry care the elephants require and to provide environmental enrichment and mental stimulation. Protected contact eliminates the need for the keepers to assume a role of social dominance over the elephants, and therefore provides both a safer environment for the keepers and a more normal social environment for the elephants.

ELEPHANT Building Operation

WEATHER GUIDELINES

During the spring, summer and fall, the elephants should be shifted into the outdoor yard every day, weather permitting. As temperatures drop in the fall and winter, the elephants can go outside as long as the temperature is at least 32 degrees, and the day is sunny with no wind, rain, or snow. During the winter (when temps are below 32 degrees) they may be given access (or shut in the outdoor yard) for short periods of time (approximately 15 minutes) several times throughout the day if there is no precipitation and little to no wind. When outside (or with access outside) their conditions and behavior should be closely monitored.

Weather conditions that warrant keeping elephant inside, or bringing them inside from the outdoor yard, include: thunderstorms, electrical storms, and tornado watches/warnings. Severe weather procedures are provided on page 44.

SHIFTING ELEPHANTS

Transferring the elephants between the indoor and outdoor enclosures requires at least two trainers. One trainer may operate the doors while the other "steadies" both elephants, or one trainer may "steady" one elephant and operate the doors with the remote, while the second trainer maintains behavioral control of the other elephant (see door operation protocol on page 43). When necessary, doors may be operated by a non-elephant staff member (or new elephant staff member in training) who has been trained in their operation. In this situation, one trainer "steadies" both elephants, but must do so from the "safety zone" of the hallway (outside the training zone), and therefore can only toss rewards to the elephants.

Whenever performing any of the following animal transfers, it is important that all staff members be aware of the procedure. The keeper door to the back hallway MUST be closed and locked to prevent entrance to the back hallway and the chute by persons entering from the east end of the hallway.

Transferring elephants outside

Chute gates should be secured across the hallway, and then door 11 (the east yard door) opened. The elephants should be steadied in any of the stalls other than #1. The door to stall #1 may then be opened, and the elephants released and asked to go outside, or they may be called to positions at the PC area. Once outside, they may either be steadied at the PC area while the yard door is closed, or, if the elephants are moving away from the door toward enrichment in the yard, the door may be closed once the elephants are well clear of it.

Transferring elephants inside

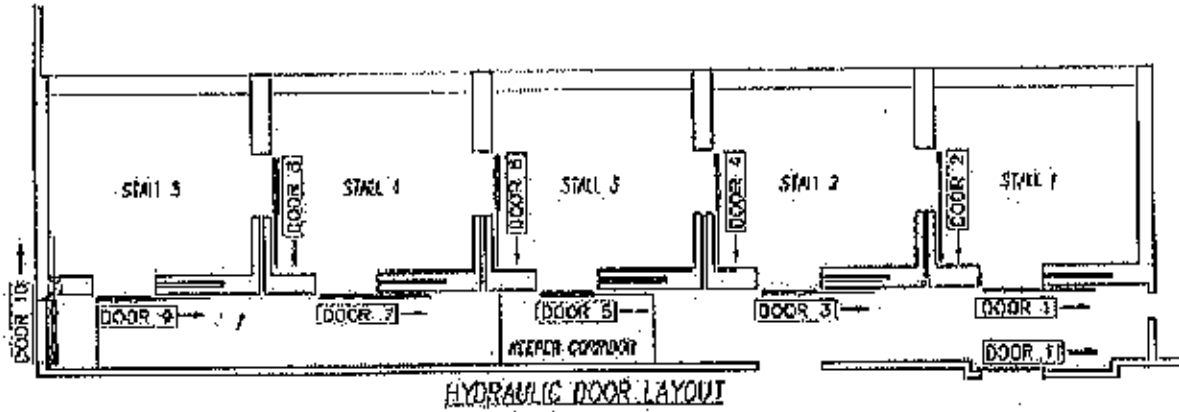
All inside doors should be checked for proper positioning and the stalls should be examined for foreign objects prior to bringing elephants inside. The elephants should be called over to the outside PC area and steadied by the trainer(s). Door 11 may then be opened, using either the hand-held remotes from the PC area, or by a person operating doors from the main panel in the hallway who is in radio contact with the trainer(s) in the PC area. When the door has been opened all the way, the elephants should be asked to enter the building, or they should be called to positions inside the building by trainers waiting inside. They should be taken past stall #1 and steadied in other stall(s) before the door to stall #1 is closed. If food has been put down in the stalls and the elephants are not willing to "steady", door #1 may be closed when the elephants have moved out of stall #1 into other stalls.

Providing access to both the yard and the building

This procedure is the same as transferring elephants outside, except that they need only be "steadied" inside until door #1 is opened, and then they may be released. They are not asked to go outside, and door #11 is not closed behind them.

When elephants have access outside, the door to the aisleway MUST be closed and locked, and a sign must be put on the door indicating that the elephants have access inside. All items in the area of the chute must be moved out of trunk reach.

The elephants may be given access to stalls #1 and #2, which gives elephant staff passage from the back aisleway to the catwalk (through stall #3), or they may be given access to stalls #1 - #4, allowing elephant staff passage from the back aisleway through stall #5, using the emergency ladder into the indoor moat.



Elephant stall and door numbers