

Chendra & Zoo Reforms

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Executive Summary

Oregon Zoo is in serious need of reforms. Elephants at the zoo are dying—four in just five years—at a rate unheard of in their natural settings, despite the expensive taxpayer-funded “Elephant Lands” renovations. Nonetheless, the zoo continues its reckless breeding program with no scientific oversight and deliberate lack of transparency. Chendra, a Borneo elephant at the zoo, embodies the urgent need for reforms: she recently suffered a tragic miscarriage due to unnatural breeding, was treated for a tuberculosis (TB) infection, and continues to suffer from a host of zoonotic health conditions.

Four reform areas are recommended to improve the quality of life for the animals, and to better align the zoo’s operations with its mission of conservation, namely—considering a zero-cost proposal from Elephant Refuge North America (ERNA) to retire Chendra there, prioritizing native species, instituting greater transparency & following scientific conservation practices.

Issues

Diseases

- Oregon Zoo lacks the capacity to prevent and control the spread of disease. Three elephants (Rama, Tusko and Packy) who contracted TB died in three years. Two other elephants, Shine (in 2017) and Chendra (in 2019) have also tested positive for TB.
- Lily, died in 2018 of herpes at the tender age of six, another disease prevalent among captive-born Asian elephants [5].

Breeding

- Chendra, a Borneo Pygmy Elephant (*Elephas maximus borneensis*) was mated with two much larger Asian bull Elephants (*Elephas maximus*) Samson & Samudra, resulting in a pregnancy. DNA analyses [1] indicate Borneo elephants are distinct from other Asian elephants. The peer-reviewed study further concludes that “*The genetic divergence of Borneo elephants warrants their recognition as a separate evolutionary significant unit. Thus, interbreeding Borneo elephants with those from other populations would be contraindicated in ex situ conservation.*” Predictably, Chendra suffered a tragic miscarriage, a loss which is devastating physically and emotionally.
- Chendra’s failed pregnancy is just one of a long history of the zoo’s unethical and unscientific breeding program. Packy was even bred with his sisters Hanako & Me-Tu [2]. Four in-bred elephants were born, and all four met with premature deaths [3].
- The Zoo’s breeding record is extremely poor. Only 5 out of 28 elephants born in the zoo have survived [4]. Nonetheless, the pressure to breed has not let up.

Importation

- Chendra, the only Borneo Pygmy elephant in North America, was brought all the way from Malaysia. Such elephant importations from range countries often come with a heavy price, as explored in a recent exposé [10].

Transparency

- The Zoo's record of transparency has also been poor. News around the spread of TB, a highly contagious disease and public health concern, was kept from the public for three years [6]. It took a lawsuit for this information to finally be disclosed to the public.
- Attempts to access zoo records are met with artificially inflated estimates [7] which stymies any independent public oversight of zoo operations.
- The Zoo also initially kept hidden from the public the fact that Lily's legal owner was a circus company, after her birth. Only after an exposé from Seattle Times [8] did the Oregon Zoo Foundation scramble to buy her from the circus company.
- Rose-Tu, a female elephant who still resides at the zoo, was assaulted by a zookeeper using a bullhook, sticking it into the then-five-year old's anus and pulling hard down on it, resulting in 176 lacerations [14]. Although the Zoo claims to no longer use bullhooks, keepers are routinely observed using a similar instrument to make the elephants perform tricks for visitors.

Conservation

- Despite claiming conservation as key to their mission, the zoo spends only a fraction of their overall budget on *ex situ* elephant conservation. Several revenue-generating operations such as "Zoo Concerts," "Zoo Lights" and "Animal Encounters" which contravene true conservation goals end up compromising animal welfare.
- Scientists have debunked the zoo industry's unfounded claim linking zoo attendance with awareness of conservation among public [9].

Chendra

Chendra (pictured) embodies the result of the zoo's failures. A Borneo Pygmy elephant *imported* from her native tropical forests of Malaysia, she was *mated* with much-larger Asian elephants—against scientific principles [1]—resulting in a tragic miscarriage; she got *infected with* TB from other elephants at the zoo; she demonstrates *advanced stereotypic* behaviors such as walking in circles [11]

and repetitive pacing [12] and suffers from a host of *health issues* ([example vet record](#)). In the process of becoming captive, Chendra suffered a series of severe traumas: loss of her mother and family, the grueling experience of transportation, being forced to live among strangers in a harsh and unnatural environment, and being subjected to forced breeding. [Dr. Gay Bradshaw](#), a noted animal trauma researcher [13] recently observed Chendra and found her to exhibit symptoms of and conform to a diagnosis of Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD), a condition common to human prisoners and survivors of torture. Moved by her conditions, ERNA (Elephant



Refuge North America) offered her a retirement home in their lush 850-acre sanctuary at no cost to the zoo or Portland taxpayer, however the zoo is refusing to even consider the offer. Unfortunately, our petitions to Metro requesting to assess this proposal are also being ignored. This does a disservice to both Chendra and the Portland taxpayers in not adequately exploring a potential opportunity to improve animal welfare and to conserve public funds at the same time. We at FOZE request a transparent assessment of this opportunity, either by Metro staff or by a third party. We are very concerned that Chendra's fate is mirroring that of Packy before his death, when the zoo was adamantly refusing to acknowledge his health deterioration, fearing public calls to retire him.

Recommendations

- **Retire Chendra:** Perform an independent, comprehensive evaluation in response to ERNA's proposal to retire Chendra at no cost to the zoo or Metro.
- **Prioritization of native species:** The Zoo should pledge to not accept elephants (ideally, any non-native species) from outside the country since it provides no ex-situ conservation value. Zoo activities should be aligned towards ex-situ conservation of the rich local fauna of the Pacific Northwest deserving our attention and related education, rather than focusing on maintaining exotic and expensive exhibits.
- **Better transparency:** Proactive and periodic sharing of veterinary records and considering installing after-hours elephant webcams.
- **Scientific conservation:** A moratorium on elephant breeding until an independent expert committee of qualified wildlife veterinarians are able to assess the situation at the zoo and provide a public report on this topic. The Zoo's AZA membership only certifies that it meets the minimum industry standards, and not what is excellence in animal care.

FOZE requests a public hearing to have Metro consult with independent experts on instituting these reforms. Elephants are intelligent, sensitive creatures whose intellectual capabilities are yet to be fully understood, and they deserve much better than what the zoo can provide.

References

- [1] Fernando P, et al. (2003) DNA Analysis Indicates That Asian Elephants Are Native to Borneo and Are Therefore a High Priority for Conservation. PLoS Biol. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pbio.0000006>
- [2] [Packy timeline: A look at Oregon Zoo elephant's life](#), The Oregonian.
- [3] AZA, Asian Elephant - North American Regional Studbook, 2007-2010.
- [4] FOZE, "[Forgotten Zoo Elephants](#)", 2020.
- [5] [EEHV - Elephant endotheliotropic herpes virus](#)
- [6] [Elephants infected seven Oregon zoo workers with tuberculosis -CDC](#), Reuters.
- [7] Northwest Examiner, May 2015 issue.
- [8] [Baby elephant at Oregon Zoo won't go to traveling show](#), Seattle Times.
- [9] Marino, L., Lillienfeld, S. O., Malamud, R., Nobis, N., & Broglio, R. (2010). Do zoos and aquariums promote attitude change in visitors? A critical evaluation of the American zoo and aquarium study. *Society & Animals*, 18(2), 126-138.
- [10] [Zoos Called It a 'Rescue.' But Are the Elephants Really Better Off? \(Published 2019\)](#), NY Times.
- [11] Chendra walking in circles <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LjNjxLLP9eI>
- [12] Chendra doing repetitive pacing <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aa8myuUdzyw>
- [13] Bradshaw, G. A.. *Elephants on the Edge: What Animals Teach Us about Humanity* (p. 196).
- [14] [The lesson of Rose-Tu and her calf](#)