



April 21, 2025

Honorable Los Angeles City Council
c/o City Clerk, Room 395, City Hall
Los Angeles, CA 90012

"Creating a just and sustainable world where people and wildlife thrive, together."

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ZOO DEPARTMENT REPORT BACK RELATIVE TO ELEPHANT PROGRAM – MOTION (BLUMENFIELD-HERNANDEZ) C.F. 24-0209

On May 15, 2024, the City Council adopted a Motion (Blumenfield-Hernandez) related to the Zoo's Elephant Program. Specifically, the Zoo Department was directed to report within 30 days:

1. On the cause of death for both Asian elephants in their care, Jewel and Shaunzi; and
2. On current Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) standards for elephant management and care, the Zoo's current compliance or noncompliance with the standards, and any requested variances by the Zoo to meet these standards.

As zoo management professionals and as experts in animal care and animal health, we understand and uphold our responsibility to the City of Los Angeles and the communities we serve to provide the highest standard of care to our charges, with ethics and animal welfare driving every decision made for the animals. Life's beginning and ending are always going to be a part of this type of work. Every death is devastating to those who work with the animals, and it is one of the most difficult parts of the profession. No one working at the Los Angeles Zoo takes their role for granted, and all understand the privilege and responsibility that comes with caring for animals.

When a zoo animal dies, a necropsy is performed in order to gain perspective and answer questions about an individual case. Necropsies also provide information that enables Zoo staff to continuously improve the collective understanding of animal health and wellbeing, and to continue learning to ensure the best possible care for our animals in the future.

Both of these elephants came to the Los Angeles Zoo, in 2010 and 2017 respectively, as geriatric elephants that had lived well into their forties before their arrival. Both arrived in L.A. with chronic medical conditions for which



medical and palliative care was provided using approaches appropriate for their age and individual medical histories.

The Zoo hopes that by sharing this report, those who might have questions about our professionalism, expertise, and dedication can gain a better understanding of the extent to which we cared for these elephants, as well as the compassion that brought us to make the difficult decision to humanely euthanize Jewel and Shaunzi.

Elephant Deaths

Jewel

Jewel was a 61-year-old female Asian elephant. Jewel and her companion, Tina, spent decades in the circus and entertainment-performing environment. In 2006, they were sold to a private owner and in 2009, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) removed the pair from the care of the owner for alleged mistreatment and substandard veterinary care. They were transported to the San Diego Zoo for recovery and rehabilitation. They came to the Los Angeles Zoo in 2010, at which time Jewel was 48 years old and Tina was 44 years old.

During the 12 years that Jewel lived at the Zoo, she lived with Tina at the Elephants of Asia exhibit. She received appropriate, consistent care, and she also had the opportunity to develop bonds created through successful introductions with male bull Asian elephant Billy and female Asian elephant Shaunzi. Jewel's longevity is a testament to the high quality care and welfare AZA accredited zoos provide to animals of all ages throughout the entirety of their lives.

On January 19, 2023, the consensus decision was made to sedate and humanely euthanize Jewel. The difficult decision came after five days of Jewel progressively refusing food and water, and not defecating. She was under intensive treatment and supportive care to alleviate her discomfort. At the time of her death, Jewel was the second oldest female elephant in the AZA Asian elephant population.

Jewel's cause of death was euthanasia, decided by consensus as the most humane option given her acute and quickly declining medical condition. The necropsy confirmed a very large, impacted fecal bolus in the colon that pathologists verbally confirmed would not have been able to pass through the rest of the gastrointestinal tract.

At the time of her death, Jewel was on her last set of molar teeth. Asian elephants have six sets of molars that grow in sequentially, newer teeth replacing older ones as they fall out. Once the sixth set is in place, these remaining teeth are gradually worn down and their food grinding ability is reduced. As a result, food items such as browse or hay may not be

completely masticated which can predispose to complications such as gastrointestinal impaction as seen in Jewel's case. Jewel's necropsy results confirmed that her molars were overall in an advanced state of wear.

Shaunzi

Shaunzi was a 53-year-old female Asian elephant. Shaunzi was born in Thailand and spent much of her youth in a circus environment. She arrived at the Fresno Chaffee Zoo in 1983 and came to the Los Angeles Zoo in 2017 at the age of 46.

During the more than six years that Shaunzi lived at the L.A. Zoo, she lived at the Elephants of Asia exhibit, receiving appropriate, consistent care and the opportunity to socialize through successful introductions with male bull Asian elephant Billy and female Asian elephants Tina and Jewel.

On January 2, 2024, Shaunzi was observed by Zoo staff downed in her habitat late in the evening and unable to stand up. Animal care, veterinary, and support staff responded quickly and worked through the night in an extraordinary effort to help her get up. Despite the use of all resources and personnel available, the tremendous attempts were ultimately unsuccessful. Because of her inability to right herself with supportive efforts, and the prognosis resulting from the life-threatening physiological stresses on the cardiovascular, pulmonary, and respiratory systems that a large animal experiences after being down for an extended period of time, the difficult consensus decision was made to sedate and humanely euthanize her.

Shaunzi's cause of death was euthanasia, decided by consensus as the most humane option given her inability to right herself and the resulting negative prognosis. The necropsy, received May 1, 2024, confirmed geriatric conditions including severe chronic degenerative joint disease, affecting multiple joints, which was suspected since her arrival at the Zoo in 2017, and other less serious age-related issues including natural dental wear, benign abdominal lipomas, and myocardial fibrosis. Shaunzi had been receiving medical and palliative care prior to her death for reduced mobility issues, presumed to be age related, and the necropsy confirmed the severity of the joint disease that was likely a factor in her inability to stand up after going down.

Elephant Life Expectancy

The median life expectancy for Asian elephants is 47.8 years old (May 2024 – AZA). Like humans, there are instances where individuals can be considerably longer lived than the median, but those occurrences are not common. Both Jewel and Shaunzi were both within approximately one year on either side of the median life expectancy, 48 and 46 respectively, at the time they first arrived at the Los Angeles Zoo in 2010 and 2017, respectively.

AZA Accreditation Standards for Elephant Age and Sex Structure of Social Groups

Since 1979, the Los Angeles Zoo has been accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums and abides by all of its accreditation standards that range from animal wellbeing and veterinary care, to safety and security, education, conservation, financial stability and governance. There are also accreditation standards related to elephant care and management. The loss of Shaunzi created a situation in which a variance to section E.2.2.1.1 was needed in order to remain in compliance with the standard. With the receipt of the allowable variance, the Zoo remains in full compliance with the AZA Accreditation Standards including the standards for elephant care.

Standard E.2.2.1.1: Each zoo with elephants must have a minimum of three females (or the space to have three females), two males or three elephants of mixed gender.

If a zoo does not meet the social requirements, they must apply for a variance to the AZA Accreditation Commission and must describe their plan for a) obtaining additional elephants; or b) de-acquisitioning their elephants, and c) what will occur if they experience the loss of one elephant.

Variance

The Zoo received a variance from the AZA Accreditation Commission through July 1, 2025 providing time for the Zoo to evaluate all of its options for the future of its elephant program.

Los Angeles Zoo Elephant Program

During this time, the Zoo has fully evaluated its situation and all available options and has done so in consultation with the AZA Elephant Taxon Advisory Group (TAG) and Species Survival Plan (SSP).

An AZA SSP is a cooperatively managed program that strives to manage an ex situ species population with the interest and cooperation of AZA-accredited facilities. SSPs are led by expert advisors who cooperatively work together to maximize genetic diversity, appropriately manage the demographic distribution and long-term sustainability of Animal Programs within AZA member institutions. Each SSP Program manages the breeding of a select species or sub-species by collaborating with the AZA Population Management Center (PMC), Reproductive Management Center (RMC), Program Leaders, and Institutional Representatives (IRs) from each participating institution to develop an SSP Breeding and Transfer Plan. These Plans are designed to maintain a healthy, genetically diverse and demographically stable population for the long-term future.

TAGs are composed of expert advisors who help to identify, manage and support AZA's cooperative animal management programs. TAGs develop Regional Collection Plans (RCPs) that recommend taxa for cooperative management among AZA member institutions, AZA-accredited institutions, Conservation Partners, and Certified Related Facilities (CRFs), recommend Animal Program management designations, and identify Animal Program goals and essential actions. TAGs also serve as AZA experts regarding the husbandry, veterinary care, conservation needs/challenges, research priorities, ethical considerations, and other issues applicable to their taxa.

The Zoo has two remaining elephants, one male owned by the Los Angeles Zoo (Billy - 40), and one female owned by the San Diego Zoo (Tina - 59). The highest priority in considering the Zoo's options is in the context of their health and wellbeing. Included in this evaluation is the opportunity to be part of a social herd structure; the ability to remain together; assurance that they receive the exceptional care afforded by an AZA-accredited institution; live in an environment where they can continue to thrive; and support the AZA's Asian elephant SSP. This evaluation and consultation has concluded and the Zoo has made the decision to move Billy and Tina to another AZA-accredited institution and pause its elephant program for the immediate future.

For the Los Angeles Zoo to consider the continuation of its elephant program, it would be necessary to bring in additional elephants on the recommendation of the SSP. Creating a larger social herd at the L.A. Zoo is currently not a viable option due to the limited availability of Asian elephants within the AZA population. AZA's ongoing effort to facilitate sustainable breeding programs and build self-sustaining multi-generational herds is another important factor in the decision to move the Zoo's two remaining elephants. Moving them to another AZA-accredited zoo with an excellent elephant program will allow them the opportunity to be part of a social herd structure, receive exceptional care, and remain together.

The recommendation from the Elephant TAG/SSP is to move the Zoo's two remaining elephants, Billy and Tina, to the Tulsa Zoo where they have recently expanded their elephant program and facilities. The new construction includes a complete revisioning of the now 17-acre elephant complex that includes a massive 36,650-sqft state-of-the-art elephant barn and incorporates a 10-plus acre wooded elephant preserve. In addition to the SSP recommendation, the Zoo has taken into consideration the exceptional caliber of the Tulsa Zoo's elephant program including the modern exhibit, two barns, the expansive space of the new preserve, and the expertise of the staff.

About Billy

Billy is a 40-year-old male Asian elephant. He came to the Los Angeles Zoo as a four-year-old calf from peninsular Malaysia in 1989. At the time, the Government of Malaysia was capturing and relocating wild elephants that were causing extensive damage to palm oil and rubber plantations due to their habitat being severely fragmented by agricultural activities. Many of the elephants that were relocated were sent to other tracts of habitat, but because of space limitations in suitable habitat, many of the young elephants were sent to zoos in order to spare them from being culled along with herds of elephants that had been identified as problematic. Billy was one of the young animals that was rescued and he was sent to the Los Angeles Zoo to safely live his life.

Billy's story is one that exemplifies the need for conservation of nature, and places emphasis on the importance of human-wildlife coexistence. He has been an excellent ambassador for his species and has helped teach millions of zoo visitors about the threats that endangered wild Asian elephants face including poaching, habitat fragmentation and loss, and other human activities.

About Tina

Tina is a 59-year-old female Asian elephant owned by the San Diego Zoo. She came to the Los Angeles Zoo from San Diego in 2010 at approximately 44 years of age along with her companion, Jewel.

The two elephants spent thirty years together in private ownership before being confiscated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and transported to the San Diego Zoo for recovery and rehabilitation.

Tina lived with Jewel, Shaunzi, and Billy at the Elephants of Asia habitat at the Los Angeles Zoo where she was the dominant female of the herd. As an older elephant, she receives appropriate geriatric care that includes special attention to her feet and joints which can become issues as elephants age.

Like Billy, Tina is an excellent ambassador for her species. She has helped to shed light on the issues that endangered Asian elephants face in the wild and helped teach visitors about her species.

AZA Accreditation Standards Governing Animal Related Decisions

AZA standards relevant to the decision making process are listed here for informational purposes. As described in standard 1.8.1 (below), failure to comply with SSP recommendations without reason could result in loss of AZA accreditation.

Standard 6.1. *The governing authority must be supportive of the institution abiding by the AZA Accreditation Standards, Code of Professional Ethics, and Bylaws.*

Standard 6.3. *The governing authority has the responsibility for policy matters and oversight of the institution. The CEO/Director must be responsible for the day-to-day management of the institution, including animal acquisition, transfer, welfare, euthanasia, and reintroduction, paid and unpaid staff, and programs.*

Standard 6.4. *While the governing authority may have input, the decisions regarding the institution's animals must be made by the professionals who are specifically trained to handle the institution's animals, staff (paid and unpaid), and programs.*

Standard 1.8.1. *The institution must fully participate, as defined in the Facility Engagement in Animal Programs Policy, in every SSP that pertains to an animal within their collection, and must follow agreed upon SSP breeding and transfer recommendations.*

Compliance with AZA Accreditation Standards

The Los Angeles Zoo remains in full compliance with all AZA accreditation standards and is in good standing with all other licensing authorities including the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. When an institution applies for and receives accreditation from the AZA, that institution agrees to comply with animal programs policy, including Species Survival Programs breeding and transfer recommendations. A refusal to do so puts the institution in non-compliance with accreditation standards and accreditation could be revoked.

When an accredited zoo loses standing with AZA, it no longer has access to, and cannot participate in, AZA administered animal programs including but not limited to conservation programs, breeding programs, professional development opportunities for staff, and a nation-wide resource for collaboration, problem solving, research and science. Opportunities to apply for certain grant funds and other financial opportunities available only to AZA-accredited institutions would also be forfeited. Animals on loan at the Los Angeles Zoo that are owned by other zoos are subject to recall or transfer to another institution. The Zoo's participation in collaborative conservation programs and wildlife rescue programs would be limited or canceled. The Zoo's ability to acquire animals for exhibits through AZA cooperative animal management programs would also be eliminated. AZA accreditation is considered as the standard of excellence in the zoo and aquarium profession. Of the approximately 2,800 animal exhibitors licensed by the USDA across the country, less than 10% are AZA-accredited.

Conclusion

The move of Billy and Tina from the Los Angeles Zoo will result in no elephants being a part of the Zoo for the first time since opening in the Griffith Park location in 1966. The significance of this moment is not lost on the Zoo, but is a decision that was made after considering all viable options and rightfully prioritizes the care and welfare of Billy and Tina. The Zoo will be evaluating the Elephants of Asia exhibit for other suitable species and programming.

RECOMMENDATION

That the City Council note and file this report as it is provided for informational purposes.

FISCAL IMPACT STATEMENT

There is no impact on the General Fund.

Respectfully Submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Denise Verret". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Denise M. Verret, General Manager
Zoo Department

cc: Jacqueline Hamilton, Office of the Mayor
Board of Zoo Commissioners

DMV/cf