



The voice for all animals

PROPOSED AUCKLAND ZOO ASIAN ELEPHANT PRECINCT

SUBMISSION

18 MAY 2009

**COMBINED COMMITTEES,
AUCKLAND CITY COUNCIL**

Prepared by Eliot Pryor, Campaign Officer, SAFE, Auckland

PROPOSED AUCKLAND ZOO ASIAN ELEPHANT PRECINCT SUBMISSION



SAFE would like to make a submission on Auckland Zoo's proposal to create a new herd of elephants in Western Springs, as part of Auckland City Council's draft 10-year plan 2009-2019.

As an animal advocacy organisation with a 74-year history in New Zealand SAFE is qualified to offer an animal welfare perspective for your consideration. Before a decision is made, SAFE would appreciate the opportunity to speak in support of our submission.

SAFE has many concerns about the proposed new elephant exhibit at Auckland Zoo. These pertain to the proper health and welfare of the imported elephants, including:

- stress and unnecessary risks of long-distance transport and quarantine
- adequate housing, long-term management and behavioural enrichment programme
- the long-term psychological and physiological impact of captivity on the elephants
- the feasibility of successfully forming a social herd from individual captive animals.

Other serious considerations about the proposal concern:

- effective elephant conservation in the wild
- the balance between entertainment and education
- financial commitment to a long-term elephant breeding programme.

SAFE has concerns about the way the project is being presented to the public, and feels claims made by the zoo that importing elephants into New Zealand has significant conservation and educational benefits are misleading.

As the proposal now stands we see this as the least progressive option for the zoo to take regarding its future. It is a solution to a financial problem that does not respond appropriately to the situation facing Kashin and Burma, nor is it in the best interests of the world's remaining wild Asian elephant population.

SAFE respectfully asks that the council reconsider its support towards this proposal.

In 2005 Taronga Zoo imported nine Asian elephants, which drew widespread international criticism and a court case led by the RSPCA in Australia.

Internationally, the breeding of elephants in captivity is controversial and continues to be opposed by the world's leading and most respected animal advocacy and conservation organisations. These include:

- RSPCA (UK) and RSPCA (AU)
- Born Free Foundation (UK)
- World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA)
- Humane Society International (HSI)
- International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW)
- PETA (US)

1. ZOOS COMPROMISE ELEPHANT WELFARE

Asian elephants are clever, curious and playful. With the largest brain of any land mammal, elephants are highly intelligent and have an impressive memory. Extremely social animals, Asian elephants have strong family ties. They engage in greeting ceremonies, complex communication, courtship, teaching and communal care. Female family members often stay together for their entire lives.

SAFE acknowledges that elephants in a well-resourced, professionally run modern zoo can be provided with a high level of personal attention from trained personnel and offered veterinary care not afforded to their wild counterparts. However, SAFE remains extremely concerned given that a captive environment fails to provide basic space and behavioural requirements necessary for the world's largest free-ranging animal.

There are animals, such as elephants, that science and expert opinion have found to suffer tremendously in zoos. This is because, despite their best efforts, zoos cannot meet the physical, behavioural, psychological and social needs of elephants.

(‘Elephants are born to be Wild’, International Fund for Animal Welfare)

"Keeping an elephant in a zoo is like living in a hotel room for the rest of your life. Elephants have little opportunity to exercise, they are forced into unstable and small social groups and they have a greater propensity towards health problems like obesity and foot and joint stress."

(Dr Bidda Jones, RSPCA Australia Chief Scientist)

INSUFFICIENT SPACE

Wild elephants roam large distances and walk every day, for most of the day. The proposed area for Auckland Zoo's elephants, even expanded into Western Springs Park, is a fraction of the space a wild elephant would normally have access to.

Studies have shown that a family group of Asian elephants will travel a minimum of 3.2 km² per day. By comparison, the space provided in Auckland Zoo's proposal is less than one per cent of this recorded minimum.

The space available to captive elephants in sanctuaries and zoos varies greatly, and zoos are typically at the extreme low end of the scale. In 2005 the San Francisco Board of Supervisors imposed a space minimum of 15 acres as one condition before elephants could be reintroduced to the city zoo.ⁱ

Asian Elephants' space requirements in a natural habitatⁱⁱ:

Group herd median home range size 113 km² (30 - 799.5 km² recorded)

Adult bull median herd home range size 246.3 km²

Smallest range reported 10 km²

Family group average daily travel 3.2 km²

Auckland Zoo proposed elephant area = 22,000 m² / 0.024 km² (6 acres)

A zoo is a human-created environment, designed to ensure the public has continual up-close encounters with the animals. It is not necessarily designed for the best interests and needs of the animals themselves.

A zoo enclosure can never replicate a natural environment for elephants and is limited to offering an artificial, inadequate space because of the limited area available in an urban area, which inevitably compromises basic welfare principles, to the detriment of the health and wellbeing of the elephants.

ARTIFICIAL SOCIAL GROUPING

The proposed herd for Auckland Zoo is a small, artificial and isolated group.

Female Asian elephants in the wild stay with their family for life, in groups of mixed ages and roles. Male elephants leave after the onset of sexual maturity and are then mainly solitary, and not territorial.

In the wild, elephants have the freedom to socialise with other elephant herds, and have the ability to recognise at least 100 other elephants. In a zoo, there is no freedom to associate with other elephants or to break away from the existing herd.

The proposed 'herd' would be an artificial grouping of unrelated captive-born elephants. The proposed Auckland Zoo grouping will always be just an approximation of what it might be like in the wild and will not be a natural grouping. There is significant risk and possibility that the elephant herd will not successfully socialise together and be unwilling to naturally breed, therefore requiring an invasive breeding programme.

Europe is currently leading the world in animal welfare reform and we can anticipate they will move away from elephant exhibits, as a result of community pressure. The UK RSPCA recommends that no more elephants be imported into Europe and that no more breeding takes place, and that zoos should refocus their resources on wild elephant welfare.ⁱⁱⁱ

HEALTH PROBLEMS

Zoo elephants suffer a range of problems not commonly associated with wild populations.

Stillbirth, infanticide and rejection of calves are the main causes of infant mortality in zoo elephants.

Elephants breed slowly and are inhibited to mate in a zoo environment. The median zoo female produces just one calf in her whole lifetime, compared with six in the wild.^{iv}

Zoo elephants are often overweight through lack of exercise and unnatural food. Captive elephants often experience foot and leg problems. Of 66 elephants studied in an examination of zoos in the United Kingdom, only 11 individuals had a normal gait, and only six had a normal body weight. ^v

Unlike many other species kept in zoos, elephant mortality rates are not lower than those living in the wild. Reasons why zoo elephants tend not to die of 'old age' are illness and giving birth before the age of 12. Elephants born in captivity are more likely to die young.^{vi}

Transporting elephants between countries is a lengthy and delicate process that takes many months of preparation, during which the animals are put at unnecessary risk and can suffer huge anxiety. For example in 2005 a 36-year-old female African elephant died on arrival after a transfer between Lincoln Park and San Diego Zoos. Zoo keepers were at a loss to say what had gone wrong.

There are also many different variables and risks once they are at the zoo, such as not getting on with each other, being too aggressive or dying prematurely.

KASHIN

SAFE believes Kashin has suffered significant health and welfare problems associated with captivity. These include arthritis, foot abscesses and skin ulcers, and a decreasing ability to recover from infections. Kashin is not expected to live for long, yet is relatively young for an Asian elephant.

It is important to note the Auckland Zoo kept Kashin on her own for eight years until Burma arrived in 1990. SAFE understands it took years before they were considered a compatible pair.

2. LACK OF CONSERVATION BENEFITS

There are no direct conservation benefits to keeping elephants captive.

Conservation groups WWF, International Union of Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the African Elephant Specialist Group do not consider that captive breeding makes a significant contribution to elephant conservation, and that it is therefore not a priority.

Elephants born in a zoo are never released into the wild, therefore any argument suggesting that zoos contribute to the conservation of a species is misleading and at best, questionable.

If elephants become extinct in the wild there will be no reintroduction from captive populations.

Keeping captive elephants in a zoo environment is not a modern approach to conservation of the species and distorts public perceptions by suggesting the possibility. Once the chance to preserve their natural habitat has gone there will be no chance of the species surviving in the wild.

Zoos invest huge amounts of finances into captive management and facilities while wildlife habitat restoration programmes struggle, resulting in loss of habitat and species. It is estimated to be 50 times more expensive to keep an elephant in a zoo than to protect an elephant in the wild. It costs a lot less to maintain the original habitat than to recreate an artificial elephant herd and enclosure in Auckland.

Auckland Zoo estimates annual operational costs for six elephants to be almost half a million dollars, supposing the proposal goes ahead without unforeseen problems and extra expenses. It is important to note that the capital cost of setting up the new elephant zoo exhibit grossly exceeds the budget of many wildlife and conservation programmes.

"The best thing that can be done to save the endangered Asian elephant is to invest in their welfare and future in the wild in Thailand."

(Nicola Beynon, Humane Society International Senior Program Manager)

The goal of conservation "is the survival of biodiversity in its natural state and not as individual museum specimens".^{vii}

3. EDUCATION vs ENTERTAINMENT

Viewing animals first hand at a zoo has some value but SAFE questions what type of benefit this experience offers – educational or entertainment.

SAFE believes the 'entertainment versus education' balance is not in favour of education. What evidence is there that exhibiting elephants in captivity changes the way kiwis relate to animals, our attitudes or behaviour?

The Auckland Zoo suggests that exhibiting elephants in captivity at the zoo supports 'wildlife advocacy,' however seeing elephants in the zoo context may in fact be counterproductive, as this gives people a false sense of security that wild animals live similar lives.

New Zealanders enjoy easy access to their own outdoors and there are a number of critically endangered native animals in our own country, most of which are at risk due to human activities. Auckland Zoo's new project Te Wao Nui is an example of what the zoo could focus more on, creating inspiring projects with realistic conservation aims and with immediate relevance to New Zealanders.

With its proposed elephant project the zoo is not promoting wildlife or its conservation but primarily providing the novelty experience of seeing exotic animals on display.

"Studies of visitor behaviour indicate that zoo patrons spend between 33 seconds and 3 minutes, on average, at each exhibit."

(Elephants at the Zoo, 'Perspectives', ABC National Radio, Siobhan O'Sullivan, 2006)

4. ZOO ECONOMICS

The real question that SAFE feels is being answered by the proposal is how the Auckland zoo can thrive financially without Kashin and Burma.

Economic factors in the proposal highlight increased public attendance from events such as the birth of a new elephant, however other less desirable commercial considerations must be considered such as in the event of infant mortality, elephant ill-health or death and a general public apathy for supporting the zoo resulting in a loss of ticket sales.

Approving this proposal will entrench the zoo's reliance on elephants as their main attraction. SAFE wishes to highlight that this proposal is not a 10-year plan, but is in fact a 100-year plan, since the zoo aims to develop a successful long-term breeding programme.

If it is a priority for Auckland Council to support preservation of Asian elephants in the wild, then SAFE suggests there are better ways of using the finances allocated to Auckland Zoo capital expenditure. Considering the cost of creating an artificial elephant herd and enclosure in Auckland compared to that of maintenance of their original habitat, it would be much more cost effective to donate the money directly to Thai conservation projects. However considering that there are many important conservation projects that need support locally SAFE would suggest that this is not a present priority to Auckland ratepayers.

The council's own aim with this review is to reduce unnecessary costs. By not supporting this programme the Council will help meet its goal of reducing the pressure to increase rates.

"If Asian elephants did not already exist in zoos would we spend scarce resources developing an ex situ captive breeding programme with no guarantee of success?"

(Asian elephants in zoos face global extinction, Dr Paul Rees, 2003)

Despite the declining numbers of zoo elephants, concern about welfare among interested parties and the public remains at a high level. This is unlikely to change even though, based on current trends, the number of elephants in UK zoos is likely to continue to decrease.

(The Welfare, Housing and Husbandry of Elephants in UK Zoos, 2008)

SUMMARY

There are few benefits to keeping elephants in zoos and the risks to their welfare means it is highly irresponsible to bring in a new elephant population.

SAFE is very concerned that the risks involved are being taken simply for the zoo's own interests and not for the elephants themselves.

The proposal is being presented as a decision to 'retain' elephants ^{viii} however this is a completely new programme. It is not an extension of the current situation and there is no obligation to create the new project.

Auckland Zoo says it wants to display these amazing animals for the general public as 'wildlife advocates,' but does so by keeping them in an environment that limits their natural instincts to walk, feed and associate freely.

There needs to be justifiable reason to inhibit an animal's natural behaviours, and SAFE does not believe Auckland Zoo's proposal is anywhere near adequate.

It is not a priority or in New Zealand's interests to be breeding Asian elephants in captivity, and while the death or removal of Kashin and Burma would be a tragic loss, it also provides an opportunity for Auckland Zoo to move on in a responsible manner. Inspiring New Zealanders with projects with realistic conservation aims and clear benefits, such as the new project Te Wao Nui, is an example of what the zoo should focus more on.

Internationally there is a trend away from exhibiting captive elephants in zoos. Zoos that have closed their elephant exhibits in the last few years include:

- London Zoo (2002)
- San Francisco (2005)
- Detroit Zoo (2005)
- Lincoln Park Zoo (Chicago, 2005)
- Alaska Zoo (2007)
- Philadelphia Zoo (2009)

Many other zoos have committed to not replacing elephants presently held.

SAFE believes the best solution is for Burma to be relocated to another suitable zoo upon the tragic death of Kashin and for the zoo to re-evaluate its priorities.

SAFE recommends Auckland Council not support the importation of Asian elephants to New Zealand and not help finance an Asian elephant breeding programme.

A fundamental requirement for keeping animals in captivity is that we provide an excellent quality of life... We feel that we can accomplish this for all the animals at the Detroit Zoo, but can't for elephants. Elephants in general in captivity live shorter lives than in the wild, do not reproduce well, show numerous physical problems and often display psychological problems.

(Detroit Zoo, 2005)

ⁱ 'Law halts exhibits of captive elephants' (Tribune, Jane Meredith Adams, Dec 2004)

ⁱⁱ A Review of the Welfare of Zoo Elephants in Europe commissioned by the Royal Society for the Protection of Animals (RSPCA) (Clubb and Mason, 2002)

ⁱⁱⁱ Live Hard, Die Young – How Elephants Suffer in Zoos (RSPCA, 2002)

^{iv} A Review of the Welfare of Zoo Elephants in Europe commissioned by the Royal Society for the Protection of Animals (RSPCA) (Clubb and Mason, 2002)

^v The Welfare, Housing and Husbandry of Elephants in UK Zoos (Harris, Sherwin & Harris, University of Bristol, 2008)

^{vi} A Review of the Welfare of Zoo Elephants in Europe commissioned by the Royal Society for the Protection of Animals (RSPCA) (Clubb and Mason, 2002)

^{vii} Evaluating the conservation mission of zoos, aquariums, botanical gardens and natural history museums (Miller, 2004)

^{viii} Letter by Cr Graeme Mulholland to Mary Heslan, 30 April 2009