Chicago Considers Banning Mistreated Elephants

by Kari Lydersen

After all three of the Lincoln Park Zoo’s elephants met untimely deaths, wildlife experts urged the Chicago City Council to embargo captive elephants in the interest of sparing them physical and psychological misery.

Chicago; Mar. 6, 2006 – Winifred Kiiru cried the first time she saw an elephant in a zoo. In her native Kenya, she says, children rarely saw elephants but grew up revering them. When Kiiru visited zoos in the United States as part of her work as a wildlife ecologist, she was shocked to see the huge animals confined to small areas and suffering physical and psychological problems.

“Visiting the Los Angeles Zoo was the most miserable experience of my life, seeing these majestic animals bobbing and swaying in [typical] expressions of stress,” Kiiru recently told members of the Chicago City Council. The aldermen are considering an ordinance that would essentially ban elephants from Chicago zoos and circuses.

Referring to the reeling elephant on display in Los Angeles, Kiiru said, “Imagine my horror when the tour guide told a child who asked what the elephant was doing that it was ‘jamming to the music in its head.’”

As Kiiru and others who work closely with elephants testified at the February 23 Chicago City Council hearing, elephants in captivity suffer severe foot infections, arthritis, psychologic problems and stress disorders at inordinately high rates because they are almost always denied the range of movement, mental stimulation and social interaction they enjoy in the wild.

A growing number of zoos around the country have closed their elephant exhibits and turned their elephants over to sanctuaries, where they can roam more freely in conditions similar to their native African or Asian habitats.

A growing number of these moves are a response to growing awareness of illnesses afflicting captive elephants as well as other animals in zoos and circuses.
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alarming number of elephant deaths in US zoos past few years. At least 46 elephants have died institutions accredited by the American Zoo and Aquarium Association (AZA) since 2000; more t of them were younger than 40, while normal life expectancy is about 70 years. According to the .

website, about 300 elephants live in AZA-accredited zoos.

Within a six-month period in late 2004 and 2005, three elephants at Chicago?s Linco Zoo died. On May 1, 2005 a 36-year-old African elephant named Wankie died after f: during transport from Chicago to Utah?s Hogle Zoo. The position she had been trans crushed her organs, leaving her to be euthanized upon arrival in Salt Lake City.

Les Schobert, a former general curator at the Los Angeles and North Carolina Zoos, NewStandard that Lincoln Park Zoo officials did not spend enough time training Wan the trip, in a rush to get her out of the city before a May 12 City Council hearing on el welfare.

"Hustling Wankie out after only crate-training her for a few weeks was silly; it cost her he said. "If I were going to ship an elephant in a crate across the country, I?d train him months, not two weeks."

The other two Chicago elephants died of a respiratory disease and an unknown cause, possibly related to a leg injury.

Leg and foot problems are a leading cause of death for elephants that spend long hours standing on cold concrete, often in their own excrement. They often develop foot abscesses, which are to treat. The infection could then migrate through the pad of the foot to the bone.

"Once it?s in the bone, almost no one can cure it," said Carol Buckley, co-founder of the1,000-acre Elephant Sanctuary in Tennessee. "It?s a very painful death."

Elephants in the wild typically walk 30 to 60 miles a day on a variety of terrains ? a routine that is virtually impossible to replicate in a zoo.

The current AZA space requirements for elephants are a 400-square-foot outdoor sp an indoor area big enough for the elephant to comfortably lie down. The AZA did not call for this story.

Zoo administrators have argued that elephants walk out of necessity in the wild, but they actually need to walk when food is brought right to them.

"The argument that elephants don?t need to move because they have plenty of food contradicted by the fact that elephants [in the wild] move even more when they have food because they have plenty of energy," said Dr. Keith Lindsay, a Canadian biologist, at the hearing. Drawing on his research in Kenya, Botswana, Mali and South Africa since 1977, he called them a ?shell? of the animals he studied in their native habitats.
estimated that elephants spend about 18 hours a day on the move in their natural ha

The Chicago ordinance would mandate zoos provide each elephant with at least five acres and five indoor acres. Since it is doubtful any zoo within the city could meet the requirements, it would essentially ban elephants in Chicago’s zoos.

At the City Council hearing, AZA President Beth Stevens defended the current health safety protections for zoo elephants and characterized the proposed ordinance as a maneuver by animal-rights groups.

"This ordinance is not about elephants in Chicago," she said. "It is an attempt to make Chicago a national example of getting ... elephants out of zoos, and tomorrow getting species ? giraffes, lions, gorillas ? out of zoos.

The proposed ordinance would also mandate that traveling exhibitions like circuses provide 1,800 square feet of outdoor space for a single elephant, equal room indoors per animal, and 900 additional square feet in and out for each additional elephant.

The elephants’ keepers would also be barred from using pain-inducing training instruments including bull-hooks, electric prods and baseball bats. Since such implements are regularly used in most circuses, the ordinance would bar mainstream circuses, including those run by Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey, from entering the city.

Tom Rider, a former elephant-keeper for Ringling Brothers, testified at the hearing that elephants in circuses "live in extreme confinement and endure miserable, inhumane conditions."

“Ringling handlers beat elephants named Nicole and Sophie for not performing well, elephants’ screams could be heard outside the tent,” said Rider, who has filed a lawsuit against Ringling Brothers charging animal abuse.

Tom Albert, vice president of government relations and animal handling for Feld Entertainment, which manages Ringling Brothers, said there are a few “bad apples” among circus trainers, “but it’s not fair to condemn everyone because of them.”

He said the circus opposes the ordinance, especially its limit on the use of chains, bull hooks and other training tools.

"It’s like any other tool," he said. "If you use it properly, it’s not a problem. When you are talking about chains, because they need to be strong enough. That someone, somewhere is misusing these tools doesn’t make them wrong."

He said that while the proposed space requirements probably would not pose a problem for the circus, the limits on training methods would prevent the circus from coming to Chicago.

Elephant experts say that the mistreatment of elephants could have dangerous implications for humans as well. Elephants remember if a trainer or handler abuses them, sometimes waiting months for an opportunity to take revenge.
At the Chicago hearing, a former Florida police officer testified about a rampage by an elephant named Janet who he ultimately helped shoot to death.

"She decided she didn?t want to be a circus elephant anymore," said the officer, Blayne Doyle, who was attacked by Janet as she ran wild in the circus tent with five children back. "We ended up shooting her 56 times [after removing the children], and she didn't right away; she lay there crying for 10 or 15 minutes before we could put her out of her misery."

If the ordinance is passed, Chicago zoos would likely follow the example of the Detroit Zoo which turned its elephants over to the Performing Animal Welfare Society (PAWS) sanctuary in California in 2004.

Conditions are especially bad for elephants in circuses or zoos in northern climates, where they must spend much of the winter cooped up indoors. "We would exhaust every option to keep them moving and stimulated," Patti Miles, a former zookeeper at the Detroit Zoo, told the Chicago Council. "But there was no way to compensate for the climate and the lack of social opportunities. I would feel so much guilt and shame seeing such a fantastic animal locked inside bobbing and swaying."

Other zoos that have ended their elephant exhibits since 1999 include the San Francisco Zoo, the Chehaw Wild Animal Park in Georgia, the Louisiana Purchase Gardens and Zoo in Louisiana, and the Mesker Park Zoo in Indiana. In the United Kingdom, the London Zoo, the Edinburgh Zoo and the Bristol Zoo have made the same decision.

Some argue that elephants should remain in zoos and circuses because they act as "ambassadors" for the animal kingdom, fostering the public's appreciation for wild animals and the environment.

On the AZA website, then-interim executive director Kristin Vehrs describes AZA member zoos as places for the public "to make a connection with wildlife."

However, this argument rings hollow to many elephant and conservation experts, who argue that most captive elephants do not look or act like elephants in the wild. Lindsay called them a "shell" of the animals he studied in their native habitats.

Conservationists note that if US institutions want to support elephant conservation, the money spent to import and showcase elephants would be better spent on habitat preservation in the elephants' native countries.

"We continue to run our zoos like menageries in the early 1900s," said Schobert. "Everyone doesn't need to exhibit every animal. If a child wants to see the Golden Gate Bridge, see it in films or pictures. If they want to see the real thing, they have to go to San Francisco. It's the same with elephants."

At the hearing, Kiiru testified: "Children across Africa have never seen elephants. Yet in the Western world believe that it is their right to see elephants, no matter what the
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