



## The Birmingham News

### Elephants suffer in zoos

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The Birmingham Zoo's plan to create a new, \$15 million exhibit to house six to eight male elephants ignores the elephant in the room: the fact that landlocked urban zoos cannot provide Earth's largest land mammals with the space and natural conditions they need to thrive.

The zoo's proposed 14-acre Trails of Africa exhibit may sound good on paper, but even if elephants were allowed to roam the entire acreage (an unlikely prospect given the inability of zoos to house male elephants together due to aggression issues and the space that will be taken up by indoor housing and visitor amenities), it would still be inadequate for six to eight pachyderms.

Elephants evolved to walk tens of miles daily. Their feet were meant to dig, climb, swim, run and even stand, but all on natural dirt, sand, grass, forest and savanna floor, which maintain foot and joint health.

Zoo conditions prevent elephants from exercising, forcing them to stand, virtually in one place, for decades on unyielding substrates like concrete and compacted earth. These conditions wreak havoc on elephants' joints and feet. More than 60 percent of all elephants in zoos suffer from foot disease, and nearly half have arthritis. These painful conditions are the leading cause of suffering and premature death of elephants in zoos.

A national debate is raging as more people recognize the suffering that zoos inflict on elephants by failing to provide them with the space and conditions they need. More than a dozen U.S. zoos - including those in major cities such as New York, Detroit, San Francisco, Philadelphia and Chicago - have reacted by closing their elephant exhibits and/or announcing they will phase them out. But others, fearful of losing elephants and revenue, are embarking on expensive expansion projects that will add only a token few acres to existing elephant enclosures.

Given the evolving standards for keeping elephants in captivity, the millions being spent by the Los Angeles Zoo, National Zoo in Washington, D.C., Birmingham Zoo and others to build new elephant exhibits are being squandered on facilities that will be outdated by the time they open their doors.

Zoos claim all this is necessary for conservation, but it is more than 50 times as expensive to maintain elephants in a zoo than to protect equivalent numbers in the wild. Indeed, the more than \$200 million earmarked for inadequate elephant exhibit renovations at U.S. zoos could save entire populations of elephants in their native lands.

Over the past decades, numerous zoos have transferred elephants to the two U.S. elephant sanctuaries. It is these facilities that have set the bar for caring for elephants. The Performing Animal Welfare Society in Northern California and the Elephant Sanctuary in Tennessee provide hundreds of acres of natural habitat with grass, trees, mud, ponds and dirt for dusting, coupled with high-quality care. In fact, elephants' joint and feet problems have improved and even healed once the elephants can move freely over great distances on natural surfaces.

As the public becomes more aware of the pain and suffering elephants endure in order for visitors to conveniently see them in zoos, people are demanding the drastic changes necessary for providing maximum health and a high quality of life for elephants. If zoos can't give elephants what they need, zoos should stop keeping elephants altogether.

For the Birmingham Zoo, that means forgoing an elephant exhibit and spending money instead to

improve zoo exhibits for existing animals as well as on true conservation programs that save elephants where elephants live. Elliot M. Katz, DVM is the president and founder of In Defense of Animals, an international animal protection nonprofit based in Northern California. E-mail: [zoos@idausa.org](mailto:zoos@idausa.org).

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