

Elephants in zoos at risk of abnormal behaviour because of small groups

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Elephants in zoos are at risk of depression, according to a new study that found captive animals are unhappy kept alone or in small groups.

The research found that most elephants in zoos are kept in groups of four or smaller.

Scientists say this is unnatural for the herd animals. It not only means young elephants cannot learn important social skills but many begin showing "abnormal behaviour" that suggests depression such as swaying on the spot or pacing in circles.

Animal welfare specialist Dr Paul Rees of Salford University looked at the records of 200 zoos worldwide. In 2006, 69 per cent of Asian elephants and 80 per cent of African elephants in the world's zoos were still being kept in groups of four or fewer.

Both British and American animal welfare groups recommend elephants are kept in larger groups of seven or more that better reflects the natural habitat in the wild.

Dr Rees, who has spent years decoding the complex social structure of elephants, said elephants kept in small groups cannot learn important social skills such as finding a mate or greeting rituals.

"In the wild, elephant social structure is complex and, although the average group size is around 12, they can also live in even larger extended family units. Contact with members of their own species is crucial for the animals to develop normal behaviour patterns and friendships," he said.

"Small group sizes in zoos may prevent this from happening. There is no good reason for a zoo to keep just one elephant."

Dr Rees said elephants kept in small groups can display "abnormal behaviour" such as swaying on the spot or pacing in circles that suggests the animals are unhappy.

"In an awful lot of zoos around the world elephants are unable to comply with recommendations that elephants are kept in larger groups. I am absolutely convinced this is not a good thing," he added.

In a 2005 survey of 78 zoos accredited by the American Association of Zoos and Aquariums, 40 said they planned to expand or build new elephant exhibits.

But Dr Rees said it would be difficult for the majority of zoos to keep larger herds.

"This transition would be difficult as it would take a lot of time and money, and the zoos would need to find the right combinations of elephants. Many animals are often incompatible due to a history of inadequate care in circuses or substandard zoos where many of them originate," he said.

Weighing up to six tonnes, elephants are the largest land mammals. They are highly intelligent and can live up to 70 years, although their numbers are dropping due to poaching and the destruction of their habitat.