



From:

Barry Kent MacKay
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Canada

To:

Interim Zoo Director Teri Dressler
Portland Metro Council President Tom Hughes
Portland Metro Council Members
Oregon Zoo
4001 SW Canyon Road
Portland, OR 97221
U.S.A.

Dear Ms. Dressler, Mr Hughes and Metro Councilors,

I live just a few miles from Toronto Zoo, the largest zoo in Canada, owned by the City of Toronto. I am a zoo member and frequent visitor. In fact, some thirty years ago in my capacity as an animal artist (specialty birds) I did some freelance work for the zoo, illustrating their herptiles. I mention these things because I find that when people who represent organizations such as Born Free USA write about concerns about any zoo practices, they are often simply dismissed out-of-hand as anti-zoo, thus making it easy to dismiss their concerns overall.

Some years ago, as you may know, the City of Toronto was faced with a problem. In spite of best efforts by a dedicated staff they had a discouragingly high attrition rate among their Savannah African Elephants at the Toronto Zoo, which is owned by the city, and were down to their last three, one of whom had foot problems, all were female. All were at the maximum age normally reached by zoo elephants. The CAZA normally recommends that elephants, being social, be kept in numbers no fewer

than three. But the city did not wish to spend the money required to upgrade the accommodation, which provided the animals relatively little room, although above CAZA standards. There was little in the way of enrichment, most of the space being dry earth (or mud after rain). And, of course, the local climate is inimical to tropical and subtropical species, such as elephants.

When the city opted to send the elephants to a sanctuary in California, accredited by the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries (GFAS), it caused an enormous controversy. In its way it was not significantly different from a controversy that erupted when a similar plan was made to send an Asian Elephant, Maggie, from Alaska Zoo to the same sanctuary. The arguments included a belief that these elephants would miss their human handlers, would not be able to survive the journey, would be exposed to diseases at the sanctuary and that a facility not accredited by CAZA or AZA was, notwithstanding GFAS accreditation, inappropriate.

I was in the middle of this controversy, and instead of relating the various arguments and counterarguments I'd like to tell you of something that got drowned out, or missed, in the usual media coverage and public commentary at the time: on both "sides" there were moderate, sensible people who only wanted what would work best for the elephants. They were not blinded by ideological views to the pluses and minuses of various options.

In the event, Maggie was moved to the Performing Animal Welfare Society (PAWS) sanctuary in California, where she did very well, indeed. The negative concerns did not significantly materialize, and while one can never judge "what might have been", it seems at least intuitive that the facilities and care standards at PAWS were equal to those of AZA-accredited facilities, while room to roam was far greater. Disease concerns, however valid or otherwise, did not materialize.

Meanwhile, the Calgary Zoo was faced with a similar need to ship Asian Elephants a long distance. The Calgary Zoo opted to send its elephants via truck, using the same method set up to accommodate Toronto's three elephants being sent to California. The distance, from Calgary to the U.S. mid-Atlantic coast, was comparable to the journey from Toronto to California. And yet there was no objection from the zoo community, presumably because the Calgary elephants were sent to an AZA-accredited facility, where, however, they would have far less space than had they gone to PAWS.

To me the greater issue was that of the credibility of the zoo community. There seems to be a fear that if zoos "give in" to outright opponents of zoos on such specifics as the deposition of geriatric (or prematurely geriatric) elephants or on the issue of lethally culling animals surplus to various needs, it will lead to an overall decrease in public and political support for zoos and their capacity to educate the public and provide support for captive breeding and release programs that would otherwise be supported by their detractors. But what is happening is, perhaps ironically, doing exactly that. The argument, for example, that captive breeding and release programs are effective in helping to protect endangered species has been discredited in many instances. Elephants are a prime example of a species not threatened in any way by natural attrition in the wild or an inability to breed; and whenever protected from poaching, unregulated hunting and habitat degradation, they thrive in the wild. Sufficient information is available to the general public, media and legislators to conclude that captive breeding and release won't save the elephants and that zoos populations are not self-sustaining.

There are other options, including the establishment of the zoo's own sanctuary, modeled on GFAS standards, and indeed, I see no reason why the zoo community and GFAS can't work together. Certainly PAWS has worked closely with other zoos in ultimately providing what we all want, which is that which is best for the elephants and other animals.

Packy is, I quite understand, a local luminary, much beloved by the good people of Portland, and surely deserving of a retirement that celebrates his long contribution to the city. Such a positive move, perhaps in conjunction with some sort of anti-poaching, anti-ivory campaign that helps "on the ground" in Africa or Asia would be a positive development for all involved, starting with Packy, himself.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Barry Kent MacKay". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the typed name.

Barry Kent MacKay
Senior Program Associate; Canadian Representative
Born Free USA.