

# Zoo vs. Sanctuary

BY MICHAEL HUTCHINS, PhD, DIRECTOR/WILLIAM CONWAY CHAIR  
AZA DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION AND SCIENCE

The Detroit and San Francisco Zoos' recent announcements that they intend to send their remaining elephants to non-AZA-member sanctuaries have generated considerable media buzz. AZA institutions constantly review the status of their animal collections and facilities and it is every director's prerogative to determine which animals are appropriate for their facility at any given time and which are not. However, a common thread running through many of the media reports and in quotes from animal activists is that elephants would be "better off" living in these sanctuaries than in any AZA accredited zoo. This implies that the quality of animal care at these sanctuaries is better than it is at accredited zoos. It also implies that, within their respective categories, sanctuaries and zoos are all of similar quality. But is this really true? Absolutely not!

My intent in writing this article is to outline the differences and similarities—both real and perceived—that exist between AZA accredited zoos and sanctuaries, and specifically with regard to elephant care. Such an understanding is key to examining the validity (or lack thereof) of the above assumptions. It may also help us understand why some zoo professionals, government officials and members of the public have supported the transfer of selected elephants from AZA institutions to sanctuaries. I must, however, state from the outset that I have not visited the sanctuaries in question. My comments are based on written reports from other AZA members' visits, as well as from the organizations' web sites and promotional materials.

## DIFFERENCES

**Space:** The elephant sanctuaries at Hohenwald, TN and San Andreas, CA can offer hundreds of acres of space through which elephants can roam. In contrast, elephants at some urban zoos are maintained in considerably smaller areas (one acre or less) and therefore have little opportunity for exercise or social benefits that come from larger group sizes. However, this is changing. While many AZA facilities cannot offer the same amount of space as the two sanctuaries in question, they are still quite large and complex. There are also many zoos that have new elephant facilities in the works, some of which are multi-acre.

While space may be important for elephants, there are no scientific studies that can assist us in determining either the minimum or optimum amount of outdoor space required for captive elephants. It is important to note, however, that bigger does not always imply better. There are many other factors that must be considered, including enclosure complexity and environmental enrichment, group size and composition, training, safety, veterinary care, nutrition, and so forth, when evaluating the quality of any elephant management program.

**Breeding:** Elephant sanctuaries typically do not breed animals or transfer them to other facilities for the purposes of genetic management. Most animals going to sanctuaries are on a one-way trip and will remain there for the rest of their lives. This is consistent with a sanctuary's sole focus on individual animal welfare.

In contrast, the focus of AZA and its members is both on the welfare of individuals and the population as a whole, both in zoos and in nature. Participation in programs such as Species Survival Programs (SSP) may involve moving animals from one facility to another, either temporarily or permanently. In AZA zoos, elephants are seen as animal ambassadors, which play an important role in supporting conservation of their cousins in the wild. This is accomplished through a wide variety of activities, including public education, professional staff training, research, technology development, field conservation and fundraising.

Cooperative programs also control breeding so that populations do not overshoot their available space. Such programs are thus seen as contributing to professional and humane animal management and care, not detracting from them. Indeed, some biologists have argued that family life is critical to elephant social well-being. Births, such as those that recently occurred at Disney's Animal Kingdom and the San Diego Wild Animal Park, are known to have a profound effect on adult behavior, often further cementing female social bonds. Sanctuary elephants that are not allowed to breed will never have these opportunities, and this could be seen as diminishing their "welfare."

**Accreditation:** Although licensed by the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA's) Animal and Plant Inspection Service (APHIS) and their state wildlife agencies, the elephant sanctuaries are not accredited by AZA. This means that they are not required to meet AZA accreditation standards, which are considerably more detailed and comprehensive than USDA standards. In addition, AZA established detailed Standards for Elephant Management and Care in 2001 and updated them in 2003. Non-members are not required to meet these standards, nor are they obligated to maintain them over time.

Of particular interest to AZA's Accreditation Commission is the long-term financial stability of a zoological institution. Without a predictable and reliable source of income, it is difficult or impossible for any organization to provide proper long-term care for animals or to ensure the safety of their staff. This is an especially important consideration for long-lived and potentially dangerous animals, such as elephants. Like sanctuaries, most AZA zoos are non-profit entities, but still have solid business plans to ensure that they are not solely dependent on unpredictable "soft money" donations. It is my

opinion that sanctuaries, which are nearly totally dependent on soft money, should be required to submit pro forma annual operating expenses and projected revenue for the next 5-10 years before receiving any additional elephants.

The sanctuaries in question have their own accrediting body—The Association of Sanctuaries (TAOS). However, a review of the TAOS web site provided no information on the accreditation process or how long accreditation lasts. In addition, no information was available on the specific standards to which each TAOS member is to be measured against.

Do the sanctuaries in question meet AZA standards? The simple fact is that we do not know about the quality of animal care at these facilities because they are not accredited. This brings up a whole series of critical questions:

If additional elephants are added to the sanctuaries, will the facilities have sufficient staff to manage all of the animals appropriately and safely?

Are the keepers well trained and knowledgeable about elephant management? (AZA elephant program managers are required to complete a certified Elephant Management course such as the one offered by the AZA Schools for Zoo and Aquarium Professionals).

Is the veterinary staff experienced with elephants, or with treatments of specific maladies that affect elephants, such as TB?

Are the care programs science-based? (e.g., one sanctuary's veterinary team includes an individual who prescribes "flower essences" and claims to communicate telepathically with animals).

What kinds of on-site veterinary facilities are in place?

Are there procedures to deal with emergencies or natural or human-caused disasters?

Can the elephants perform essential behaviors necessary for proper management?

Is the facility financially stable now and into the future?

These are all examined in great detail during the AZA accreditation process, as they should be at any prospective elephant holding facility. Why are answers to these questions important? There have been numerous cases where USDA licensed facilities, including so-called "sanctuaries", have degraded over time, on some occasions necessitating removal of animals and/or closure of the facility. Many animals have suffered as a result.

## SIMILARITIES

**Animal Management and Care:** Despite claims by activists that sending elephants to sanctuaries is equivalent to "setting them free", these animals are still in captivity and must be managed. Indeed, other than the space issue, I can see little difference in the day-to-day practical challenges facing animal caretakers at sanctuaries and accredited zoos. Animals must be fed and watered, introduced into social groups, trained to perform management-related behaviors, provided shelter, administered veterinary care when they become ill, and perhaps even euthanized when the quality of their life has diminished due to old age or health problems.

Like zoos, sanctuaries must also have holding facilities for the animals so that they can be secured at night, slowly introduced into social groups, separated due to social conflicts or health problems, or be protected from the elements. The Detroit Zoo has cited cold temperatures as a reason not to have elephants at their facility and further suggested that it is not appropriate to keep elephants in cold climates. However, elephants can tolerate some cold — what is important is they have access to heat and shelter when they need it. It should be noted that in Tennessee, Hohenwald Sanctuary's average annual temperature during January and February is in the mid-30s and the average low is in the low-to-mid-20s °F. This is hardly a subtropical climate.

Animal activists claim that AZA accredited zoos are less concerned about animal care and welfare than sanctuaries. This is simply not true. AZA-accredited facilities have invested many millions of dollars into highly trained animal care staff and state-of-the-art veterinary facilities. They pride themselves in offering professional,



Tufani (left) celebrates his first birthday at Disney's Animal Kingdom with his mother, Moyo. © Disney

science-based care for their animals and have become effective advocates for both animal welfare and conservation. One of the sanctuaries lists among its goals the rescue and care of "100 additional elephants." This same facility is now trying to raise enough money to build a barn in which to quarantine 6 additional elephants from the Hawthorne/Cuneo facility, all of which have been exposed to, or have, TB. One wonders if housing "100 additional elephants" is a realistic goal. The facilities, personnel, and annual operating budget needed to manage this number of elephants would be enormous.

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**Keeper and Public Safety:** Sanctuaries and zoos should have the same responsibilities to train their keeper staff and ensure their safety. This is particularly true when dealing with large, potentially dangerous animals, such as elephants. The sanctuaries in question practice some form of both protected and free contact management. This makes it critical that staff have important skills in animal training and keeping and that these skills are constantly updated. It would be interesting to know the keeper to elephant ratio in AZA zoos versus sanctuaries.

AZA zoos have highly trained keeper staff with both academic training and practical experience. In contrast, the two sanctuaries appear to rely heavily on volunteer animal caretakers or interns. This should raise some safety concerns, although at least one sanctuary is very clear that volunteers will have "no contact with the elephants." It is critical that effective safety protocols are developed and enforced at any elephant holding facility. Emergency procedures should also be in place to ensure public safety in case of accidental escape from the primary enclosure. (Disposal of animal waste is also a potential public health issue.) When it comes to keeper and public safety needs, there should be little or no difference in the procedures or requirements of sanctuaries and accredited zoos.

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**Conservation and Education:** Sanctuaries may involve themselves in conservation and educational activities. However, AZA member institutions view conservation and education among the core missions of the profession. Accredited AZA institutions are required to have educational programs that are administered by professional staff. AZA institutions are also asked to show some evidence of their commitment to conservation during their accreditation review. At last count, AZA members had initiated or supported 56 elephant conservation and associated research and education projects, many in range countries. Highly trained scientists employed by zoos are doing some of that work. In addition, AZA institutions play a leadership role in the International Elephant Foundation, which supports numerous elephant research and conservation projects worldwide.

To their credit, one of the sanctuaries (Hohenwald) also appears to provide some financial support for elephant *in situ* conservation, although the extent of that support was not clear from examining their web site. Both zoos and sanctuaries would appear to support educational and conservation goals. However, the collective investment of AZA-accredited zoos in conservation and associated scientific and educational initiatives appears to far surpass that of sanctuaries, and the difference could be exponential.

**Fundraising and Marketing:** In order to provide excellent animal care, any zoological facility—whether a sanctuary or zoo—must have a consistent source of income. Animal care and administrative staff must be paid and facilities must be built and maintained.

Animal activists claim that zoos, even not-for-profit ones, are “exploiting” animals for personal financial gain. Balderdash! Public zoos offer wildlife experiences for a diverse audience, whereas sanctuaries offer exclusive viewing opportunities for those who can afford to pay for it. One sanctuary offers a special guest experience called “Seeing the elephant” for \$750 per person and also operates an online gift shop. The other offers special tours of the facility for “VIP donors”—that is, those that provide \$1,000 or more in financial support. In a sense, the operators of both sanctuaries and zoos charge for admission and live off the revenue generated by visitors who pay to view and make a connection with living wild animals. To assume that one is exploitative and the other altruistic is both misleading and inaccurate.

## CONCLUSIONS

Sanctuaries, like zoos, maintain animals in captivity, experience the same challenges of day-to-day animal management and care, need to engage in intensive fund-raising, and may support education and conservation.

Space seems to be the key difference between the sanctuaries in question and AZA-accredited zoos. How much space do captive elephants need for proper management? Unfortunately, there is little scientific evidence to help guide us in such decisions. Furthermore, it seems as if the media and public have seized on this single factor in their comparisons of sanctuaries and zoos. Chalk that up to good PR.

Zoos may find it difficult to compete with the perception of animals roaming “freely” through hundred-acre enclosures. However, I hope I made it clear that space is not the sole factor when evaluating the quality of an elephant management program. The difference between having four or one hundred acres may not be as critical to elephants as having social companionship, effective environmental enrichment and quality nutrition and veterinary care.

Until sanctuaries open themselves up for detailed peer-evaluation through periodic accreditation there will be no way to verify that their animal care programs, long-term financial stability, staff numbers and expertise, facilities, safety procedures and so forth meet professional standards. Nor will there be any way to ensure that such standards will be maintained over time.

It may be desirable for AZA members to cooperate with qualified sanctuaries. AZA has one accredited member sanctuary now and there could be more in the future. Although many AZA zoos maintain large numbers of geriatric animals and continue to provide them with quality care, it may be advantageous to have a place to send such individuals to live out the remainder of their lives.

The real question is: which elephant sanctuaries meet professional standards of animal management and care? The quality of care in non-AZA accredited facilities varies, sometimes widely. It is not enough for individual facilities to pass USDA inspections or to be “accredited” by TAOS, an organization that may be well intentioned, but currently has no detailed standards or method of enforcing them.

If the sanctuaries in question want to prove the quality and stability of their animal care programs, then I would encourage them to apply for AZA accreditation. Currently, there is no higher standard of professional animal care and these standards can be expected to continually evolve over time. Alternatively, USDA APHIS could adopt AZA’s standards for elephant management and care and apply them to all elephant holding facilities as a condition of licensing. ■