

BARBARA ANDERSON

I was an elephant keeper and trainer for 17 years – employed in AZA accredited zoos and parks including The San Diego Wild Animal Park, The Los Angeles Zoo, MarineWorld Africa, USA (now owned by Six Flags), and The Parks at Chehaw in Albany, GA. My most recent experience has been the 2½ years as a primary caregiver for The Elephant Sanctuary, in TN.

Back in 1989, when I hired into elephant management, Free Contact was the only form of training, and handling style available to keepers and handlers. The San Diego Wild Animal Park was one of the first institutions to learn the concept of Protected Contact for both their bulls and cows but this new method of training would not be truly recognized as an alternate form of management until a keeper death occurred there in 1990.

I spent my first years absorbing and learning all I could from some of the original trainers in the business like Smokey Jones, Alan Roocroft, Larry Joiner and David Blasko. I performed rides and shows and was convinced that I was doing all the right things regarding elephant care.

In the early 1990's, when The Oakland Zoo switched to Protected Contact, primarily because of yet another keeper death at their zoo, I was absolutely convinced that I was doing the right thing. Protected Contact was seen as a cheap alternative management style for those who couldn't perform Free Contact "effectively". Also, in Protected, you couldn't do rides, or shows where I could sit on top of the elephant's head and couldn't do tug-o-wars with the public. Where's the fun in that?

I truly felt that way until I witnessed a beating in our own barn. A beating that lasted about 6 hours. I was a part of a crew that sat in the front of the barn with all the doors closed and watched two supervisors and two colleagues chain a young bull to four leg chains then take turns beating him on the side of his body and on both of his back legs with an ankus (bullhook) as well as a piece of wood the size of a baseball bat only to resort to electrical shock through his front leg chains before this elephant would perform the one behavior that the "team" wanted him to do – and that was to simply lay down.

Now I can talk forever about how wrong those four men were that night but what I still live with everyday is the fact that I was just as guilty because I did nothing to stop the abuse or even question it, partially for fear of losing my job. I didn't have a weapon in my hand but I was just as responsible for that elephant's injuries. I put my job ahead of that young bull's welfare.

That's when I began to question what I was doing and why. It caused me to look at the bigger picture of Free Contact for the very first time. Elephants don't treat one another the way that we treat elephants. Also, there is no other species in zoos that are handled within the Free Contact management style of training.

I could no longer condone the traditional Free Contact management style of training so I left. I moved to Georgia and for 7 years helped develop and implement a much more passive control form of training for two adult African elephants with an abusive past thanks to Free Contact.

My colleague and I recognized that by its very nature, traditional Free Contact denies elephants the capacity of having a mind or emotions thus never allowing them the ability to express their true individual personalities.

We allowed these girls to trust us on their terms - not ours – and allowed them to interact with us when they were ready to do so. Even though we were still in a zoo, we saw a big change in their emotional and physical behavior for the better but it was nothing compared to the tremendous change they made after they moved to The Elephant Sanctuary in TN. From the time Tange and Zula walked out of their new barn onto 250 acres of forest and pasture land and for the remainder of what now will certainly be an extended lifespan, their true personalities will continue to flourish.

It's undeniable that space, though not the only necessity, is one of the most important necessities for the future of captive elephants.

During my second year as a primary caregiver for The Sanctuary, I watched in amazement the entire herd of the Hawthorn Corp elephants 10 in all – confiscated by the USDA -slowly develop social skills after spending 30+ years in a squalid barn void of a life that remotely represented their most basic needs.

The space these elephants are given is not just the acreage in which to roam but it's also the space needed between the elephants and caregiver staff. In a program that is based upon trust and true respect, the elephants' true personalities - in their due time – shine!

A true Sanctuary's philosophy – whether it's about elephants or any other animal is - “animals come first”. It's not about human personalities, egos, or money. This should be the philosophy of every human who says they care about animal welfare whether they are in or out of the zoo community. Sadly, it's not.

Zoos and Parks that continue to use dominance and fear-based training systems like Free Contact are out of touch with even the most primary needs of elephants. Maybe they are more concerned with physically dominating animals that happen to outweigh them by 9,000 lbs or more in order to satisfy their own personal needs in the form of egos - or maybe it's just complacency.

Years ago, I saw Protected Contact as a cop out – an easy way out of primary care responsibilities and that Free Contact was the true way. Given the past 17 + years in this business, and all that I've seen and been a part of, I have come to have exactly the opposite point of view.