

Amboseli Elephant Research Project
Amboseli Trust for Elephants
P.O. Box 15135
Langata 00509
Nairobi, Kenya
Tel/Fax: +254 2 891191
E-mail: AmboseliEle@aol.com
Website: www.elephanttrust.org

An Open letter to the San Diego Zoo and the Lowry Park Zoo
June 24, 2003

Re: The importation of 11 African Elephants from Swaziland

We, the undersigned, form a group of elephant researchers working together to study elephants in the wild. The Amboseli Elephant Research Project strives to create, maintain, and make available an unparalleled body of knowledge on a single, long-lived mammal species--the African elephant. The data bank is based on 30+ years of research on a relatively undisturbed, free-ranging population of elephants inhabiting the Amboseli ecosystem. One of our main aims is to produce published results, which provide base-line information on elephant biology to scientists and to relevant authorities responsible for the conservation and management of African elephants throughout their range.

The combined experience of the signatories to this statement represents over 200 years of research and conservation activities involving free-ranging, wild African elephants. We are the acknowledged leading experts in the field and as such we feel that we must comment on the permit application to import 11 African elephants from Swaziland to the US.

There are currently only 36 elephants in the whole country of Swaziland. Previous to 1987 for over 40 years there were no elephants in Swaziland. Almost all the elephants there today arrived as calves who were translocated from Kruger National Park in South Africa after their families were killed in culls. Eighteen calves were introduced in 1987 and another 19 in 1994. Now only nine years later, when there are actually fewer elephants than there were after the second importation, the management authorities are threatening to kill 11 individuals if they cannot sell them to US zoos. We do not find the ecological or conservation arguments for killing these elephants in any way convincing and we are surprised and very disappointed that reputable zoos such as yours would be involved in this undertaking.

We are greatly concerned that a precedent is being set that will have profound implications for elephants in Africa. There are now dozens of small public and private reserves in southern Africa, which have been "stocked" with elephant calves from culls and with translocated families from other areas. Most of these reserves

apparently took the maximum number of elephants that their area could hold. Many are now saying, as Swaziland is, that they have to kill or sell some of the elephants because of habitat degradation.

This is not conservation of elephants in their natural habitats nor is it a situation of a natural elephant population outgrowing its park or reserve. As far as we can surmise it is more like keeping and breeding elephants with the purpose of selling them. The policy of dumping elephants into private ranches and reserves and then after a few years complaining that there are too many and that they have to cull them is untenable from an ethical and conservation point of view. These elephants are being treated like livestock to be bought, transported, bred, sold, transported again, chained, caged, "trained" with bull hooks and hot wires, sold or traded again when they are not as appealing or they are not breeding or they are too old, and finally ending up in miserable road-side zoos or third-rate circuses.

Our 30 years of research has shown that elephants live in highly complex societies, that they form life-long bonds, that they are remarkably intelligent, and that they display an amazing array of emotions. The 11 elephants in question have already experienced horrendous trauma when their mothers and the rest of their families were killed in the cull. Now they will be captured again, "tamed down", a process we have now learned is often cruel and painful, and transported thousands of miles to the US. The quality of their lives will be radically different in the zoo environment and the following is one of the most important points we want to make—these elephants will experience more debilitating illnesses and will live shorter lives than elephants living in the wild. The recent RSPCA study of zoo elephants in Europe revealed that the life expectancy for African elephants in captivity is 16 years old. In Amboseli where there is infant mortality as well as drought, accidents, disease, and most important poaching and spearing, the life expectancy is 41 for females and 24 for males. This is a huge and very significant difference. There is no indication that the situation is better in US zoos. Taking elephants from the wild is not only traumatic for them, it is also detrimental to their health.

Up until recently we had not been opponents of elephants being kept in zoos. Although we never felt that the breeding of captive elephants was relevant to conservation, we did buy into the argument that displaying elephants in zoos was educational, that the unfortunate elephants in captivity could act as the ambassadors for their wild cousins. Now we know a lot more about elephants and their needs and, even more important, we know a lot more about what is involved in the capturing, taming, and training of wild elephants. No matter how well your zoo may treat the elephants, your visitors would not want to know what those tranquil elephants went through to make it possible for them to be viewed in captivity. It is our feeling that the public can be educated by seeing films about wild elephants. We recommend that the elephants held in captivity in the US today be allowed to live out their lives and that no more elephants should ever be captured for display again.

In the case of elephants, with their potentially long lives, their ability to communicate their emotional states with numerous vocalizations and displays, their loyalty and care of each other, their gentleness and dignity, we believe the time has come to consider them as sentient beings and not as so much money on the hoof to be captured and sold and displayed for our own use. We should be beyond the exploitation of animals as complex and magnificent as elephants.

We urge you to reconsider importing these elephants. There are alternatives for them in Africa. Your actions will prompt the capturing of more young elephants with the intent to sell them to zoos and circuses around the world. It would be a shame for your zoos with your excellent reputations to set this precedent.

Sincerely,

Dr. Cynthia Moss	AERP	35 years experience
Dr. Harvey Croze	AERP	35 years
Dr. Joyce Poole	AERP & SEVP	28 years
Dr. Keith Lindsay	AERP & EDG	25 years
Dr. Phyllis Lee	Cambridge U. & AERP	21 years
Norah Njiraini	AERP	17 years
Soila Sayialel	AERP	16 years
Dr. Hamisi Mutinda	AERP	13 years
Catherine Sayialel	AERP	<u>11 years</u>
		201 years