



IN DEFENSE OF ANIMALS

# The Truth About Zoos and Elephant Conservation

***"Captivity does not equal conservation. Research shows elephant captive breeding programs fail, and in the rare event a zoo elephant produces a calf, it cannot be released back into the wild... The best way for these zoos...to assist with the future conservation of this species, is to support field conservation programs in Asia."***

**- Vivek Menon, Wildlife Trust of India, 2004**

## ZOOS DO NOT PROMOTE ELEPHANT CONSERVATION

Zoos breeding and other programs are aimed not at saving elephant species in range countries, but rather in propagating elephants for zoos.

German veterinarian and elephant expert Fred Kurt, who has worked with and studied elephants and elephant cultures extensively throughout the world, highlights this distinction clearly:

***"Modern conservation should be directly aimed to ensure the future existence of in situ populations and habitat. Therefore we suggest the term preservation be used for species captive propagation."***

Kurt goes on to state that if captive propagation is to be done, it should be done in a setting that recreates an elephants' natural

environment, not in the traditional zoo environment.

The IUCN (World Conservation Union) African Elephant Specialist Group (AfESG) definitively questioned the role of zoos in African elephant conservation and welfare:

***"...the AfESG is concerned by the poor breeding success and low life expectancy of captive African elephants and does not see any contribution to the effective conservation of the species through captive breeding per se... the holding of African elephants by a captive facility is not a necessary precursor for involvement in situ African elephant conservation."***<sup>2</sup>

## MORE COST-EFFECTIVE TO PROTECT ELEPHANTS WHERE THEY LIVE

The cost of keeping elephants in zoos is 50 times more expensive than protecting equivalent numbers in the wild.<sup>3</sup>

As of 2008, zoos worldwide were spending in excess of \$500 million on exhibit expansions or construction to benefit 250 elephants. In addition, AZA zoos annually spend an estimated \$16 million to maintain fewer than 300 elephants, based on an average of \$58,000/year/elephant.<sup>4</sup>

By contrast:

**► \$400,000 is the annual budget for the Amboseli Elephant Research Project in Kenya, which protects the lives of 1,400 elephants in 52 families in**

their natural habitat. **Some zoos spend this much to maintain four elephants for one year.**

**► \$10,000 is the rough cost of supporting an anti-poaching team in Thailand for one year (including salaries and food supplements, medicines and equipment).**

**► \$25 million is the entire annual budget for the Kenya Wildlife Service, which protects some of the world's most diverse wildlife populations, including more than 30,000 elephants across more than 20,000 square miles. The total combined size of all U.S. zoo elephant enclosures is less than 1 square mile.**

***If the money spent to house and maintain elephants in American zoos were spent on in situ conservation, entire populations of elephants in Asia and Africa could be saved.***

## ZOO FUNDS FOR REAL CONSERVATION SCARCE

Zoos spend more on marketing and advertising than on true conservation. Oregon Zoo claims \$320,000 in conservation funding per year, but does not disclose what percent is spent on actual range country conservation. In contrast, the zoo spends \$1.3 million annually on marketing and advertising.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>"The Importance of socialization to the well being of elephants," Garai and Kurt, 2006

<sup>2</sup> Letter from IUCN African Elephant Specialist Group to Dr. Michael Hutchins, AZA Director of Conservation (1999)

<sup>3</sup> Leader-Williams, "Black Rhinos and African Elephants: Lessons for Conservation," Oryx, 24(1), 23-39, 1990

<sup>4</sup> AZA Elephant Director's Meeting – Survey Results, Jan. 2005

<sup>5</sup> AZA 2004 Annual Survey