

2010 Top Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants

List documents devastating consequences of keeping elephants in North American zoos.

San Rafael, Calif. (January 18, 2011) - The 2010 list of the Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants, released today by In Defense of Animals (IDA), once again exposes the hidden suffering of elephants in zoos, where lack of space, unsuitably cold climates and impoverished social groupings condemn Earth's largest land mammals to lifetimes of deprivation, disease and early death. In its seventh year, the list also includes IDA's first recognition of a zoo (Dallas Zoo in Texas) for improvements in elephant welfare and policies that help elephants in need.

"The Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants list is an SOS for suffering elephants and a call for mammoth change," said IDA Elephant Campaign Director Catherine Doyle. "Caging elephants in urban zoo displays is not humane and it is not conservation."

Zoos making the 2010 list are: San Antonio Zoo (Texas), Edmonton Valley Zoo (Canada), Buttonwood Park Zoo (Mass.), Central Florida Zoo (Fla.), Niabi Zoo (Ill.), Topeka Zoo (Kan.), Honolulu Zoo (Hawaii), Wildlife Safari (Ore.), York's Wild Kingdom Zoo (Maine) tied with Southwick's Zoo (Mass.), Pittsburgh Zoo's ICC (Penn.). San Diego Zoo Safari Park (Calif.) earns a dishonorable mention.

IDA tallied the high cost of keeping elephants in zoos: Since 2000, zoos in North America have committed at least \$500 million to remodel elephant exhibits, and every year spend close to \$20 million to maintain fewer than 300 elephants. To put this in perspective, the entire annual budget for the Kenya Wildlife Service is less than \$40 million, and the agency protects more than 30,000 elephants across 20,000 square miles. "You can protect 50 elephants in Kenya for the cost of holding one elephant in a zoo for one year," said Doyle. "Zoos are wasting scarce conservation dollars even as elephants are heading toward extinction."

"It's absurd for zoos to claim to be conserving elephants when those in zoos are suffering and dying prematurely because of inadequate conditions and harmful practices," added Doyle. "The key to elephants' survival is to protect them where they naturally live."

IDA's 2010 Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants List:

1. San Antonio Zoo (Texas) – A tragedy waiting to happen.

Last year this zoo was named one of the worst in the world because of its treatment of elephants. It crams two of the Earth's largest land mammals into a space smaller than many backyards, creating an unhealthy and dangerous situation: Boo has been terrorizing Lucky, who has no escape route, leading a top elephant expert to warn of dire consequences. The zoo simply needs to close its outdated exhibit before an elephant is injured or killed. This is the San Antonio Zoo's fourth appearance on IDA's list; it holds the number one spot for the third straight year.



Read: [IDA's action alert with links to USDA complaint and expert assessment of elephant aggression at the zoo](#)

See: [Boo's aggression toward Lucky](#)

2. Edmonton Valley Zoo (Alberta, Canada) – Cold zoo, cold heart. Lucy suffers the trifecta of cruel zoo conditions: solitary confinement, a tiny exhibit and Alberta's frigid climate. As a result, she suffers captivity-induced foot disease and arthritis – the leading cause of premature death for elephants in zoos – and displays signs of psychological distress. But the zoo remains deaf to the worldwide clamor demanding Lucy's release to a natural-habitat sanctuary in a warmer climate that better meets her needs. The Edmonton Zoo appears on the list for the first time.



See: [Video response to zoo claims about Lucy \(by Zoocheck Canada\)](#)

3. Buttonwood Park Zoo (Massachusetts) – Elephants as cash cows. A controversial proposed expansion plan won't help the elephants at this small zoo that stubbornly clings to the view that only elephants bring in paying customers, and that welfare matters less than the bottom line. Emily and Ruth are locked indoors for at least 15 hours nightly, spending even more time inside during the cold, icy winters. This intensive confinement has caused painful chronic foot disease and severe arthritis. Aggression problems add to their misery. The zoo must put their welfare first and retire these elephants. This is the Buttonwood Park Zoo's first appearance on the list.



Read: [IDA's op ed on Buttonwood Park Zoo](#)

Dr. Mel Richardson's report on elephants' health

See: [Buttonwood Park Zoo elephants/stereotypic behavior](#)



4. Central Florida Zoo (Florida) – Sentenced to solitary. Since the death of pen-mate Mary nearly a year ago, Maude has lived in cruel solitary confinement, though elephants are highly social and naturally live in large family groups. Despite early reports that the zoo would decide her fate quickly and then shut down its antiquated exhibit, Maude is still on display and performing tricks for the public. A sanctuary will take Maude and give her a life far closer to what nature intended. What is the zoo waiting for? Central Florida Zoo makes its first

appearance on the list.

Read: [Press release on the Central Fla. Zoo with link to IDA's letter to the zoo](#)

See: [Maude "performing" for the public](#)



5. Niabi Zoo (Illinois) – A painful existence. This small Midwestern zoo holds elephants Babe and Sophie, who have a history of painful chronic foot infections fostered by their living conditions: a small outdoor yard and an unbelievably tiny barn into which the elephants are crammed during the long, freezing winters. Zoo records detail gruesome foot disorders, especially Sophie's, including chronic abscesses, exposed "crab meat tissue," pus and foul odors. Chronic foot infections can invade the bone and lead to death. Fundraising for a proposed exhibit renovation would take at least two years. Meanwhile, Babe and Sophie continue to suffer. This is Niabi Zoo's first appearance on the list.

6. Topeka Zoo (Kansas) – What's good for the goose...

The Topeka Zoo recently closed its zebra exhibit due to welfare concerns over a muddy yard, yet problems are far worse for elephants Tembo and Sunda. Lack of space and a harsh climate that forces them into



cramped indoor quarters for much of the winter has caused chronic health problems that will ultimately turn deadly. We hope new zoo director Brendan Wiley will show the same concern for the elephants' welfare by sending them to a sanctuary. The Topeka Zoo makes IDA's list for the third time.



7. Honolulu Zoo (Hawaii) – F for Effort. A miserly "expansion" that would give Mari and Vaigai less than an acre of space – though elephants naturally walk tens of miles daily – simply fails the test. Though larger, the zoo's plan to add two elephants, including a male who would need his own pen, greatly reduces space. This zoo sets

the bar way too low, endorsed by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums' (AZA) extremely minimal elephant standards. This zoo will only make the grade if it ends its elephant program. Honolulu wins a spot for the second straight year on IDA's list.

See: [Honolulu Zoo elephants/stereotypic behavior](#)



8. Wildlife Safari (Oregon) – Most clueless award. At a time when African elephants are being slaughtered for their ivory, you would expect this zoo to send a serious message about respect for these threatened animals. Instead, it offers an "elephant car wash," a circus-like spectacle in which the elephants spray water onto paying customers' vehicles and wipe them with sponges. Training that relies on the sharp steel "bullhook" – a device used to prod, hook and strike elephants – ensures the elephants' compliance with this cheap gimmick. The zoo's approach to "conservation" would be laughable if the plight of elephants wasn't so grave. This is Wildlife Safari's first appearance on IDA's list.

See: [Elephant car wash at Wildlife Safari](#)

9. TIE: York's Wild Kingdom Zoo (Maine)/Southwick's Zoo (Massachusetts) – Just a few clowns short of a circus. These zoos bring in a single elephant each summer for circus-like performances and rides. Lydia "works" in the shadow of York's amusement park rides, treated like one herself. Southwick's Dondi disco danced and gave rides until her death in July, likely from tuberculosis, raising serious questions about elephant health and public safety.



The elephants used by these zoos are kept in barren exhibits, cruelly isolated from other members of their species. It's simply time to stop this inhumane and unsafe practice. York's Wild Kingdom and the Southwick's Zoo make IDA's list for the first time.

See: [Lydia at York's Wild Kingdom](#)

See: [Dondi's "performing" at the Southwick's Zoo](#)

10. Pittsburgh Zoo's ICC (Pennsylvania) – The forgotten elephants. The Pittsburgh Zoo runs a nearby "breeding center" where no breeding takes place and where elephants are warehoused in miserable conditions. This includes elephants Bette and Kallie, who were confined to a cement barn for two months straight last winter and are denied free access to water or enrichment items. Only in their 20s, both elephants are



prematurely infertile, a problem caused by captivity; wild elephants give birth into their 50s. The Philadelphia Zoo, which still "owns" Bette and Kallie, should send them to a sanctuary now. This is the first appearance on the list for the Pittsburgh Zoo's ICC.

Read: [Philadelphia elephants mistreated in W. Pa., activists say](#)

See: [Keeper talks about the lives of the elephants at the ICC](#)

Dishonorable Mention: San Diego Zoo Safari Park

(California) – Too much bull. This zoo has a troubling history with elephants, including the banishment (and quick deaths) of three older elephants to make room for imported wild elephants. Now its reckless breeding program is aggravating the critical problem of surplus bulls in captivity by producing seven male calves in the last seven years – four in 2010 alone. Zoos consider the dangerous and unpredictable males undesirable, so most spend solitary lives in tiny pens. Despite a trend toward increased male births in captivity, breeding continues. Two elephants will give birth at the park this year. The park has appeared twice on IDA's Worst Zoos for Elephants list.



"Step in the right direction" recognition: Dallas Zoo (Texas) –

IDA recognizes this zoo for a rare combination of positive factors: a moderate climate, use of humane "protected contact" handling, and policies that eschew breeding and include acquiring elephants from worse situations such as circuses. Elephants are not suited to urban zoos, but Dallas has gone farther than any other to improve welfare and it will not add to the number of elephants already living in inadequate conditions. Dallas' exhibit still isn't large enough for a species with home ranges measuring hundreds of square miles, but its policies put it in a class of its own.



[Click here to visit IDA's Worst Zoos for Elephants Hall of Shame](#) – a special category for repeat offenders that have made little or no progress improving conditions for elephants.

In Defense of Animals issues its Top Ten Worst Zoos for Elephants list annually. IDA is an international animal rescue and advocacy organization based in San Rafael, CA.