

Solitary elephants and the issues surrounding a captive environment.

A discussion about Lucy the Elephant

Ingo Schmidinger, Nuria Maldonado

I would like to clarify my position with regards to Lucy, the elephant currently housed at the Edmonton Valley Zoo in Edmonton, Canada. I evaluated her in October 2022. Due to time constraints and possibly some issues with translation, my report may have been unclear regarding my position on Lucy and whether she can and should be retired to sanctuary.

General Discussion

When it comes to elephants in captive environments such as zoological institutions, and if animal welfare is what we are striving for, we must take into account scientifically proven facts that are no longer open for discussion. Vast space, natural habitat, conspecifics, complete autonomy, and appropriate climate are just the basic but fundamental requirements. This not only provides elephants with stimulating situations allowing them to fulfill their physiological needs, but it is also vitally important to meet their complex cognitive abilities.

Ironically, and contrary to the above, we still try to manage elephants within small-dimensioned and artificial enclosures, in social isolation, and all too often under unsuitable or even unacceptable climate conditions. Of course, it's not surprising that these intelligent and highly socially complex animals suffer from a variety of physical, physiological, and psychological health issues. Gastrointestinal diseases, metabolic disorders, skin problems, depression, hyper-aggressiveness, and stereotypies are just a few examples of what is observed regularly as a response to prevailing social, environmental and husbandry deficiencies.

Lucy at the Edmonton Valley Zoo

Since my evaluation, no substantial development can be observed in terms of fulfilling any of the basic physiological and psychological requirements mentioned earlier. Little steps, such as potential weight loss or certain medical treatments, is by far not enough to truly meet an elephant's essential needs and to ensure Lucy's overall welfare.

Looking at the current circumstances and considering the management philosophy that has adversely impacted Lucy's living conditions and well-being, we assume that not much more can be expected for meeting even minimum standards in terms of Lucy's care with respect to true elephant welfare.

While time is running, and regarding this unvarying development, as well as the overwhelming requirements for improving Lucy's husbandry conditions at her current location, there is obviously only one decision left where we don't have to balance any pros or cons. It's as simple as moving her to an appropriate place, such as a warm climate sanctuary - as soon as possible.

And again: yes, she can be moved free of stress if planned properly. And yes, she's able to adapt to a new environment as well as to new caregivers. And again yes, she has all the abilities to socialize with other elephants. And as dramatic as it might sound - no, elephant caregivers are not part of the family of any elephant.

Conclusions

Scientifically proven findings along with extensive observations regarding animal welfare show that we keep on making a huge mistake in keeping elephants isolated, forced to live a solitary life in artificial surroundings that still too many people imagine to be a species-appropriate way of caring. Regarding the alarmingly slow development of captive elephant management in general, this situation might only change when people start to think (literally) outside the box, and hopefully make the same observations and experiences we have been fortunate to have made based on fifty years of experience in working with elephants.

The question remains: what makes us believe that we are thoroughly capable of providing true species-appropriate living conditions and care to such highly intelligent, social, sensitive, and self-aware wild animals within an artificial environment. And furthermore, how are we able to meet all their complex physiological and psychological needs in this unnatural and space constrained environment?

We seem to get lost in conversations and discussions, while we systematically tend to forget what it is all about: making decisions and movements to give wild animals the life that they are made for.



May 10, 2023