

Rebuttal to Woodland Park Zoo's "Responses to "An Optimal Future for Woodland Park Zoo Elephants" by Lisa Kane, JD

The Zoo, again, refuses to address the detailed arguments raised in the "Optimal Future" report on their merits, claiming the arguments are not "new" nor "break ... new ground." Sadly, the serious questions about the Zoo's elephant program have not changed over time because the elephants' social, physical and environmental hardships have not changed. Specific examples of the hardship of their daily lives are detailed in the Report. Just a few of these hardships include the smallness, the sameness, the tedium of an environment that fails to challenge their great bodies and great brains and chronic, painful physical disabilities directly related to captivity on hard substrates in often cold and wet conditions. We challenged the Zoo to address these issues on the merits. The Zoo has had the Report for 19 months and still won't address them.

Expert Letters of Support

The "Optimal Future" Report, issued in December 2011, included a public letter Jane Goodall wrote in November 2011, specifically addressing the issue of whether captive elephants are better off in sanctuaries or zoos. She stated in language broadly applicable to the entire zoo industry: "***While many zoos do an excellent job of caring for wild animals and contributing to their conservation, there are some species, like elephants, which will always be unsuited to zoo environments.***" One month after the Zoo received its copy of our Report, Dr. Goodall wrote a second letter. In it, Dr. Goodall changed course and stated that some excellent zoos were capable of humanely exhibiting elephants. We assume the second letter came as the result of pressure from a Zoo industry unhappy with her original position. Be that as it may, Dr. Goodall did not identify Woodland Park Zoo as an excellent zoo capable of exhibiting elephants humanely.

The Zoo criticizes Dr. Mel Richardson's review of the elephants' veterinary records on two grounds: (1) his lack of recent contact with the elephants and Zoo staff; and (2) the fact he "is not licensed to practice in Washington state." The first criticism is based on an erroneous assumption that there is no well accepted body of scientific knowledge and welfare principles that he, as a seasoned elephant veterinarian, can reasonably apply to the volumes of detailed vet records maintained by the Zoo. The Zoo's second criticism is deeply ironic. Surely Dr. Richardson's lack of a license to practice in Washington does not disqualify him given that the three veterinarians serving on the Expert Veterinary Panel, including its chair Dr. Bryan Slinker,¹ appointed by the Zoo to assist the Task Force are also not licensed to practice in Washington.

According to Washington State's Department of Health, Dr. Slinker's license to practice has expired. See: <https://fortress.wa.gov/doh/providercredentialsearch/SearchResult.aspx>. Accessed July 18, 2013.

Foot Disease

The Zoo's vet records disclose years of foot ailments for all three elephants. Dr. Richardson discusses these problems and a host of other painful conditions, including infected and necrotic skin conditions, vesicular eruptions, colic, bloody discharge, and arthritic lameness in his evaluation of the Zoo's own records. The Zoo's claim that "none of our elephants has arthritis or foot problems" is patently false.

Barn

Watoto has not laid eyes on another African elephant for over 40 years. She is indeed socially isolated in the starkest terms. Because she and Bamboo do not get along, the Zoo is forced to keep them separated, whether they are in the barn or outdoors. Thus, all the elephants while away their lives in small paddocks or small stall areas. The shower stall, in which Bamboo and Watoto alternate, is separated from the main barn space by a concrete wall and steel doors. Recently, perhaps in response to the "Optimal Future" Report, the steel doors are chained together in a manner permitting about a three-inch opening through which the elephants might catch a glimpse of one another.

Watoto-EEHV

The Zoo claims that none of its elephants has EEHV. However, it is undisputed that Hansa died of an EEHV infection. The conflict between the Zoo's claim that its elephants are disease free and the death of Chai's calf from EEHV was addressed head on by Smithsonian's pathologist, Dr. Laura Richmond: "***Hansa would have gotten it (EEHV) from another elephant. Hansa had not left Woodland Park Zoo since she was born, which suggests the virus was passed from one of the zoo's other elephants, either her mother Chai, or Watoto, or Bamboo.***" Because this is the most reasonable explanation under all the circumstances made public, the "Optimal Future" Report relied upon it.