

## Oped by Joyce Poole, Ph.D. in Opposition to L.A. Zoo's Elephant Exhibit Expansion Plan

***Dr. Poole one of the world's foremost elephant authorities, studied elephants for over 30 years as Research Director for Amboseli Trust for Elephants, the longest study of elephants in the world. Current director of research and conservation for Elephant Voices.***

All rhetoric aside, there is ample scientific evidence to declare that an urban zoo - the LA Zoo in this case - cannot meet the basic interests of an animal as large, as socially complex and as intelligent as an elephant. Add to these attributes long life, long-term memory, self-awareness and the ability to empathize, and it doesn't take rocket science to come to the conclusion that elephants need to be able to roam over more than a couple of acres in order to stay mentally and physically well.

As Director of ElephantVoices, member of the Amboseli Elephant Research Project and previous head of Kenya Wildlife Service's Elephant Program, I am no stranger to the suffering of elephants. Mostly, though, I have experienced the *joix de vivre* of wild elephants. I can recognize the body postures and facial expressions of fearful and sad elephants just as I can the gestures of joyful and playful elephants. Observing the natural behavior of elephants has been my life's work. Thirty-three years of studying elephants allows me some insight, and having observed Billy, I have no difficulty in asserting that his needs are not being met and that he isn't happy.

Despite the zoos protestations to the contrary, Billy's stereotypic head bobbing, is not a behavior observed in the wild; it is a coping mechanism for the loneliness, boredom and frustration that characterizes his life in the zoo. His behavior is symptomatic of the enormous frustration that a vigorous, highly social and intelligent creature experiences in confinement. And contrary to statements by the zoo, male elephants are not solitary. Until the age of 14 they live in the company of their families and, as adults, they spend two thirds of their time with other elephants. Billy was not designed for solitary confinement. Captivity is, in fact, particularly gruesome for males. Well fed and isolated they become trapped in a heightened sexual state known as *musth*, which makes their level of frustration, despair and on occasion, rage, even more intolerable.

The educational and conservation value of keeping Billy and others of his kind in the LA Zoo is, at best, questionable. Will their presence behind bars lead to Los Angelians becoming more compassionate toward animals? Will they be more likely to choose a green lifestyle to ensure the survival of wild places for creatures like elephants? Is the sacrifice of the well being of a few elephants worth whatever unforeseen potential there may be for us becoming better human beings? Does spending tens of millions of dollars to keep Billy and a few others in the LA Zoo have anything to do with conservation when a fraction of the cost could ensure thousands of their kind a future in the wild?

I am not against zoos, nor against elephants in captivity, *per se*, but as an elephant ethologist, I cannot sleep at night when I haven't spoken out about the needless suffering of elephants. We are an educated, wealthy, advanced society. Why must we persist in the antiquated practice of subjecting other animals to a life of cruelty purely for our own pleasure?

Zoos *can* have an important educational role to play, and I believe good public awareness is vital to ensuring the future survival of wild elephants and the kind treatment of animals. Nevertheless, it is not educational to allow children to believe that elephants are healthy and thriving in insufficient space, when science overwhelmingly shows they are not. Exhibiting

elephants that display abnormal behavior caused by cramped conditions is animal abuse. You certainly don't have to be an elephant expert to see that Billy is suffering - kids comment on it all the time.

I know that the LA Zoo staff and supporters love Billy - this is not about kind or unkind keepers or members of the public, but about outdated policy. We simply know too much about elephants now to fall back on traditional zoo practice and rhetoric. It is insincere to allow elephants to suffer for the purpose of encouraging our children to appreciate them. Appreciation of the complex lives of elephants can better come from multimedia technology with links to conservation projects in the wild and LA is uniquely suited to lead the way.

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