



Thick skins, tender hearts and broken spirits  
Should there be more elephants in the Denver Zoo?

By Marc Bekoff  
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Should the Denver Zoo spend \$52 million to increase the size of its Asian elephant habitat and boost the number of captive elephants from two current residents to as many as eight, who they'll keep in what they call an "elephant park" furnished with a hot tub?

Five major zoos in the United States — the Bronx Zoo and those in Detroit, Chicago, San Francisco and Philadelphia — recently decided to phase out their elephant exhibits, despite the fact that they're money makers, because they cannot meet the social, emotional and physical needs of these awesome mammoths, and also because of the high cost of keeping captive elephants. Elephants are highly intelligent, extremely emotional, very social and like to roam. By definition, zoos are antithetical to these needs. The proposed 10-acre elephant park is merely a bigger, but thoroughly inadequate, cage, and the elephants won't get it all.

The Denver Zoo justifies its intentions by claiming that its park will help to conserve this endangered species. In an interview I did on Colorado Public Radio with Craig Piper, vice-president of the Denver Zoo, Piper called these elephants an "insurance population." Insurance for what? The Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) that oversees accreditation of zoos in the United States admits in its own executive summary "Little to no systematic research has been conducted on the impact of visits to zoos and aquariums on visitor conservation knowledge, awareness, affect or behavior." Terry Maple, renowned director of Zoo Atlanta, notes, "Any zoo that sits around and tells you that the strength of zoos is the SSP (Species Survival Plan) is blowing smoke." The SSP is an AZA program that attempts to ensure the survival of certain wildlife species using managed breeding programs and reintroducing captive bred wildlife into proper habitat. The Denver Zoo puts less than 10 percent of its

annual budget into conservation efforts (and about the same into education), one quarter of what the Bronx Zoo devotes to conservation. Piper admitted that it's extremely unlikely — impossible — that any of these insurance elephants would ever be reintroduced to the wild. Every conservation biologist knows that retaining suitable habitat for animals is enormously difficult and there's no hope that habitat into which elephants could be released would be saved for them in their absence. Captive elephants merely insure a zoo's income.

There also is a lot concern about how captive elephant groups are established and maintained. Piper said that the zoo might be able to house, for example, six bull elephants and use them for breeding and also for sending around to other zoos. Redecorating zoos with any animals raises serious ethical questions. In order to maintain the new elephant park, individuals will be shipped in and out, and friendships, and strong and enduring social bonds, will be broken repeatedly. Elephants are highly emotional, sentient beings and they suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and psychological flashbacks. They grieve, often irreversibly, when life-long friendships are broken. Elephants have thick skins, but tender hearts.

A recent essay in the New York Times concluded we're driving elephants crazy by keeping them in captivity and by shipping them here and there as if they're pieces of furniture. In spring 2001, Asian elephants were regularly moved in and out of the Denver Zoo as if they were couches being moved from room to room. Rocky Mountain Animal Defense (RMAD) and I got involved because of the lack of concern of the Denver Zoo and the AZA. Dolly, a 32-year-old female, was removed from her friends, Mimi and Candy, and sent to Missouri on her "honeymoon," as the zoo called it, to breed. A few months later, Hope, a mature female, and Amigo, a 2 1/2-year-old male (who had been taken from his mother), were sent to the Denver Zoo, where they lived next door to Mimi and Candy.

In the following months, Mimi got increasingly agitated. In June 2001, Mimi pushed Candy over, she couldn't get up, and had to be euthanized (the zoo didn't have a proper elephant hoist). Two days after Candy died, and a day after she was autopsied within smelling distance of the other elephants, Hope got angry, escaped from her keepers and rampaged through the zoo. Miraculously, no one was

seriously injured. Hope was then transferred out of the zoo, and a new elephant, Rosie, was brought in. When elephants move in and out of groups, their social order is severely disrupted and individuals get very upset. I've seen this first hand among wild elephants in Kenya and, not surprisingly, this is what happened at the Denver Zoo. And it could happen again. Playing "musical chairs" with animals that have no choice can be serious business with dire consequences.

Zoos are no place for elephants. As humans, we can do just about anything we want to other animals so let's make the correct choice — phase out the elephant exhibit and send these amazing animals to sanctuaries where they can live out their lives with social and emotional stability and respect and dignity. The Denver Zoo should put the money elsewhere so that other residents can have the better lives they deserve.

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