



IN DEFENSE OF ANIMALS

# **A REPORT ON THE FAILURES IN CARE AND MANAGEMENT OF ELEPHANTS AT THE SIX FLAGS AMUSEMENT PARK**

**Prepared by: In Defense of Animals**

**Based on: Elephant Veterinary Records obtained  
from Six Flags under the California Public  
Records Act (Available at  
[www.helpelephants.com/records](http://www.helpelephants.com/records))**

**Date: June 28, 2007**

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## **I. Introduction**

Six Flags Discovery Kingdom, formerly known as Six Flags Marine World (and previously as Marine World Africa USA), has a shameful and appalling history of elephant suffering and death, and there are grave concerns about current conditions at the facility.

The following report presents evidence of the extent and seriousness of the problems at Six Flags and documents the facility's failures in the care and management of the elephants, including major health problems related to inadequate conditions for the elephants, inhumane practices, questionable record keeping, and serious public safety concerns.

This report is based on veterinary records for the publicly "owned" elephants at Six Flags Discovery Kingdom. Detailed case summaries for each of the elephants, prepared by C. James Mahoney, BVMS, MSc, PhD, and full copies of the veterinary records are available online at [www.helpelephants.com/records](http://www.helpelephants.com/records).

As four of the elephants currently held at Six Flags are "owned" by the City of Vallejo, it is ultimately responsible for their health and well-being. This report clearly demonstrates the need for immediate intervention by the City of Vallejo and provides a solid argument for City action to remove the elephants from Six Flags.

## **II. Six Flags Fails to Provide an Adequate Environment for Elephants, Causing Needless Suffering and Premature Death**

Elephants are highly social, powerful animals built to range large expanses of land while foraging for food, caring for offspring, socializing with family and kin, and exploring their environment. Free-ranging elephants live in tightly-knit, multigenerational family groups, with mothers and daughters staying together for life. Elephants are biologically designed for almost constant movement, remaining active for 20 out of every 24 hours and walking ten or more miles per day. Elephants' natural lifespan is 60 to 70 years.

In zoos, where elephants are denied adequate space and natural conditions, and where it is rare to find related elephants living together, they fall victim to an array of behavioral problems, health disorders and premature death. Conditions at Six flags are even worse for elephants than most zoos, and the elephants, both current and in the past, have suffered severely from serious health problems, as outlined below.

## A. CURRENT HEALTH PROBLEMS OF CITY-OWNED ELEPHANTS AT SIX FLAGS

- **Liz** – This middle-aged (43) Asian elephant has a recurrent abscess of the middle toenail of her left front foot. She suffers from fractures and partial disintegration of the bone in this toe. Reported X-ray results raise the possibility that Liz’s nail infection has invaded the bone of her toe, resulting in osteomyelitis, a serious and often fatal condition in elephants. Despite this problem, which has produced lameness, stiffness and has been treated with anti-inflammatory drugs, Liz is forced to give rides and perform in shows, including a log demonstration where she lifts and stacks heavy (up to 600 pound) logs with her front feet (including the diseased left foot) and trunk. Liz also is anemic and blood tests have shown signs of systemic infection. Notes in her medical file indicate that she “can be difficult to work” and is separated from the herd at night.

In his case summary of Liz’s veterinary records, Dr. Mahoney writes:

This is a very disturbing case. Liz is 42 years old. She has had repeated recurrences of left forefoot pathology over the last 6 1/2 years. We know that she has a fractured and disintegrated third phalanx in the middle digit. This will never heal. Infection was determined in her middle toe as early as February 2001, yet the records indicate no follow up for a continuous period of at least 2 years, nine months! Clear evidence of toe infection again became evident in January 2006. This sort of pathology is enormously difficult to treat in elephants, as the literature makes abundantly clear, yet to fail to maintain frequent and continuous observation and medical recording shows a heartlessness, which I personally find shocking and beyond comprehension.

*Foot disease is directly linked to inadequate conditions for elephants, including lack of space, which prevents adequate movement, and hard surfaces like concrete and compacted soil on which elephants are forced to stand Chaining, which further restricts movement, exacerbates this problem. Despite regular preventive care and treatment, zoos have not been able to stop this often-fatal disorder, the equivalent of which is not seen in free-ranging elephants.*

- **Taj** - Taj was in the Carson and Barnes Circus until 1977, and has been at Six Flags since 1978. This elderly Asian elephant (late 60s) suffers from arthritis and, over the years, has been treated extensively for stiffness, lameness, and pain in her feet and legs. She has been administered drugs such as phenylbutazone and ibuprofen (specifically for arthritis) and ketoprofen (mainly for pain). Despite her advanced age and arthritic condition, Taj is forced to perform in shows, including the tug-of-war and log show described above.

*Like foot disease, arthritis is linked to inadequate conditions and lack of space, which prevent adequate exercise and cause muscles to atrophy, placing increased pressure on joints. [While some of the Six Flags elephants do walk*

*while giving rides, this repetitive movement on a hard surface is not sufficient to maintain the health of elephants, who, in the wild can walk 10 or more miles a day.]*

- **Malaika** – A young African elephant (19), Malaika is regularly beaten up by other elephants. She has had a persistent lesion/abscess on her hip that appears to have been reopened during fights with other elephants. Malaika also suffers from severe allergies that cause hives and throat constriction making breathing and swallowing difficult. (Evidenced by wheezing and repeated spitting out of food.) She has been treated extensively with steroids and antihistamines, but the problem has continued into 2007. Malaika has also suffered from repeated bouts of colic from ingestion of gravel.

A former keeper at Marine World reports that, as a young elephant, Malaika lived in fear of her handler. This keeper witnessed Malaika being “worked” by the trainer, forced repeatedly to lie down and get up. The trainer repeatedly hit Malaika between the eyes and on her side with the ankus while Malaika screamed in fear and pain. The beating continued even though Malaika eventually complied with the trainer’s command.

*While the cause of Malaika’s allergies is not identified in the records, certainly changing her environment would be one strategy for dealing with the problem. In addition, the stress and trauma Malaika suffers as a result of confinement in a noisy, crowded amusement park is exacerbated by the fact that she is the target of aggression from the park’s other elephants. Since stress and immune response are linked, this situation likely worsens Malaika’s condition. Finally, ingestion of gravel, an aberrant behavior, causes colic and is also linked to a cramped and unnatural environment.*

- **Tava** – This 28-year-old African elephant has long-term tusk injuries. Her left tusk is visibly cracked. It is also worn at the end from lying on concrete.

*Note: There are three other elephants at the park – Bertie Mae, Joyce and Valerie – who were acquired from various circuses and are owned privately by Six Flags, so no medical records are available.*

## **B. A HISTORY OF ELEPHANT SUFFERING AND DEATH AT SIX FLAGS**

Since 1995, nine elephants (including two full-term calves) have died at this park. The adult victims include:

- **Mardji** euthanized (1995) due to osteomyelitis (bone infection) from severe and chronic foot abscesses at age 42. At the end of her life, Mardji underwent two surgeries to remove the diseased bones of her toe and was kept largely separated from the other elephants and chained inside in the barn.

- **Bandula** euthanized (1996) due to severe arthritis and joint pain at age 27. Bandula had reportedly sustained a serious injury in a show at the park.
- **Ginny** euthanized (1998) due to severe arthritis at age 58. She reportedly had two stiff front legs and was used to give elephant rides.
- **Judy** euthanized (1999) due to arthritis attributed to leg deformities at age 33. Judy had been made to water ski in a regular show when the park was located in Redwood City, according to a former keeper.
- **Tina** euthanized (2003) at 46 due to severe foot and joint disease. At the end of her life, her left hind foot had six abscesses, was oozing pus and bled heavily when she put her weight on it. The infection had invaded the bone (osteomyelitis). Tina also had severe arthritis in all of the major joints and most of the minor joints of all four limbs. For years, she had suffered from chronic abscesses on her hips (referred to as gaping, pus-oozing holes by a former keeper) likely due to lying on concrete. Before she died, Tina could barely stand or walk. One particularly disturbing entry in the medical records recalled how it took Tina two hours to slowly and painfully cross the park's small elephant yard to reach the pool where she could submerge and relieve the pressure on her diseased feet and joints due to the water's buoyancy.
- **Tika** euthanized (2002) due to massive infection from a full-term fetus decomposing in her womb. Medical records detail her final month and the abdominal pain and discomfort she experienced prior to euthanasia. A laparoscopy performed right before she died showed "adhesions on every tissue surface that was examined."

#### C. CALF DEATHS

- **Kala** died (2002) at age 2 from elephant herpes virus, six months after being separated from his mother at Dickerson Park Zoo and shipped to Vallejo. Elephant advocates had warned against separating this baby from his mother, as in the wild, male elephants stay with their mothers into their teens.
- Full-term calf of Tika died (2002) in utero during labor.
- Full-term calf of Misha was stillborn (2003).

#### D. ABUSE OF ELEPHANTS LATER TRANSFERRED TO OTHER FACILITIES

- **Roman**, a young bull elephant, suffered a beating at the hands of David Blasko, long-time Marine World/Six Flags elephant manager and later head of animal care at the park until this year (2007), that "lasted hours," according to an eyewitness. The beating allegedly culminated with Blasko attaching an electrical cord to Roman's leg chains and plugging it into the wall. Roman was shocked

repeatedly, jerking up and down while the keepers watched. At age 11, Roman was sold to an unknown facility in Mexico where he is rumored to have died.

- **Misha**, a female African elephant, was repeatedly attacked by the park's other elephants. She had a massive and painful draining abscess on her jaw for at least five years. (The cause of this wound is not disclosed, though possible causes include injury from another elephant or from a bullhook.) Despite the painful, infected jaw wound, Misha was artificially inseminated on two occasions, using a surgical procedure that left the incision site infected each time. A month after the first procedure, records report that she was "no longer urinating through the episiotomy site." Misha became pregnant but her full-term calf was stillborn; the second insemination attempt failed. In 2003, Misha gored a trainer and was isolated and put in protected contact for two years before being shipped to Hogle Zoo in Utah. Her jaw abscess was still chronic and draining at the time.

### **III. Six Flags Is Out of Step with Zoo Industry Trends in Elephant Care and Management**

#### **A. SIX FLAGS CONTROLS ELEPHANTS THROUGH FEAR AND PAIN**

Six Flags employs an outdated, circus-style method of training that controls elephants through domination and physical punishment, aided by the use of a bullhook (a heavy stick resembling a fireplace poker with a pointed metal tip and hook at one end). Desired behaviors are achieved through negative reinforcement (pain and discomfort) and/or corporal punishment, coupled with some positive reinforcement. Not only is this method out of line with trends in progressive elephant training, it knowingly creates a dangerous environment for handlers and is unacceptably cruel for the elephants.

The bullhook (also called an ankus or guide) is the key to maintaining control in this management system. It is carried at all times by elephant handlers and is used to stab, hook and prod the elephant in the soft tissue behind the ears, inside the ear or mouth, in and around the anus, and in tender areas under the chin and around the feet. The blunt end is used to strike the elephant on the head and body when discipline is meted out. Elephants are disciplined (usually out of public view) when they do not comply with a handler's commands.

A former keeper at Six Flags who worked under David Blasko provided the following example of a typical disciplinary incident:

The elephants were ordered to hold their trunks up in the air in "salute" position while handlers were performing daily care routines. For the elephant Tina (see above), the routine took longer than usual and her trunk began to cramp. Finally, Tina could no longer hold it up. When she lowered her trunk, a stream of accumulated mucus leaked out, indicating that Tina was unable to breathe through her trunk. Nevertheless, a supervisor witnessed this breach of command (Tina

lowering her trunk), and ordered Tina to be chained for discipline. The keeper was told to ‘work her over,’ which meant running her through her commands – forcing her to move from side to side while on chains – and striking her with the ankus when she did not comply quickly enough. The keeper was not being forceful enough with Tina for the supervisor, who took over the session.

All elephants in this circus-style training system – particularly those who give rides and perform in shows – have been trained in this abusive manner. (See above for additional reports of beatings.) An IDA representative personally witnessed a Six Flags elephant handler forcefully stabbing the elephant Liz with the sharp point of the bullhook three times under her chin. This was done at a time when Liz was being brought into an empty arena with no public present and with no apparent reason for this action.

In 2004, the dangers of this elephant handling system were made evident at Six Flags when Misha gored her trainer. Miraculously, the trainer survived. Perhaps Misha, who endured so much suffering at this park (see above), had finally snapped.

Because of the inherent cruelty and danger of the circus-style management system, an estimated 55 percent of Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA)-accredited facilities have switched to a progressive form of training and management that utilizes only positive reinforcement and voluntary cooperation of the elephants. More zoos are changing over to this system every year because the technique is safer for keepers, who never share the same physical space with the elephants, more humane for the elephants, and it encourages more natural behaviors.

## B. CHAINING OF ELEPHANTS

IDA is aware that Six Flags has a history of chaining elephants at night in the barn. It is possible that Six Flags may continue this practice today in some fashion. [The park has failed to disclose documents relating to their management practices, despite records requests submitted by IDA to the City of Vallejo.] Medical profiles describe each of the four city-“owned” elephants as having “no problem being restrained by chaining,” though this may also refer to chaining for veterinary or husbandry procedures. Also, the elephant barn appears very small for holding elephants in individual stalls.

Chaining is particularly detrimental to elephants as they are vigorous and far-ranging animals who are in near constant motion in the wild. Chaining is implicated in the development of foot and joint disorders, which, as Six Flags’ record clearly demonstrates, can be lethal for elephants. It is also strongly associated with abnormal behaviors, such as the intensely repetitive swaying and rocking seen in captive elephants, but not observed in free-ranging elephants. Several of the Six Flags elephants have been observed and videotaped while repetitively swaying and rocking.

The zoo industry has recognized that chaining is both injurious and inhumane for elephants. Overnight chaining of elephants has largely been replaced by the housing of elephants in individual stalls.

#### **IV. Six Flags Fails to Provide the Space and Natural Conditions that Elephants Need to Thrive**

Free-ranging elephants walk ten or more miles a day over home ranges that span from 60 to over 200 square miles. At Six Flags, seven elephants are crammed into a barren yard that appears to be less than one-acre in size. The yard, which includes a pool, and appears to be divided into three separate pens, is too small to maintain healthy growth of grasses for grazing. As a result, the yard surface is primarily compacted earth, a hard, non-yielding substrate that is damaging to elephants' feet, surrounded by concrete.

The barn appears to be small and sided with what seems to be pre-fabricated metal, a structure that is not considered "elephant-proof." As stated above, it is possible that Six Flags may still chain elephants when they are locked inside the barn, a practice that would be consistent with this type structure.

Against AZA guidelines, the park houses African and Asian elephants together in the same facility. It is recommended that these two distinct species of elephants be housed separately, due to concerns about disease transmission.

#### **V. Six Flags Fails to Keep Sufficient Veterinary Records on Elephant Health; Veterinary Care is Questionable**

##### **A. GROSSLY DEFICIENT VETERINARY RECORDS**

The attached case summaries, prepared by well-known academic and research veterinarian C. James Mahoney, provide a detailed analysis of the Six Flags elephant medical records. The summaries describe in detail the poor quality of the medical records including chronological gaps and missing test results, as well as raises questions about the quality of care that the elephants are receiving at this amusement park.

The quality of the medical records kept by Six Flags for the elephants is extremely poor. Among the problems:

- Gaps of up to two years in the records of elephants with ongoing pathologies
- Lack of full reporting of test results, including required annual tests for tuberculosis
- Failure to fully record, describe and track pathology onset, progression and treatment

## B. QUESTIONABLE VETERINARY CARE

Medical conditions, such as Misha's jaw abscess, do not appear to have been adequately treated, and, in turn, became chronic. In Misha's case, the jaw wound became "massively infected," a condition that would persist for six years, through the time she was transferred to Hogle Park Zoo.

Foot and joint pathologies were managed, unsuccessfully, by treating the symptoms without addressing the cause of the problem: the inadequate environment for elephants at Six Flags. Proper veterinary care would mandate the removal of the elephants from the conditions that were causing these degenerative conditions in the first place. Given the park's history of euthanizing elephants with foot and joint disease, veterinarians clearly know what the outcome of cases like those of Liz and Taj will be if they are not transferred from this stressful and damaging environment to an appropriate facility like an elephant sanctuary.

## **VI. Six Flags' Elephant Practices Fails to Protect the Public and Creates Great Liability for the City of Vallejo**

Through its elephant rides, shows, visitor-elephant interactions, and tug-of-war demonstrations, Six Flags creates a danger for the public and serious liability for the City of Vallejo, which owns four of the elephants – all of whom have been used by the park in one or more of these various capacities.

Offering public elephant rides is in direct opposition to the AZA's own Standards for Elephant Management and Care that specifically state it "strongly encourages members to discontinue public elephant rides" in the interest of public safety.

Six Flags is the only AZA institution member to offer elephant rides. Other zoos abandoned them long ago for humane and public safety reasons.

In addition, AZA standards strongly discourage "visitor-elephant interactions" outside the primary enclosure, along with the "the practice of walking elephants in public areas during public hours." Six Flags allows both. An elephant is often brought to the front entrance of the park early in the day to "greet" visitors, who are allowed to come into direct contact with the elephant. Elephants are also walked in close proximity to the public when taken from the elephant yard to the performance areas and back.

Direct observations of the elephants revealed even more public safety concerns:

- Elephants walking within 18 inches of members of the public, with no barrier or handler between them. (One handler was on the other side of the animal and one behind her.)
- Handlers inattentive to elephant while in contact with the public.

- Public areas on both sides of the loading platform for elephant rides allow close proximity between the elephant and park visitors.
- Handler not situated between the public and the elephant during elephant rides, despite close proximity as described above; handler walks on the inside of the track, with his view of the public obscured by the animal.
- During an elephant ride, one handler was observed walking completely behind the elephant – who had a woman and child perched on her back – to turn on a hose and bring it around for the elephant to drink from. At that point, the handler’s back was fully turned to the elephant, a dangerous situation both for the handler and the people on the elephant.
- Insufficient barrier between the public and elephant during the elephant show in the arena area.
- Public allowed direct contact with elephants during feeding after log show and also in the morning at entrance to the park. An elephant could easily grab a person’s arm with her trunk, as happened at a county fair in Pennsylvania in 2005 when an elephant grabbed, twisted and seriously injured the wrist of a woman feeding her.
- Public allowed to charge up behind elephants with no barrier in between during tug-of-war.

**Since 1990, “performing” elephants have killed 12 people and injured 125** under conditions similar to those allowed at Six Flags. The park’s elephant rides and shows are an accident waiting to happen. One elephant handler has already been critically injured when gored by an elephant. Will a member of the public be next?

A further concern is disease transmission, specifically tuberculosis, which is transmissible between elephants and humans. Medical records for the four city-owned elephants lack complete reporting of results for required annual tuberculosis tests. Tuberculosis in circus elephants has been a particular problem for many years, and several of the Six Flags elephants have circus backgrounds. The three Six Flags-owned elephants were purchased from circus trainers within the past three years.

If any of the Six Flags elephants were tuberculosis carriers, the close contact between elephants and park visitors would certainly constitute a public health risk.

## VII. CONCLUSION

This report provides clear evidence of the need to remove the four city-owned elephants from the Six Flags amusement park. The facility's many failures, which seriously affect the health and welfare of the elephants as well as endanger the public, include:

- Six Flags fails to provide the space or natural conditions that elephants need to thrive, and the elephants are paying for it with painful and crippling diseases and, eventually, their lives, which are cut short decades too soon.
- Six Flags fails to demonstrate a level of care and management that that reflects today's zoo industry standards. Elephants continue to be trained with cruel, circus-style methods that endanger both the keeper and the elephant, and the facility possibly utilizes prolonged chaining of elephants, which is extremely detrimental to the health and well-being of these animals.
- Six Flags fails to keep sufficient veterinary records and there are questions about veterinary care of the elephants.
- Six Flags fails to protect the public and creates a serious liability for the City of Vallejo's by allowing visitor-elephant contact, walking elephants through public areas during park hours, conducting elephant rides, and other unsafe practices.

It is incumbent upon the City of Vallejo to take immediate action to remove the four city-owned elephants and transfer them to sanctuaries, which provide natural habitats with large, open spaces of varied terrain that help heal and strengthen elephants debilitated by years of intense captivity.