

Doing What's Right For Our Elephants



Emily and Ruth will be the last elephants to reside in New Bedford.

By Keith Lovett, Director of Buttonwood Park Zoo

The Buttonwood Park Zoo's Asian elephant program has made a lot of headlines recently. In an incident this January two keepers failed to properly padlock a door, resulting in Ruth, our 55 year-old elephant, being exposed during a winter storm. Ruth's exposure resulted in hypothermia and frostbite. The good news is Ruth is recovering well and will hopefully suffer no long-term effects.

The incident initiated a community exchange about the future of the elephant program. Unfortunately that exchange has not always been informed by the facts.

First, it is important to appreciate how our two elephants came to reside in New Bedford. Emily arrived as a youngster in 1968 and was kept as a singly-housed elephant for many years. Ruth arrived in 1986 after enduring years of abuse at the hand

of a private owner.

Their treatment here throughout their long lives has been marked by a level of care and compassion that is a real credit to the Zoo and New Bedford as a community.

The fact that both are in reasonably good health at extremely advanced ages, is a testament to the love and attention they have received over the years. That said, the challenges of caring for two geriatric animals are many, so it is all the more important for decisions about their care to be made with care and expertise.

Second, it's important to avoid snap judgments about the zoo keepers whose failure resulted in harm to our beloved Ruth. As someone who works daily with an extremely dedicated staff, I can assure you that those involved were personally devastated by their error. Both keepers have each worked with our elephants for over a decade and have devoted their professional careers to providing loving care to these animals. Both keepers would do anything to rectify their failure. They will live forever with the fact that they failed an animal they loved as much as their own children and they have both received appropriate sanctions for their mistake.

It is unfortunate that the incident has been exploited by animal activists who are demanding the elephants be sent to a sanctuary. These well-organized activists seek to portray Emily and Ruth as objects of neglect and abuse that is simply preposterous.

Meanwhile these groups sweep under the rug disturbing problems with their proposed solution, an elephant sanctuary. It becomes quite obvious that this sanctuary solution is actually no solution at all once one considers the sanctuary's well documented track record: Significant issues with tuberculosis in their elephants, a host of citations by the USDA regarding their veterinary care, and a fluctuating leadership that does

not inspire confidence.

The ironies abound. The activists disparage the Zoo for historically housing our elephants in a concrete-floored barn, but fail to acknowledge that the City replaced the floor over a year ago while the sanctuary still has concrete floors in their barns.

When I took the helm at the Zoo a year ago, the elephant program was foremost in my mind. I set about assessing their overall health, their care, their existing and proposed new facilities, the feasibility of various alternative homes, the impact of physical and emotional stress from relocation, and the dangers their introduction to a new herd might present.

As I worked through these issues, the path forward became much clearer. An upgrade of their housing and a modest expansion of their outdoor space within the Zoo's current perimeter, would not only give Emily and Ruth a home suited to their needs in their remaining years, but would also represent a much safer option than any alternative.

Ultimately, the histories of the two elephants were the decisive factor in our analysis. It is easy for the activists groups to advocate ideal solutions in the abstract, but real solutions have to take account of the personalities and particular social needs of individual animals.

The pairing of our elephants has never been a match made in heaven. It took a major effort to successfully introduce these elephants. Even today they act more like roommates than companions. As result of their upbringings, our elephants are far more interested in the zoo keepers they love than other elephants. It is certainly not what critics want to hear, but the reality is that introduction to a herd, at their advanced ages and with their social preferences now cemented over a lifetime, would not allow them to flourish in a new herd. The inescapable reality is that wild elephants are born into their

herds and normally do not enter them after fifty plus years of life.

Likewise critics have made much of elephants' supposed desire for roaming. In this they miss an obvious factor: Wild elephants roam in search for food, water, and mates. This factor does not apply to our well fed and watered post-reproductive elephants. In fact, for years the Zoo staff has been taking Emily and Ruth on walks around the Park and Zoo only to find Emily and Ruth most interested in being with keepers and returning to their exhibit where they can better enjoy their company.

And while relocations have been performed occasionally with other geriatric elephants, there are open questions about a trip's impact on our elephants' ailing joints and whether they might survive the trip. A long-distance relocation is a gamble, and no one can predict the outcome.

Finally, contrary to critics' contentions, the notion that the Zoo's decision-making is driven by fear of financial losses from an elephant departure could not be further from the truth. The Zoo has a see-through perimeter fence that permits anyone to view most exhibits without paying admission. Anyone who has spent time in Buttonwood Park knows more people enjoy watching from outside in the Park than from inside the Zoo. Moreover, the annual cost of caring for Emily and Ruth far exceeds the revenue from their visitors.

As the person entrusted with responsibility for the Zoo's two most beloved occupants, I have many wishes: I wish I could turn back time and rewrite the formative years of Emily and Ruth so they would develop into better socialized elephants. I wish there was greater public awareness of the genuine love their keepers have for them, and the deep affinity they have for their keepers. Above all I wish Emily and Ruth continue to thrive as conservation ambassadors in their enhanced home at the Zoo.

All I can do is weigh every option about their care and make decisions that best take account of their needs. That is what I have tried to do since day one, and that is what I will continue to do. I recently requested experts from the Association of Zoos and Aquariums visit to evaluate our current and future planned elephant management programs. Efforts like this represent the only approach that truly honors the animals whose lives are entrusted to us: Get the best advice and information we can, remain steadfast in acting in their best interests, and remain wary of quick fixes and easy solutions.

Emily and Ruth will be the last elephants to reside in New Bedford. One of the best ways to honor these magnificent girls is to visit the Zoo and learn more about what you can do to help endangered Asian elephants in the wild so that our children and grandchildren will not live in a world without elephants.
