



International Elephant Foundation Takes Issue With Conclusions Found In “Compromised Survivorship in Zoo Elephants” Article.

The International Elephant Foundation (IEF) provides funds and expertise to support in situ and ex situ elephant conservation programs, as well as veterinary research, conservation education and improvements in husbandry of elephants in human care. The institutions that IEF board members represent manage both African and Asian elephants in zoos, circuses and other facilities. Due to the contributions from our board member institutions and other zoological institutions that care for elephants, the IEF has been able to contribute over \$1.4 million to elephant programs since 1999.

A recent article published in Science magazine and titled “Compromised Survivorship in Zoo Elephants”, maintains that the keeping of elephants in zoos has a detrimental impact on their viability. The IEF Board of Directors takes issue with the conclusions of the article, the underlying data and the bias of at least some of the authors. Although one of the authors has said that the intent of the article was not to eliminate elephants in zoos, it is already being used to attack zoos holding elephants and not as a tool to support the ongoing efforts of zoological institutions to improve elephant care and welfare.

Thorough examination of their data and analysis technique is still ongoing, but it appears that several errors have been made in the data analysis and the way some information is reported. Initially, however, the IEF questions the authors’ use of data over the last 50 years from only European zoos and comparing it to two small managed range state populations. The authors seek to bolster their conclusions regarding zoo elephant viability by citing a previous study, the serious flaws of which have been well-documented.

It is [acknowledged by experts](#) that zoological institutions of the 1960s maintained a different animal management philosophy from the institutions of today. Like many other science-based professions, elephant management has evolved significantly in the last twenty years resulting in more species appropriate exhibits; training courses for elephant keeper staff; guidelines, standards and publications on elephant husbandry; increased reproductive success; and enhanced long-term sustainability of elephants in human care. Individual species studbooks and regional cooperative species breeding programs were not instituted until the early 1990s. Thus, to rely primarily on historic data is inappropriate and does not allow conclusions that accurately reflect the advances of the last twenty years and the state of elephant care today.

The article’s conclusions are also contradicted by the clear facts which the article ignores. Within IEF institutions alone over the last 20 years over 50 elephant births have occurred including multiple second generation births and one third generation birth. To date, most of the elephant calves born still survive and, furthermore, adult elephants over 40 are common. Within multiple institutions, there are elephants in their 50s and 60s, well beyond the median life spans the article claims to demonstrate.

The IEF also notes the significant financial support of at least one of the authors by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) an organization with a well-known belief that elephants should not be held in zoological institutions. This along with the history of anti-captivity positions by several of the authors raises concerns about their objectivity. A biased article that offers flawed conclusions does nothing to advance the welfare of elephants anywhere.

IEF believes that elephant care and welfare must be the number one priority of all those who hold elephants and will continue to support numerous staff training, health, and reproductive programs that have immediate impact elephant welfare. Moreover we know that elephants in zoos and circuses are important ambassadors for their species in range countries. Wild elephants benefit through effective conservation education activities and fund-raising programs developed and maintained through elephant exhibition. We provide people of all ages and from all socio-economic levels with the opportunity to see, admire, respect, touch and be amazed by elephants. In doing so, we seek to inspire young and old alike to be concerned about habitat and the conservation of elephants, and to practice good stewardship of the Earth's animals and plants.