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SOLUTIONS FOR ELY THE AFRICAN ELEPHANT AT THE SAN JUAN DE ARAGON ZOO

The Pro Elephant Network (PREN)¹ consists of an international community of diverse individuals and organizations, comprising specific expertise from both western and eastern academies on wild and captive elephants, including the fields of science, health, conservation, elephant welfare, economics, community leadership, social justice and the law.

Members of PREN have contributed in recent years to extensive research and to the recognition of who elephants are and of their individual needs². There is growing evidence that, of all animals, elephants are among those who suffer the most in captivity³. In fact, results have shown that despite consistent efforts in providing enrichment at the zoo, the needs of elephants are still compromised⁴. Not only are captive elephants likely to acquire physical ailments that invariably shorten their lifespan⁵, they are also prone to developing psychological issues that can render depression⁶, stereotypy⁷ and self-harm⁸.

PREN Members have been made aware of the conditions and behaviour of Ely, the forty-one year old African Elephant, currently living in the San Juan de Aragon Zoo and are offering to assist by proposing alternatives and practical solutions for the improvement of her life and a sustainable way forward.

¹ www.proelephantnetwork.org

² Naoko Irie et al, 2009. Elephant psychology: What we know and what we would like to know

³ Professor Lori Marino 2021 [Big Brains in Small Spaces – the Impact of Confinement on the Brains of Cetaceans and Elephants - Bing video](#)

⁴ Clubb R., Rowcliffe M., Lee P., Mar K.U., Moss C. & Mason G.J. 2008. Compromised survivorship in zoo elephants. *Science*, 322:1649.

⁵ Wiese & Willis 2004 Calculation of longevity and life expectancy in captive elephants

⁶ Bradshaw et al, 2005. Elephant Breakdown; Bell Rizzolo J. et al, 20016. Prevalence and Patterns of Complex PTSD in Asian Elephants (*Elephas maximus*)

⁷ Mason G. J. 1991. Stereotypies: a critical review. *Animal Behaviour*, 41:1015-1037.; Kurt F & Garai M. 2001. Stereotypies in captive Asian elephants- a symptom of social isolation. *Scientific Progress Reports in: A Research Update of Elephants and Rhinos*. Proceedings of the International Elephant and Rhino Research Symposium, Vienna June 7-11,2001. pp.57-63.

⁸ David M. Peña-Guzmán, 2017. Can nonhuman animals commit suicide? *Humanities and Liberal Studies* San Francisco State University



All elephants live highly complex social and emotional lives and need physical contact and bonding with other conspecifics and suffer tremendously when forced in solitude⁹.

In addition, they crave space and movement¹⁰. They evolved to cover long distances while feeding on a rich variety of vegetation across different ecosystems. In the wild they walk an average of 10 kilometres, and sometimes as many as 50km, every day, with home ranges covering hundreds of square kilometres¹¹. When elephants' movements are restricted in a captive environment, they develop potentially fatal conditions of their bones, joints and cardiovascular systems¹². Elephants' vital endeavours include mud wallowing, bathing, interacting with their companions through touch, vocalisation and olfaction and countless other social behaviours¹³. Given their complex brain, suite of emotional responses and physical expressiveness in a socially embedded life-style, it should not come as a surprise that the denial of any of these conditions through their captivity in undersized enclosures with inappropriate hard substrates and lack of enrichment, results in physical and psychological trauma and abnormal behaviour¹⁴.

Stereotypy, that invariant restrictive and apparently purposeless repetition of motor patterns, is commonly seen in captive elephants and indeed many captive animals held in impoverished environments. Exposure to psychological stress, which may be caused by close confinement and solitary living, has direct physiological consequences that impact the body's ability to function¹⁵.

For these reasons, a total of 70 elephant exhibits have been closed or converted globally¹⁶. Zoos around the world (in Argentina¹⁷, Chile¹⁸, Alaska¹⁹, Pakistan²⁰, etc.) have in recent times recognised that, despite their best efforts, they have been unable to meet the needs of their elephants; they have decided to prioritise the welfare needs of elephants and have agreed to translocate them to more suitable environments where the elephant can enjoy more physical and psychological comfort.

At the same time, an increasing number of institutions across the world are the subject of legal challenges over their keeping of elephants²¹.

⁹ Lindsay K, 2017. Solitary Elephants in Japan [EIJ_Final_report_ENG_web.pdf \(elephantsinjapan.com\)](#)

¹⁰ Poole J & Granli P. 2009. Mind and movement: Meeting the interests of elephants. In: Forthman DL, Kane LF & Waldau PF (Eds.) *An Elephant in the Room: The Science and Well-being of Elephants in Captivity*. Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine's Center for Animals and Public Policy, Tufts University, pp.2-21.

¹¹ Sukumar R. 2003. *The Living Elephants. Evolutionary Ecology, Behavior and Conservation*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

¹² Lewis KD, Shepherdson DJ, Owens T & Keele M. 2009. A survey of elephant husbandry and foot health in North American zoos. *Zoo Biology*, 29(2):221-36.

¹³ Marino L. 2013. Humans, dolphins, and moral inclusivity. In: R. Corbey & A. Lanjouw (eds.), *The politics of species: Reshaping our relationships with other animals*. Cambridge University Press, pp.95-105.; Bradshaw GA & Schore AN. 2007. How elephants are opening doors: Developmental neuroethology, attachment and social context. *Ethology*, 113(5), 426-436.; Derham T & Mathews, F. 2020. Elephants as refugees. *People and Nature*, 2:103-110.

¹⁴ Rizzolo JB & Bradshaw GA. 2016. Prevalence and patterns of complex PTSD in Asian elephants (*Elephas maximus*). Proceedings of Asian elephants in culture and nature. *International Conference on Asian Elephants in Culture & Nature*, Sri Lanka. pp.291-297.

¹⁵ Romero LM. 2004. Physiological stress in ecology: lessons from biomedical research. *TRENDS in Ecology and Evolution*, 19(5):249-255.; Bondi CO, Rodriguez G, Gould GG, Frazer A & Morilak DA. 2008. Chronic unpredictable stress induces a cognitive deficit and anxiety-like behavior in rats that is prevented by chronic antidepressant drug treatment. *Neuropsychopharmacology*, 33:320-331.

¹⁶ Garai M. 2019. *Ibid*.

¹⁷ [How to Move Your Elephant During a Pandemic - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#)

¹⁸ [Last Performing Circus Elephant of Chile is Rescued and Moved to New Sanctuary to Live Out Her Golden Years \(goodnewsnetwork.org\)](#)

¹⁹ [Alaska's only elephant heads to California \(nbcnews.com\)](#)

²⁰ [Pakistan to relocate lonely elephant to Cambodia sanctuary, South Asia News & Top Stories - The Straits Times](#)

²¹ NhRP. 2020. [Islamabad High Court Recognizes the Rights of Nonhuman Animals. Non-human Rights Project, May 21 2020. https://www.nonhumanrights.org/media-center/media-release-5-21-20-islamabad-high-court-recognizes-animal-rights/](#)





PREN elephant experts urge that in order to prevent Ely's unnecessary premature death, an urgent medical assessment and intervention is required. Members of the Pro Elephant Network are willing to offer their expertise. The implementation of high-priority measures is needed to alleviate Ely's obvious suffering.

Members of the Pro Elephant Network and other wildlife organizations have participated in the successful relocation and reintegration of elephants, particularly solitary ones, into natural environments²² and to global sanctuaries. Elephant sanctuaries have sprung up around the world from Tennessee²³ to Brazil²⁴ to Cambodia²⁵ and California²⁶.

The release of Kaavan from the Islamabad zoo to a wildlife sanctuary in Cambodia made global news²⁷ and the international publicity positively highlighted the administrators of the zoo in question.

PREN members know that the Mexico government would receive international recognition if the zoo administrators were to engage with our elephant specialists in order to find the best solution for Ely and to commit to ending the captivity of elephants at the San Juan de Aragon zoo.

It also came to the attention of our Members that the Head of Government would positively accept Ely to be evaluated by external national and international experts. PREN members hereby extend our collaborative offer to the administrators of the San Juan de Aragon Zoo, we remain available for further engagement and support.

Please accept, the assurances of our highest consideration, your feedback is greatly appreciated.

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Stefania Falcon', with a checkmark at the end.

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SIGNING MEMBERS OF PREN:

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²² Liv Baker et al, 2020. Asian elephant rescue, rehabilitation and rewilding

²³ [The Elephant Sanctuary in Tennessee](#)

²⁴ [Global Sanctuary for Elephants - Elephant Sanctuary Brazil \(globalelephants.org\)](#)

²⁵ [Elephant Valley Project \(EVP\) - Elephant Sanctuary, Mondulkiri Cambodia](#)

²⁶ [Performing Animal Welfare Society -- PAWS \(pawsweb.org\)](#)

²⁷ [Cher rescued an elephant then sang him 'My Way' - CNN](#)



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