

Wandering Wanda: Where next?

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The San Antonio Zoo is trying to keep one of its aging Asian elephants, now in Detroit, from being moved to an animal sanctuary, where officials fear she might not get the medical care she needs for arthritis.

There's also a chance Wanda, 46, could return to San Antonio after 18 years away, although zoo officials support a national accrediting body's plan to move her to the Columbus Zoo and Aquarium in Ohio.

For ethical considerations, the Detroit Zoo announced in May that it no longer will keep elephants and wants to send Wanda and Winky, a 51-year-old female Asian elephant, to the Elephant Sanctuary in Hohenwald, Tenn., or the Performing Animal Welfare Society in Galt, Calif.

Last week, the American Zoo and Aquarium Association, based on input from a 15-member panel overseeing an elephant species-survival plan, endorsed the move to Columbus.

The Detroit Zoo asked the panel to reconsider, arguing both sanctuaries have room for the pair to roam on soft ground and are in mild climates, where the cold is less likely to exacerbate their arthritis and foot pains.

Ron Kagan, director of the Detroit Zoo, said the zoo would have a final appeal with a wildlife conservation committee of the association if the species-survival panel reaffirms its decision.

He hopes to have the issue resolved by mid-October, so a move can occur before snow falls.

While Winky belongs to Detroit, Wanda's fate lies with her owner, the San Antonio Zoo, Kagan said.

Some sanctuaries are better than zoos because they simulate the wild, Kagan said.

"You don't get animals with foot problems, skin problems and neurotic behavior that you might see in a zoo," he said.

The Detroit Zoo wants what is best, but does not want to risk losing its accreditation by defying the association, Kagan said.

Steve McCusker, executive director of the San Antonio Zoo, said he's concerned about a "lower level of husbandry" that often exists at sanctuaries.

"I'm not comfortable sending our animal to either of the sanctuaries," McCusker said Thursday. "Sanctuaries, in general, have more of a practice of letting the animals out and letting them be. They're less managed."

McCusker also questioned whether the cold is an issue, since zoos in northern states have successfully bred elephants.

The Columbus Zoo, which has four adult Asian elephants and one male calf, has a 4-acre elephant compound that includes a 1-acre indoor, temperature-controlled area.

"We know that Wanda and Winky have special health care needs, and our elephant specialists are equipped to provide daily treatment," Jerry Borin, executive director of the Columbus facility, said in a statement.

Originally privately owned in Houston, Wanda came to San Antonio in 1966. Her maximum weight was about 8,500 pounds.

She was on loan for eight years to the Fort Worth Zoo, which tried but never was able to breed her. In 1994, Wanda was moved to Detroit.

Wanda has received whirlpool therapy, massage, therapeutic exercise, pain relievers and anti-inflammatory medications for severe arthritis in her front legs.

Experts have said captivity can exacerbate arthritis in elephants, who need to be able to roam several miles a day to keep their joints and feet healthy.