

Communication from Public

Name: Lorena
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Comments for Public Posting: Save Billy! file:///var/mobile/Library/SMS/Attachments/64/04/2BB67406-E981-4ABC-A7F0-38D69E9BA629/051425_TestimonySaveBillyTina1b.pdf

Communication from Public

Name: Wendy Pfeifle

Date Submitted: 05/14/2025 07:53 PM

Council File No: 25-0600

Comments for Public Posting: Re: Zoo department and Billy & Tina, the elephants See my full testimony attached. * Send Billy & Tina to an accredited sanctuary. * Require Director Verret to submit \$80,000 transportation cost to send elephants to Tulsa Zoo for review with the Budget Committee. * Find alternate costs (including private funding) to send elephants instead to sanctuary. * Request Zoo Department Audit.

Dear Honorable Council Members,

Watch [Free Billy \(trailer\)](#) Pictures speak 1000 words.

LA Times Magazine: [The Ongoing Saga of Billy the Elephant](#) about the history of LA Zoo (please read entirely).

“Los Angeles Zoo currently stands as one of the most divisive institutions in the city, raising questions...” says LA Times.¹ In Defense of Animals IDS ranked LA Zoo the “worst zoo in North America for elephants in 2023 due to its treatment of Billy the elephant.”²

The key person in charge for last 25 years is Denise Verret, who served as deputy director, interim director, director & CEO commencing in the year 2000. Abuse of Billy has been ongoing for 36 years (since 1989). For 25 years, Verret has been in charge.

Billy was forced into invasive procedures by LA Zoo and AZA to artificially collect semen⁸ from 2011-2014. He was a virgin. **A human inserts his arm into the elephant’s anus to manually stimulate ejaculation.**^{3 8} Billy underwent what the zoo termed “training” for the semen collection process at least 55 times from June 20, 2011, to November 14, 2014.⁴ **He was completely isolated as the only elephant at the zoo for 21 years (1989-2010).** With 3 females added: two in 2010 and one in 2017, he was continuously isolated in his 1-acre encampment separated from the herd. He was anally raped by his caretakers and isolated in his 1-acre encampment with limited elephant socialization for comfort or companionship.

IMPORTANT:

Will artificial semen collection continue if Billy goes to an AZA zoo or AZA sanctuary?

This artificial semen collection procedure was started and directed by Associations of Zoos and Aquariums.⁸ AZA Standards for Elephant Management and Care **3.2.8.**⁵ states “All elephants must be **trained** to accept regular collection of blood, urine, feces, saliva, semen...” (Adopted 3/21/01, Updated 3/5/03).

PLEASE CONFIRM:

Re: artificial semen collection: **“The most recent AZA Asian Elephant Population Analysis and Breeding & Transfer Plan recommends that Billy continue to be used for breeding purposes.”**³

“Billy has never sired any offspring.”

¹ LA Magazine 2/2/24: Elephant Deaths at L.A. Zoo Renew Calls for Gentle Giants to Be Moved to Larger Sanctuaries. By Julius Miller <https://lamag.com/news/elephants-deaths-los-angeles-zoo-captivity-sanctuary>

² The Sun San Fernando Valley 1/17/24: LA Zoo Takes Top Spot in List of Worst Zoos in North America for Elephants in 2023. By Gabriel Arizon <https://sanfernandosun.com/2024/01/17/la-zoo-takes-top-spot-in-list-of-worst-zoos-in-north-america-for-elephants-in-2023/>

³ Free To Be Elephants Billy | 40 years old | Los Angeles Zoo <https://freetobeelephants.com/elephant/billy-2/>

⁴ In Defense of Animals 12/16/16: Los Angeles Zoo: Release Billy to Sanctuary!
Caroline Saxon <https://www.idausa.org/los-angeles-zoo-release-billy-sanctuary/>

⁵ AZA Standards for Elephant Management and Care (Adopted 2001, Updated 2003)
<https://www.elephants.com/pdf/AZA%20Elephant%20Standards%201.pdf>

- Demand for the resignation of Director & CEO of Los Angeles Zoo, Denise Verret until she agrees to a department audit and shows total transparency on the abuse of the elephants during her terms as Deputy Director, Interim Director, Chief Executive Officer and Director from 2000 to present.
- Hire independent counsel for performance and facilities audit. Audit will no doubt reveal compliance failure to AZA Standards for Elephant Management and Care.
- Review prior audit requested by City Council May 2024 of euthanasia of Jewel and Shaunzi, with elimination of half the herd. Report includes care instructions for last two elephants, Billy and Tina. Was care outlined in the audit upheld as being compliant? And compliance with AZA standards of elephant care? Does Billy and Tina exhibit the same health deteriorations as Jewel and Shaunzi? Has further deterioration in health been observed after the death of herd members? Due to lack of care? The zoochotic behavior of Billy has been video recorded as far back as 2007. What was done to help him cope or just years of ignoring?
- If any harm comes to Billy and Tina from this point forward in LA Zoo's custody under Director Verret's executive leadership, immediately suspension should occur for Director Verret.
- Crate train Billy and Tina weeks before transport so no tranquilizer is necessary. Three male bulls in LA Zoo care died in transport due to administering tranquilizers, over sedating, breathing issues, collapsing, or unconsciousness.
- Under no circumstances should Director Verret oversee transportation of Billy and Tina. The elephants are at their most vulnerable: Helpless, sedated, tranquilized, while half-conscious maneuvering into their cages. **An independent company is needed to transport Billy and Tina.**
- Confirm transportation procedures comply with AZA Standards for Elephant Management and Care. 1.4.10. Transport (in accordance with IATA) Sections: 1.4.10.1 – 1.4.10.11 (appvd. 2011, rev. 2012)⁶

CALL TO ACTION:

- Ensure review of \$80,000 transport cost of elephants to Tulsa Zoo from Denise Verret. Pursue accredited sanctuary options and private funding to send Billy and Tina to sanctuary. Do not transport Billy and Tina to AZA Tulsa Zoo.
- Send Billy and Tina to PAWS ARK 2000 Sanctuary in Northern California.
- Do not sent Billy or Tina to AZA sanctuary if AVA policy⁸ of artificial semen extraction will continue, given Billy's prior experiences.

Please review artificial semen collection: AZA Asian Elephant Population Analysis and Breeding & Transfer Plan recommends that Billy continue to be used for breeding purposes.³

⁶ AZA Standards for Elephant Management and Care Adopted (Approved March 2011, Revised April 2012)

https://assets.speakcdn.com/assets/2332/aza_standards_for_elephant_management_and_care.pdf

During the May 5th FY 2025-26 Proposed Budget Hearing, Denise Verret refused to send Billy and Tina to sanctuary and avoided questions repeatedly, replying, “**I am going to continue to make decisions that are in the best interest for the animals at the zoo and that includes the elephants.**”⁷

- **Is it in the best interest** of Billy and Tina to go to another zoo enclosure at AZA Tulsa Zoo with 1.57 acres per elephant? Billy already exhibits zoochotic mental behavior from his 1-acre enclosure.
- **Was it in the best interest** for Billy to be in solitude confinement his entire 36 years at L.A. Zoo? He spent his first 21 years as the only elephant in the zoo. Then another 12 years were spent isolated from female herd in his separate 1-acre enclosure.
- **Was it in the best interest** for Billy when in 2012, he had an opportunity to go to a 2,300-acre elephant sanctuary in Northern California (due to public outcry about his zoochosis) and LA Zoo denied him.⁸
- **Was it in the best interest** of the elephants to have a \$42 million expansion of “Elephants of Asia” exhibit to spend taxpayers money focused mainly on increasing tourist foot traffic areas. Priority was not given to significantly improve the outdoor habitation and welfare of the elephants. Instead, four elephants were given 3.6 acres which is 1-acre per elephant encampment.^{Error! Bookmark not defined.} The elephants became an object of money revenue. Billy’s zoochosis and mental state prior to expansion in 2010 was not priority or a concern. Verret was Deputy Director at the time.

Verret is on the Board of Directors for Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) as an **accreditation inspector** yet under her executive leadership, **LA Zoo is not abiding by AZA Standards for Elephant Management and Care.** (Adopted March 21, 2001, Updated May 5, 2003) and updated (Approved March 2011, Revised April 2012).

- Non-compliant: First 21 years (1989 to 2010), Billy was the only elephant at zoo void of any elephant contact, companionship or socialization till Tina and Jewel arrived 2010. Ten years, Verret was deputy director (2000 to 2010).

AZA Standards for Elephant Management and Care (Adopted 3/21/01, Updated 3/5/03)

- Group Compositions

2.2.4. Institutions must provide an opportunity for each elephant to exercise and interact socially with other elephants (Taylor and Poole 1998, EMA 1999).⁵

With the 2010 arrival of Tina and Jewel, Billy continued to be isolated in his 1-acre encampment, meeting minimal space requirements.

- Non-compliant for 1-year 2010 – 2011. AZA Policy revised March 2011. Female group size was not maintained. Three required. 2010-2017 only two females, Tina and Jewel.

AZA Standards for Elephant Management and Care (Adopted 3/21/01, Updated 3/5/03)

- Group Size

2.3.1. Zoos should make every effort to maintain elephants in social groupings. It is inappropriate to keep highly social female elephants singly (see Sukumar 1992, Taylor and Poole

⁷ 5/5 FY 2025-26 Budget Hearing https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xOtFe_1RqCA Start at 2:34 End at 3:00

⁸ Los Angeles Magazine 11/25/14: The Ongoing Saga of Billy the Elephant by Tamar Brott
<https://lamag.com/news/new-wrinkle>

1998, EMA 1999). Institutions should strive to hold no less than three elephants whenever possible.⁵

- Non-compliant for 16 months (Jan 3, 2024, to May 2025) with euthanasia of Shaunzi (Jan. 3, 2024). Only two elephants remain Billy and Tina. Three elephants are required for mixed gender.

AZA Standards for Elephant Management and Care (Adopted 3/21/01, Updated 3/5/03)

- Group Composition

2.2.1.1 Suggested age and sex structure of social group⁵

Standard: Each zoo holding elephants must hold a minimum of three females (or the space to hold three females), two males or three elephants of mixed gender.

- Non-compliant 8 months. 2023, Billy: Medical records show “his feet left untreated for eight months while...in musth...”⁹

AZA Standards for Elephant Management and Care (Approved March 2011, Revised April 2012)

- Medical Management

3.3.2.2. Foot Care⁶

Standard: The elephants should be free of foot injuries or foot disease...If foot injuries or foot disease are present, a current treatment regimen must be in place.

- Non-compliant for 14 years (AZA approved March 2011 to 2025)
Zoo denied Billy more space than his 1-acre encampment even though Billy exhibits extreme stress (videoed as early as 2007) with zoochotic behavior (standing in place, rocking, swaying repetitively, signs of immense stress and brain damage).

AZA Standards for Elephant Management and Care (Approved March 2011, Revised April 2012)

- **1.4.1.2.** Outdoor space⁶

Standard: Outdoor habitats must provide sufficient space and environmental complexity to both allow for and stimulate natural behavioral activities and social interactions resulting in healthy and well-adapted elephants.

- **Measurement:** If there are elephant behavioral, social, or medical issues shown to be caused by insufficient space, there must be a program in place (from a programmatic and/or facility perspective) to address the issue

We are at a critical time where we make or break Billy. He has endured so much. Have compassion for Billy the LONLIEST ELEPHANT. Send Tina and Billy to Sanctuary.

Watch [Free Billy \(full video\)](#) the Shocking Neglect of an LA Zoo Elephant.

Unravel years of abuse. If Billy's abuse is so well known to the public with outcry for years, what cries are we not hearing and not seeing inside the LA Zoo. There are 1,700 animals at the LA Zoo.

Thank you, Council Members.

⁹ In Defense of Animals: End Elephants Billy & Tina's Torment at The Los Angeles Zoo, Send Them to Sanctuary, Not Another Zoo!

<https://www.idausa.org/campaign/elephants/latest-news/free-la-zoo-elephants-billy-tina/#:~:text=Billy's%20Story,on%20his%201%2Dacre%20yard>

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The Ongoing Saga of Billy the Elephant

The years-long battle over Billy, the Los Angeles Zoo's best-known pachyderm, didn't end when he moved into a new \$42 million enclosure. He's part of a plan to save the very survival of a species—not wild elephants but the ones that live in zoos

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In the spring of 2010, a veterinarian named Dr. Thomas Hildebrandt flew over the savannahs of Africa, shooting male elephants with tranquilizer darts and—with the aid of something called an Acujack—masturbating them while they were unconscious so he could collect their sperm and cryogenically freeze it. Hildebrandt planned to inject it into the female zoo elephants of Europe and North America, which are not reproducing quickly enough to sustain the zoo population. One of the reasons they are not doing so is that male zoo elephants suffer from low libido and poor-quality sperm. Hildebrandt saw the project as a much-needed workaround. It was funded by zoos on both continents and dubbed “Operation Frozen Dumbo.”

The operation was the latest in a series of efforts by the zoo industry to address the dwindling number of zoo elephants, which has reached such a low mark that in 2005, the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (the North American zoo industry’s trade group) issued an advisory stating that if something wasn’t done, there would soon be nothing left to display. At present there are only 168 African and 138 Asian elephants in North America. Less than half of those are thought to be still capable of procreation, and of those that are, the majority are precariously close to being inbred. Nearly one-third of the Asian population, for instance, was sired by two elephants named Charlie and Vance.

The zoo elephant shortage is partially the result of the passage of the Endangered Species Act of 1973, which made it nearly impossible to import animals facing extinction. Prior to that, all one had to do was fly to where elephants live, shoot a mother, and capture its baby, so little thought had gone into the challenges of breeding them in captivity, which have proved to be extensive. In the beginning the issues seemed mostly logistical. Since elephants weigh an average of four tons and may be separated by thousands of miles, coupling them sometimes demanded the use of military transport planes. Over time, though, it became



apparent that the real issue was infertility, which for reasons no one understands, afflicts both males and females.



The zoo receives 1.5 million visitors a year. Photographs by Maarten De Boer

Hildebrandt, who was born in East Germany and is 51 years old, heads the Department of Reproduction Management at the Leibniz Institute for Zoo and Wildlife Research in Berlin. He's been attempting to address the procreative problems of near-extinct animals in captivity his entire career. In 1998, Hildebrandt pioneered the method now used to artificially inseminate elephants, but his efforts were stymied by his inability to freeze sperm in such a way that would keep it viable when defrosted. Consequently he was forced to rely on the chilled sperm of bulls living within an eight-hour radius of an ovulating female, which is how long sperm can live outside the body if kept in a solution made from quail or hen egg yolk.

Hildebrandt's difficulties stemmed from ice crystals, which would puncture the sperm cell membranes and destroy them. But in 2009, researchers devised a way to bypass this obstacle, using a method called "directional freezing" that in essence points the sharp ends of the ice crystals away from the cell.

Thus began Operation Frozen Dumbo, which if it succeeded could provide an unlimited supply of elephant sperm and ensure a fresh gene pool. But the outcome would not be known for 22 months, the gestation period for an elephant. In the meantime the AZA continued to pursue other avenues. It had already asked its 156-member zoos to begin collecting sperm from all elephants over the age of six that were not yet represented in the gene pool, which wasn't many. Of the North American Asian elephant population, there were three, to be exact. One lived in Mexico City. The second lived in Albuquerque. The third was a 12-pound virgin in Los Angeles named Billy.

At the time Billy was the Los Angeles Zoo's only elephant, and he did not seem a likely candidate to repopulate anything. He was 24 years old and had spent nearly all of his life in a pen the size of a small bowling alley, where he was often seen rocking back and forth the way some autistic people do and occasionally dry-humping an old tire. He was also the subject of one of the most bitter and longest-running lawsuits in the history of the zoo industry, one that began in 2007 and continues to this day.

The dispute initially appeared to be about the significance of Billy's rocking motion. A group of concerned citizens saw it as an indication that he was not flourishing at the zoo or was possibly going insane, and they petitioned the city, which owns the zoo and all the animals in it, to send Billy to a 2,300-acre elephant sanctuary in Northern California. The zoo did not want him to go, however. Plans were already under way to build him a new enclosure called the Pachyderm Forest. So the zoo mounted a countercampaign to assure the city that Billy's head bobbing was not a sign of distress but a sign of anticipatory pleasure at the thought of seeing his trainers. "It's kind of like when I come home and my dog is jumping up and down on the patio," the zoo's director, John Lewis, told me. He also said that a small enclosure was no impediment to a healthy lifestyle, noting that Billy's keepers had him do wind sprints by throwing carrots from one end of his enclosure to the other.

Billy had become a cause célèbre long before Hildebrandt reached Africa. Since 2003, famous people had been campaigning for his release, chief among them the renowned elephant behaviorist Joyce Poole, who is considered the Jane Goodall of pachyderms. In an open letter she stated that elephants don't rock back and forth in the wild, that it was a coping mechanism for Billy's "loneliness, boredom and frustration." Halle Berry, Cher, and Bill Maher led their own crusades; Lily Tomlin called the zoo "elephant-speak for Guantanamo"; and people were picketing and posting videos on YouTube. One of them featured a song that went "Billy, his name is Billy. / He's confined in a zoo with nothing to do / But bob and sway through every troubled day..."

To read the news accounts is to see how the topic of Billy's well-being became overshadowed by other topics, such as whether a city with no elephant is a city with no self-esteem and whether the people who want Billy sent to the sanctuary are elitists trying to deny the rest of us access to the wild kingdom. When councilman Dennis Zine said he'd seen elephants in Africa and that they don't belong in zoos, councilman Tom LaBonge, in whose district the zoo resides, proclaimed that not everyone can afford to go to Africa but that we can all take the freeway to the zoo. The notion that the public is entitled to see elephants during business hours has been championed by the zoo's supporters, most notably actress Betty White, who declared that the campaign to free Billy was only the opening salvo in a far larger battle. "It will not stop with elephants," she wrote in the zoo's quarterly magazine. "Giraffes will be next. If they win this battle, they will not stop until zoos themselves are extinct."

As farcical as it seemed, the bickering over Billy really was about things more critical than they appeared. In essence it was about what should be done with the last remaining members of a near-extinct species. And whether the zoo industry's commitment to breeding them in captivity has taken the law of supply and demand to its utmost extreme by, in a sense, monetizing extinction itself.

John Lewis, who has been the Los Angeles Zoo's director since 2003, has white hair and a mustache that recalls men who run ice cream parlors in Norman Rockwell paintings. Prior to his arrival in Los Angeles, he led the John Ball Zoo in Grand Rapids, Michigan, for 17 years. He also served as president of the AZA and is a former member of its accreditation committee. At 62 years old Lewis comes across as a cordial man of science. He makes a point never to anthropomorphize the animals in public. In fact, he doesn't know the human names bestowed on most of the animals and doesn't care to. "I know people like to say, 'This is Bob the Monkey,' " he said. "But I find it diminishes them. I prefer to focus on the uniqueness of their digestive systems and whether they eat leaves and ferment them in their stomachs."

Lewis presides over 1,200 animals that live in more or less three concentric circles. In the outer circle are the smaller apes and the hoof stock. In the second circle are the blue-chip animals most people come to the zoo to see: lions, tigers, bears, and apes. Elephants have always lived in the inner circle. Since the zoo is a botanical garden as well, Lewis also presides over the foliage between the cages, which is extraordinarily beautiful, especially in the late afternoon. There are fig trees, palms, honeysuckle, rosebushes, and cycads along with the insects and birds that dwell among them. Approximately 1.5 million people visit the zoo each year, and not all of them come with children. Many adults regard it as a place to commune with nature. I once heard a lady in the aviary cry out that it was like the Garden of Eden, and I've seen more than one woman stare deep into the eyes of a monkey and ask, "What are you thinking?"

Given the size of L.A., our zoo is surprisingly modest. It never makes the list of the country's top ten zoos and is outclassed by those that do. Omaha's zoo has America's largest indoor rain forest and desert. The zoo in Columbus, Ohio, has an adjoining 18-hole golf course and a water park. Closer to home, the Los Angeles Zoo has always lived in the shadow of the San Diego Zoo, whose collection of blue-chip animals is larger by an order of magnitude and includes pandas—something L.A. will probably never have, because the Chinese government rents them out for \$1 million a year and there aren't enough to go around.

The L.A. Zoo was built in 1966, and much of it seems trapped in the past. A good many of the animals still live in tiny enclosures and grottoes, and the people who are upset about Billy tend to be just as upset about the jaguar, whose cage is roughly the size of a food truck. "In a city so wealthy and so preoccupied with storytelling and the creation of illusion, you would expect something spectacular, almost breathtaking," Australian zoo designer David Hancocks told me. "But the Los Angeles Zoo is strangely disappointing."

Lewis was hired by mayor James Hahn in the hope that he would finally make the zoo world-class. He had the capital to do so. In 1998, bond monies were approved for the zoo to build ten new attractions costing \$172 million. Eight have been completed during Lewis's tenure, among them Sea Life Cliffs, Campo Gorilla Reserve, a reptile facility, and Rainforest of the Americas. But Lewis will most likely be remembered for the Pachyderm Forest, where he said he planned to breed elephants in order to save them from extinction.

The L.A. Zoo's jaguar, whose enclosure has stirred criticism for being too small. Photographs by Maarten De Boer.



The dispute over Billy was not the first of its kind. During the past ten years, campaigns have been waged against zoos around the country, and a handful have been effective. Zoos in Detroit, Toronto, Anchorage, San Francisco, and San Jose have sent their elephants to sanctuaries, and the Bronx Zoo has pledged to close its exhibit when the last of its elephants expire. The person behind many of those efforts is a woman in her fifties named Catherine Doyle, who has long brown hair and a nose stud and lives in Hollywood with her husband and son. She has been plaguing Lewis since 2004, when she first began putting the Los Angeles Zoo on her annual list of the worst zoos for elephants.

Doyle currently serves as director of science, research, and advocacy at Performing Animal Welfare Society, the sanctuary in the Northern California town of San Andreas. But in 2004, she was the elephant campaign director of the animal advocacy group In Defense of Animals, which involved flying around the country and trying to persuade zoos to send the elephants to PAWS or to the nation's only other sanctuary, located in Hohenwald, Tennessee. Sometimes Doyle would even provide funding for the animals' transportation, much of it donated by Bob Barker, the former host of *The Price Is Right*. Over the years Barker has spent several million dollars airlifting zoo elephants to sanctuaries and paying for their housing.

Back then Doyle usually dressed in a man's black suit jacket with black leggings, unless she was traveling in the Midwest, in which case she'd remove the nose stud and put on a skirt and heels. "I don't want to look marginal," she said.

She would often begin her presentations by noting that **elephants are known to be highly intelligent** and self-aware, meaning they can recognize themselves in the mirror, a trait thought to be shared by few animals. After that she might explain how they live in large herds led by matriarchs and that males leave the herd once they reach sexual maturity but that females remain together for life, helping one another through childbirth, rearing one another's offspring, and mourning one another's dead. Keeping such animals and breeding them in captivity, where many lead solitary lives, is both cruel and detrimental to their health, she'd say.

One set of statistics she's frequently cited is that the natural life span of elephants in the wild is 70 years; Africans average 33 years and Asians 44 in zoos, where they suffer from diseases such as herpes, tuberculosis, obesity, and arthritis, not to mention mental problems. "Billy's not the only elephant who rocks back and forth," Doyle told me. "You see the same stereotypical behavior all across the country. I've even heard of elephants self-mutilating. It gets so bad sometimes, they have to be put on Thorazine."

When Doyle first started, she was admittedly naive. She wore an elephant suit to a rally in El Paso and nearly collapsed from heat prostration. But in the years since, she'd come to understand that it is no easy thing to persuade people to give up their elephants. They tend to be associated with the happier aspects of childhood—Babar and Dumbo and the notion of the gentle giant—and some people can become irrational at the thought of their elephants being taken away, even in the face of scientific evidence indicating they'd be better off elsewhere. Doyle learned, whenever possible, to focus on the fiscal irresponsibility of maintaining elephants. It costs an average of \$100,000 a year just to keep one alive at a zoo. They eat 250 pounds of fresh produce a day, for example. They can also be lethal. So many keepers—16—have been killed by elephants during the past 24 years that the AZA now requires its member zoos to install elephant restraint devices, which are steel cages the size of a 7-Eleven, with adjustable walls, a series of small portholes, and hydraulic gates that allow zoo staff to examine the elephant without fear of reprisal. Doyle hoped that once people heard these things, they would conclude that the money might be better spent on, say, expanding the city's police force.

This strategy seemed especially apt in the case of Billy. His new enclosure, which would eventually cost \$12 million, was to be constructed during a period when L.A. was cutting city services in order to avoid

bankruptcy in the future. Doyle argued that it would be economical and humane to send Billy to PAWs, the only North American sanctuary with the capacity to contain male elephants. Barker, Tomlin, and Cher had pledged \$1.5 million between them to cover Billy's costs, and according to Doyle, a barn had already been reserved for him. It was set in the middle of the sanctuary, on a three-acre hillock that has a view of the Sierra, with other elephants nearby. There was Maggie from Anchorage, Lulu from San Francisco, Mara from San Jose, Wanda from Detroit, and Nicholas, who used to ride a bicycle in the circus. From the barn you could see their silhouettes tearing down branches and napping in the grass. But you would never be able to see them having sex, because the sanctuary finds the idea of raising more elephants in captivity to be repugnant. "The day they bring in a breeding female for Billy," Ed Stewart, who runs the sanctuary, told me, "is the day I lie down in front of a truck."

One of the sad facts of life is the ever-growing list of things we used to regard as wholesome that are now widely thought to be vaguely sinister, like priests or doughnuts or zoos. That zoos have come to be on this list is partly due to activists like Doyle and partly due to the proliferation of nature documentaries that serve only to reinforce their claims that zoo animals are torpid and sad and not living as they should. The frequency of bizarre zoo tragedies involving negligence has not helped matters. In the past eight years alone a zookeeper in Tucson inadvertently killed a giraffe by feeding it a poisonous plant, a goat at the Calgary Zoo accidentally strangled itself to death in front of small children while playing with a rope toy, and a hippopotamus in Topeka was parboiled in its own wading pool as a result of a boiler malfunction.

It is only natural that the AZA, whose member zoos generate an estimated \$2 billion a year, has a crisis management team dedicated to neutralizing the effect of such mishaps and the detractors who cite them. One way it does so is by downplaying the notion that zoos constitute an industry at all. The AZA portrays itself as the "world's preeminent wildlife conservation association" whose mission is not to entertain so much as to educate the public about the mysteries of the animal kingdom, a rapidly growing portion of which faces extinction. To visit a zoo these days is to see merry-go-rounds that have been transformed into "endangered species carousels" and signs posted outside the animals' cages noting how many are left on earth and soliciting donations on their behalf. The AZA claims that these efforts, along with its breeding programs, are so important, the animal kingdom's very survival depends on zoos. "We're not like the steel industry," an AZA spokesman told me. "We're a hedge against extinction."

This is a line of thinking Lewis adheres to. He argues that if Billy were hidden away near the Sierra, where no one could see him, the public would have no way of knowing about the plight of wild elephants. They are being killed by poachers at an estimated rate of one every 15 minutes, and the forests and savannahs where they used to live are being turned into farmland. Because there is nowhere left to hide or forage, they devour the crops and are frequently killed by farmers, who regard them less as a dwindling species and more as a terrifying breed of giant locust. "By keeping them in zoos and getting people excited about them and spending money while they're here, we can send money to Cambodia to support what's going on with

elephants in the wild,” Lewis said. “We have been donating close to \$30,000 a year to Flora & Fauna International. They’re teaching farmers how to protect their crops from elephants.”

Billy in his two-acre portion of the Elephants of Asia exhibit. Photographs by Maarten De Boer.

The idea that elephants must remain in zoos so they can serve as ambassadors and fund-raisers for their brethren in the wild became a dominant theme in the debate over Billy. Doyle had come up against this argument in previous campaigns, because it is one of the primary talking points of the AZA, which has framed its desire to breed elephants as a moral imperative.

And many of the zoo’s supporters believe that it is. Karen Winnick, who is president of the Zoo Commission (the five-member oversight panel appointed by the mayor), told the L.A. city council that the survival of elephants depended on the donations of zoo-goers. “Once we no longer exhibit an animal, we can no longer support conservation efforts in the wild,” she said.

It was partly on the basis of this argument that the city council approved construction of the Pachyderm Forest and later its expansion to six manicured acres. However, the true scope of Lewis’s ambitions could only be seen in the renderings of the elephant barn: The building had 11 stalls, which the zoo evidently hoped Billy would populate himself, giving it one of the largest zoo-elephant populations in North America. A call had already gone out to find him a mate, and staff had begun training him to stand on his hind legs so he would know what to do when she arrived. What’s more, Billy was being prepped for sperm collection, which is generally accomplished by inserting one’s arm into the elephant’s anus and massaging his prostate until he ejaculates. If that doesn’t work, a rubber elephant vagina can be used, but these can be cumbersome.



Construction on the Pachyderm Forest began in 2006. The following year the late actor Robert Culp and a Brentwood real estate agent named Aaron Leider sued the City of Los Angeles and John Lewis to halt construction, arguing that even if it were significantly larger than Billy's existing pen and made to look like paradise, the Pachyderm Forest's six acres would never be adequate for a bull elephant. "It's like raising a human child in a regular-size closet, then you move him to a walk-in closet and hail it as some kind of a wonderful change," said Culp and Leider's attorney, David Casselman.

A 61-year-old with white, receding hair and a rapid-fire way of speaking, Casselman works in Tarzana but frequently flies to Cambodia, where he's established his own elephant sanctuary. It was clear from the start that Casselman hoped to use the lawsuit to expose what he considered the mendacity of the zoo industry, of which there was no clearer evidence in his mind than the \$42 million price tag of the Pachyderm Forest. "Do you have any idea what that amount of money could do for the elephants of Cambodia?" he said to me. "I personally bought a million acres there for a quarter of a million dollars. They could have bought a hundred square miles of land that would have protected them in perpetuity." As for the \$30,000 the zoo donates each year to Cambodia, he scoffed. "The AZA has done nothing to help the elephants of Cambodia that I'm aware of. It's all just a grandiose scheme to imprison animals and use them to raise money in the name of conservation."

Casselmann filed suit under an obscure taxpayer statute that allows citizens to sue their government if it has engaged in waste or fraud. By reframing Billy as a piece of city property and using the industry's own elephant mortality rates against it, he could argue that if Billy were placed in the Pachyderm Forest, he would perish prematurely, thereby wasting taxpayer money. The city tried to have the lawsuit dismissed, but the court agreed to hear it, which Casselman regarded as a fortuitous sign, if not a victory unto itself. No one had used this legal strategy before, and the interest it generated in the animal rights community was immense. "I'm getting calls from all over the country," Casselman told me when I met him. "People are watching."

Despite the lawsuit, the Pachyderm Forest opened in December 2010. The exhibit, which had been renamed Elephants of Asia, had a giant red-and-orange Thai-themed barn, two ponds, a waterfall, a mud wallow, and additional features not visible to visitors. The rock formation behind the waterfall was actually a hollow booth with little windows for the staff to fill with vegetables, and the depth of the smaller pond was adjustable so that, in the event a baby were born, it could splash around without drowning.

The zoo had even managed to procure a pair of females. However, the shortage is so profound, the only ones available were two circus refugees named Tina and Jewel, both of whom were past childbearing age and suffered from gum disease. They wouldn't be able to share Billy's space, either; the zoo feared that in his near-constant state of sexual arousal, he might inadvertently kill them. And so he and the pair were cordoned off from one another by a series of fences and hydraulic gates through which Billy could touch them only with his trunk.

Lewis and I went to see Elephants of Asia one morning not long after it opened. The trial was still ahead, but he was confident the zoo would prevail. "I know they're wrong," he said of his opponents. It galled Lewis how they claimed that elephants live an average of 70 years in the wild and only 40 in zoos. "The reality is, elephants in the wild and zoos live an average of 40 years," he said. Lewis's statement is based on the position of the AZA, which allows that elephants do live to 70 in an ideal world, but since the world is not ideal, one must factor in the 35,000 elephants reportedly killed by poachers each year, which lowers the



combined life expectancy to about 40. “You and I can live to 115, but probably we’re going to live until about 80,” he said. “And they weren’t explaining that context.”

The Chimpanzees of Mahale Mountains exhibit opened in 1998, replacing a concrete enclosure. Photographs by Maarten De Boer.

Because Lewis does not give interviews alone, we were accompanied by the zoo’s then-marketing director, Jason Jacobs, who drove us along in a little cart that had been painted in zebra stripes. Every so often he would peer at us in the rearview mirror with a look of weariness. Jacobs could not grasp why the media had focused on Billy when there were so many other animals at the zoo whose stories sometimes bordered on the miraculous. “The Los Angeles Zoo has successfully raised condors, bringing them back from the brink of extinction, but nobody ever talks about that,” he said, adding that one of the orangutan’s air sacs had been surgically removed in a groundbreaking operation.

The Los Angeles Zoo also has among the largest collections of chimpanzees in the country and is only 1 of 14 zoos in North America to house François’ langurs, an endangered leaf-eating monkey. In some cases the most interesting thing about the animals is how they came to be at the zoo. Many of the reptiles were confiscated from a Malaysian smuggling ring, and customs agents at LAX once donated a baby pangolin, a Congolese anteater prized for its delicate meat. This one was too young to eat when captured, so hunters sold it to some tourists who tried to bring it back to Sherman Oaks in a basket. “And then there was Alfred the blind sea lion,” Jacobs said. “He washed ashore with head trauma, and we decided to take him in, and now he’s sired offspring.”





When we pulled up to Elephants of Asia, Tina and Jewel were sunning themselves in the yard. Across the way was a pavilion where people could learn how much the creatures eat and defecate and similar details. “After rainstorms elephants move toward the rainy spots, looking for tender new grasses,” one of the signs read. Other signs explained how you could text money to help resolve the human-elephant conflicts in Cambodia. “People can actually make donations right there to that fieldwork,” Lewis said.

Billy was in the barn in his elephant restraint device. Up close he was massive, with speckled, leathery skin and tiny eyes. Behind him there were rows of empty stalls. Two had padded floors on which a baby might someday be born. Lewis appeared resigned to the fact that a fertile female would not be arriving in the foreseeable future. The AZA has instituted new guidelines, he explained, stipulating that groups of bonded elephants should not be split up. “Our hope is if there is a pair of females somewhere and one dies...” Lewis said. If that didn’t work, the zoo was prepared to house a bachelor herd. “One of the things that all the zoos are dealing with now is that if we’re going to breed elephants, 50 percent are going to be bulls,” he said, noting that three of the larger stalls had been sized and reinforced for male elephants. In the meantime the zoo was continuing to attempt to collect Billy’s sperm. “This is where it all happens,” Lewis said, referring to the elephant restraint device. But things had not happened as planned. Though Billy tolerated the prostate massage, thus far he had refused to ejaculate. “We may have to call in experts,” Lewis said.

By that Lewis no doubt meant Thomas Hildebrandt, who was trying to get the African sperm past customs agents in Europe and America. He was also monitoring the menstrual cycle of female zoo elephants on both continents to determine which should receive it. The process would be costly and complicated, involving three-meter catheters, light-emitting endoscopes, video monitors, and a staff of at least eight. It has proved unreliable as well. A female at the Woodland Park Zoo in Seattle has reportedly been inseminated more than 100 times to no avail. And since the first procedure took place in 2000, nearly half of the 50 babies conceived through artificial insemination have died—14 of them in utero or at birth. Eight never made it to their fifth birthdays.

In June 2012, the lawsuit finally went to trial, and the zoo had done all it could to cast doubt on the legitimacy of PAWS. Jason Jacobs noted that the facility was not accredited by the AZA, that it didn’t allow visitors without appointments, and that it didn’t have 24-hour veterinary service like the zoo. “Sanctuaries are for animals who don’t have options,” he told *L.A. Weekly*, as if PAWS were a halfway house for unwanted elephants. Zoo supporters went so far as to suggest that the facility was so large, people who wanted to visit Billy might not be able to see him through the foliage. The campaign appeared to have its intended effect. According to pollsters hired by the zoo, the majority of those surveyed believed that “closing the habitat and shipping Billy to a distant location would deprive local schoolchildren and their families of the opportunity to learn about the threat of extinction facing Asian elephants today.”

But now the zoo would be forced to make sound legal arguments against the expert witnesses assembled by Casselman. There was Joyce Poole, who would be flying in from Norway; Lori Marino, a professor of neuropsychology at Emory University; renowned zoo designer David Hancocks from Australia; and veterinarians appalled by Billy’s condition. The zoo couldn’t discredit all that expertise, so instead it tried to discredit the relevance of their testimony. To this end the city attorney representing the zoo sought to bifurcate the universe of elephants into two distinct groups: those that live in the wild and those that live in zoos. This would enable the zoo to argue that while the plaintiffs’ witnesses may be knowledgeable about wild elephants, they knew little about zoo elephants, of which there was only one true expert: the zoo industry itself. As Lewis explained, “We have experience caring for animals in the zoo, and that can be very different from the way animals care for themselves in the wild.”

The legal strategy was undermined by the zoo’s own witnesses, most of them zoo staff. For instance,   t of captive elephants are prone to arthritis and other ailments related to the soil in their enclosures being too

compacted by their great weight. During the course of the dispute, Lewis had assured the city that the zoo went to tremendous lengths to protect Billy's feet by rototilling the soil every few days to keep it from hardening. The zoo's witnesses, however, testified that the new enclosure had never once been rototilled. They also testified that the Elephants of Asia exhibit was not all that Lewis had claimed it would be to the city council. Of the six acres he promised, only two were accessible to Billy, partly because the enclosure had been subdivided to keep him away from the females and partly because the vegetation throughout his pen had been electrified to prevent him from devouring it.

The most noteworthy revelation pertained to the zoo's animal behavior department, on whose opinions Lewis had based his claims that Billy's rocking motion was not a sign of distress. During the trial it was revealed that the department head, Cathleen Cox, specialized in primates. Cox testified that she had no firsthand experience with pachyderms and had never even read a book about one; Billy was the only elephant she'd ever known. As for Billy's keeper, Vicky Guarnett, she maintained she knew in her heart that he was happy.

The judge was unconvinced. His decision began with the line "All is not well at the Elephants of Asia exhibit at the Los Angeles Zoo," and it grew worse from there as he recounted the misleading statements made by the zoo and commented on the ignorance of its staff, which he described as suffering from an "anthropomorphic fantasy that the elephants are happy...in captivity." As appalled as the judge was by the goings-on at the zoo, however, he did not see that it met the legal definition of cruelty or negligence. And so Elephants of Asia was not shut down, and Billy was not sent to the sanctuary. The zoo was simply ordered to rototill the soil in Billy's enclosure and exercise him more.

If Lewis found the revelations embarrassing, he gave no indication in public. "It's the zoo version of, 'Do you still beat your wife?'" he told the *Los Angeles Times* when the trial ended. A few days later the zoo posted a coloring book drawing of an elephant on its Web site, stating, "Asian elephants are an endangered species threatened by habitat loss and fragmentation," and that for every colored-in elephant sent in, the zoo would donate \$1 to conservation programs in Sri Lanka and Cambodia.

Casselman and the zoo appealed the judge's ruling, but the lawsuit has since been eclipsed by other events. In August 2012, a month after the trial ended, the Vienna Schönbrunn Zoo held a press conference to announce that one of its females had been impregnated with the defrosted sperm of an elephant named Steve, who resides at the Phinda private game reserve in South Africa. The director of the zoo held up an ultrasound of the fetus, whose trunk and large ears were unmistakable. A year later the baby was born, and in May 2014, a second was born in England, also from Steve's sperm, and two more females have since been inseminated.

When I spoke to Hildebrandt afterward, he seemed both elated and sad. He knew the elephants that he helped bring into the world would not be normal in the true sense of the word. "Elephants in zoos will never have behavior like they do in the wild," he said. "That's for sure." As he saw it, though, the only answer to this problem was to breed more of them. If he could do that, he might at least create larger groups that approximate the normal herd structure in the wild. This, in turn, might make the elephants less neurotic and possibly even more fertile. "The most important element in the life of an animal is offspring," he said, "and having elephants with babies will be ten times better than what we have now." There was no time to dispute the ethics. "All we can hope for is that the zoos improve," Hildebrandt said, adding that he thinks they are.



The African elephant sperm he's collected is now being stored in cryobanks in Europe. As of early summer, he had not been able to get it through the red tape of U.S. Customs, nor had he found a way to freeze the sperm of Asian elephants. But success on both fronts is surely imminent, and the zoos of North America are readying themselves for it. In the last three years alone Oklahoma City spent \$13 million on a new enclosure that hopes to house 5, and the Denver Zoo spent \$55 million, where 12 could live. This year Wichita's Sedgwick Zoo announced it was breaking ground on a \$10 million exhibit wherein visitors will be able to boat alongside the elephants. And next year the Oregon Zoo plans to open an exhibit that is expected to cost nearly \$60 million, with room for a dozen.

So far no zoo seems to be going the route Casselman and Doyle have strongly recommended to the L.A. Zoo: Casselman had hoped to persuade it to replace Billy with an animatronic elephant. He envisioned children climbing atop it so as to better appreciate its massiveness and the complexity of its trunk, while Doyle envisioned interactive consoles and giant screens projecting live feeds from a national park in Kenya. It is more than likely that Billy will live out the rest of his days at Elephants of Asia, where he continues rocking back and forth before tens of thousands of visitors each year. But if and when he produces enough viable sperm, Doyle sees a new legal battle over who will control it. "After all," she says, "doesn't it technically belong to the taxpayers of Los Angeles?"

Tamar Brott is a writer based in Oakland. Her story about dog trainer Vladislav Roytapel appeared in the May 2009 issue.

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FREE



BILLY

**40 YEARS OLD | MALE | ASIAN | WILD
LOS ANGELES ZOO (LOS ANGELES, CA)**

Billy is a wild-born male Asian elephant who has spent all but one year of his life in captivity. Born roaming freely with his familial herd in Malaysia around 1985, Billy was captured less than a year after his birth. In 1989 he was imported to the United

States and brought to the Los Angeles Zoo. For the majority of the time Billy has been confined at the zoo, he has been held alone in a barren enclosure. Captivity in such an impoverished environment causes brain damage by subjecting elephants to extreme psychological stress. For decades, Billy has been observed engaging in stereotypic behavior, most frequently intense head bobbing, which is a coping mechanism for dealing with stress.

TAKE ACTION >

BILLY'S STORY

Billy is a wild-born male Asian elephant who has spent all but one year of his life in captivity. Born roaming freely with his familial herd in Malaysia around 1985, Billy was captured less than a year after his birth. In 1989 he was imported to the United States and brought to the Los Angeles Zoo.

A 1989 training **video** shows Billy being repeatedly jabbed and led around by a bullhook, a weapon-like device that is used to control elephants through the infliction of pain. In the video, a zoo employee talks about chaining Billy and using the bullhook in various ways to exert control over him, such as touching Billy's hypersensitive body parts. In 1993, Billy was sent to Have Trunk Will Travel, most likely for training to submit to human commands. Have Trunk Will Travel was a notorious traveling entertainment operation that had been plagued by allegations of **extreme cruelty** to elephants. In 1994, Billy returned to the Los Angeles Zoo where he has remained ever since.

In 2012, a lawsuit was brought against the Los Angeles Zoo regarding its treatment of elephants, and the extent of the physical abuse Billy endured—in what the zoo referred to as “training”—was laid bare. After a trial, the presiding judge **wrote**: “The evidence shows that when Billy was much younger, trainers formerly with the Los Angeles Zoo trained him to lie down using a block and tackle. Trainers also used a bull hook, a stick with a nail, or other similar tool. When elephants that were trained or ‘broken’ with a bull hook are subsequently shown a bull hook or an object that looks like a bull hook, they (quite understandably) become afraid, and comply with requests by the trainer or keeper. [The Los Angeles Zoo director] confirmed that if an elephant has been hurt by a bull hook in the past, the elephant will react negatively if a keeper merely shows or displays a bull hook.”

The Los Angeles Zoo has just 3 acres of usable outdoor space for elephants, which is divided into 4 yards. For the majority of the time Billy has been confined at the zoo, he has been held alone in a barren enclosure. Captivity in such an impoverished environment causes brain damage by subjecting elephants to extreme psychological stress. For decades, Billy has been observed engaging in stereotypic behavior, most frequently intense head bobbing, which is a coping mechanism for dealing with stress.

Billy has been forced to participate in the **Association of Zoos and Aquariums’ captive breeding program**. Public records reveal that during a three year period, the zoo attempted to collect Billy’s semen at least 55 times. The semen collection procedure was a gross violation of Billy’s autonomy, in addition to being a great risk to his health and safety. It often involved placing Billy in an elephant restraint device, rendering him unable to freely move, and having a human insert their arm into his anus and massage his prostate to stimulate ejaculation. **Despite years of semen collection attempts, Billy has never sired any offspring. The most recent AZA Asian Elephant Population Analysis and Breeding &**

Transfer Plan recommends that Billy continue to be used for breeding purposes.

In addition to enduring traumatic trainings, long-term isolation, and grotesque semen collection procedures, Billy has also suffered from inadequate foot care—for elephants held in small captive environments, foot care is incredibly important. Foot disease is a leading **cause** of death in captive elephants. Records from 2023 show that the zoo did not perform regular foot care on Billy for eight months while he was in **musth**, resulting in overgrown nails and a significant accumulation of dead tissue.

There has been a long campaign, spanning decades, calling for Billy's release to an elephant sanctuary where his complex physical and psychological needs can be met. Celebrities such as **Bob Barker**, **Lily Tomlin**, and **Cher** have championed his freedom. Over 800,000 people have signed a **petition** calling for his release to sanctuary. Several Los Angeles City Council members have introduced **multiple** motions over the years to **close** the zoo's elephant exhibit or **relocate** Billy to a sanctuary. The Los Angeles Times' Editorial Board **wrote** a powerful article advocating for Billy's transfer to a sanctuary.

Despite the public outcry regarding Billy's plight, zoo officials have steadfastly refused to grant him a measure of freedom that was stolen from him. They justify his captivity by claiming he plays an important role in conservation by serving as an ambassador for his species, but nothing could be further from the truth. Seeing an elephant suffering day in and day out, in an unnatural space and engaging in behaviors unseen in the wild, serves no legitimate purpose. If anything, Billy is an ambassador for why confining elephants in zoos is an archaic and shameful practice, one that future generations will rightly view with moral outrage. The judge in the 2012 lawsuit against the Los Angeles Zoo recognized as much, when he wrote: "Captivity is a terrible existence for any intelligent, self-aware species, which the undisputed evidence shows elephants are."

Billy is not living at the Los Angeles Zoo; he is deteriorating as zoo officials look on. For once, the zoo must prioritize Billy's interests before its own and relocate him to a sanctuary that can meet his complex needs.

TAKE ACTION TODAY

A future where no elephant has to endure the traumas of being torn from their families and natural habitats, bred against their will, and shipped from zoo to zoo is possible, and we need your help to make it a reality.

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SUBMIT INFORMATION

Do you have a tip for us? The Free to be Elephants project relies on our supporters to keep us up-to-date with the latest news, updates and photos about elephants in their local facilities. Use this form to submit your info and help us expose the reality of elephant captivity across America.

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Accepted file types: jpg, png, gif, mov, mp4, avi, Max. file size: 50 MB, Max. files: 5.

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**End Elephants Billy & Tina's Torment At
The Los Angeles Zoo, Send Them To
Sanctuary, Not Another Zoo!**

**End Elephants Billy & Tina's Torment At
The Los Angeles Zoo, Send Them To
Sanctuary, Not Another Zoo!**

Supporters

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UPDATE: The Los Angeles Zoo recently announced its plan to send Billy and Tina to the Tulsa Zoo in Oklahoma, defying the years of advocacy by impassioned activists, renowned elephant experts and lawmakers to send them to a true sanctuary. Please sign this alert to keep the pressure on the zoo to honor the will of those who want these elephants to finally experience the peace and freedom they deserve. Speak up, call and write to the zoo with the message: not another zoo!

Elephants Tina and Billy are two decades apart in age, but two factors unite them: their many years of suffering at the Los Angeles Zoo and the obvious stress they endure as evidenced by their advanced zoochotic behavior. Act now to send these beleaguered elephants to a sanctuary where they can rest and heal from their years of anguish at the LA Zoo.

End Billy & Tina's Torment At The LA Zoo



Tina, born in the wild, was ripped from her home in Asia and now at 58 has spent all but one year of her life in captivity. Billy was snatched from his home in Malaysia at just 4 years old and has existed in a zombie-like state at the zoo for 35 years.

Tina's Story

At just 1 year old, Tina was separated from her mother and family and shipped across the world to be exploited in circuses in the U.S. For over 30 years, she was punished with bullhooks to perform tricks. In 2009, she and her circus mate, Jewel, were confiscated from their abusive trainer by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and sent to the San Diego Zoo. One year later, she and Jewel landed at the Los Angeles Zoo where Tina remains today.

Sadly, her longtime companion Jewel died in 2023, and not long after, another zoo inmate, Shaunzi, died, leaving Tina alone and grieving over now two losses. Despite her zoo-related ailments including joint disease and arthritis, her medical records indicate that Tina is doing well overall for her age. Therefore we can conclude that she is fit for transport to sanctuary. It is imperative that she goes soon before her health takes a downward turn and she dies like Shaunzi and Jewel before her.



Billy's Story

Billy has been alone for his entire 35 years at the LA Zoo. He was introduced to the three elderly females but spent little of his life in their company. Instead every day, for hours on end, Billy continually rocks, sways, or paces back and forth on his 1-acre yard.

The zoo's medical records indicate that his feet were left untreated for eight months while he was in musth, a periodic reproductive phase. As a result, the conditions of Billy's feet are described by a former elephant keeper as abysmal and clearly show he is living in pain. The lack of treatment has left him vulnerable to fatal foot disease. The zoo's inability to care for him is a prime indicator that he should be retired from the zoo.

Billy was also subjected to dozens of highly invasive procedures to extract sperm with no success. Billy has endured enough misery, it is time for him to be released from his hellish experience at the LA Zoo and given the gift of freedom and expert veterinary care he so richly deserves.

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Elephants Assaulted in the Wild to Increase Zoo Populations

End Elephant
Exploitation

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Elephants Assaulted in the Wild to Increase Zoo Populations

January 26, 2024 - Posted by Courtney Scott

TAG: ELEPHANTS, ZOOS

Elephants die faster than they can reproduce in zoos. In desperation to increase their population of elephants, zoos have resorted to stealing sperm from elephants in the wild.

Operation Frozen Jumbo 3 is underway in Kruger National Park, South Africa. It's a collaboration with zoo organizations around the world, expanding on a sperm extraction procedure dubbed "Sperminator."

Freezing sperm to inseminate female elephants has been fraught with failure in the wild and in captivity. Now this dreadfully cruel and inefficient process has been refined and is able to get more pregnancies from fewer invasive procedures. However, what is the cost of this success for the elephants?

Elephant semen



"Forcing captive and wild male elephants into involuntary sperm extraction, sometimes via chemical immobilization, and then coercively inseminating female elephants without their choice of partner, is rape. These violations, hidden behind the guise of conservation, are a trespass on personal autonomy and remove all choice and control over an individual's outcomes or mates."

— Les O'Brien, Elephant Consultant and former Zoo Elephant Keeper



It is a gruesome operation for the elephants. As reported in the Boston Globe: "First, the vet inserts a pump into the elephant's rectum and fills the intestines with an enormous quantity of water — to create space that makes an ultrasound exam possible. Next, he inserts an electric stimulation device into the animal's rectum to initiate orgasms to produce sperm."

After the unconscious elephant's tail, tusks, penis, and testes are measured, the vets collect the blood and DNA and finally inject him with the antidote to wake him. Many elephants have been subjected to this extraction in the wild and captivity with little success.

"Elephants, when protected in their natural home-range habitats, live active lives and fulfill crucial ecological roles as keystone species, ecosystem engineers, and seed dispersers – contributions obstructed by human interference and forced imprisonment. In their countries of origin, natural environments where elephants are well-protected have witnessed a rise in their wild numbers, free from artificial insemination (AI) and other human intervention."

— Les O'Brien, Elephant Consultant and former Zoo Elephant Keeper

At In Defense of Animals, we believe we should leave wild animals alone in the one place where they can genuinely live wild and free. Instead, zoos are tampering with nature, creating unnecessary trauma for these majestic elephants and populating zoos with more elephants who will live out deprived lives in captivity. Disturbingly, research needs to be done into how much this invasion into wild herds disrupts elephant societies.

"If captive zoo environments were truly the utopias advertised by zoos, the need for artificial insemination (AI) would be non-existent. Strikingly, behaviors such as infanticide, fratricide, the inability to reproduce, and stereotypies, to name but a few, observed exclusively in captive elephants, are absent with free-ranging elephants. AI exacerbates the suffering of elephants and will only add to the species decline, not save it."

— Les O'Brien, Elephant Consultant and former Zoo Elephant Keeper

You can help to free one captive elephant to a sanctuary, where he will never be forced to endure any more invasive sperm extraction procedures. Please take action now to **[free Billy from the Los Angeles Zoo](#)**.

[Donations to support our work](#) to free captive elephants are also needed and very much appreciated.



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Elephant Deaths at L.A. Zoo Renew Calls for Gentle Giants to Be Moved to Larger Sanctuaries

Home ranges for Asian elephants begin at a minimum of 2,471 acres, but the two left living at the city's zoo are confined to just a few acres — a circumstance activists believe to be deadly

JULIUS MILLER • FEB 2, 2024



A photo of Billy, one of the elephants at the Los Angeles Zoo.

(Photo by Glenn Koenig/Los Angeles Times via Getty Images)

Los Angeles Zoo currently stands as one of the most divisive institutions in the city, raising questions about its old sacraments.

It's no secret that under the Zoo's supervision, 16 elephants have died since it opened in 1966. Two of those came in the past year, with Shaunzi, a 53-year-old female Asian elephant being euthanized in January 2024 and Jewel, a 61-year-old female meeting the same fate just 12 months earlier, the [Los Angeles Times](#) previously reported.

L.A. Zoo tacked up Shaunzi's cause of death to "her age, past medical history" and her "inability to right herself with supportive efforts to raise her." However, their shrouded explanation veers away from the

expected: Shaunzi and other Asian elephants that have died may have suffered as a result of their constructed habitats.

Lights were placed around a photograph of a 53-year-old female Asian elephant named Shaunzi outside the Los Angeles Zoo, who was euthanized at the start of 2024.

(Francine Orr/ Los Angeles Times via Getty Images)

“I would say all of them [the elephants] died from that [a lack of space] because it accumulates over time,” Courtney Scott, Elephant Consultant for [In Defense of Animals](#), tells *Los Angeles* magazine.

“They have arthritis, they have joint disease, they have zoonotic behavior... there’s another study that shows they develop brain damage from lack of stimulation and space,” she adds.

The [study in question](#) comes from the Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation, an animal welfare organization in the United Kingdom. Not only does it reveal that “elephants in zoos stereotyped less, explored more, and showed more behavioral diversity in bigger enclosures than smaller ones,” but it also found that home ranges for Asian elephants begin at a minimum of 2,471 acres. Comparatively, Los Angeles Zoo’s elephant population currently [lives](#) in a 3.6 to 6.56-acre space.

“10 acres is considered large for a city zoo... The Houston Zoo has 12 elephants in three acres, so even if there was only one elephant, it’s unbelievably inadequate,” Scott says. “In captivity, they live about half as long on average.”

The IDA has recently honed in on Billy, an elephant that has been at L.A. Zoo since 1989. Zoo officials describe him and their other current resident, Tina, as “ambassadors for their endangered species” and say they must remain as “millions of Angelenos with the opportunity to establish meaningful, empathy-building connections with animals they might otherwise never see.”

Scott says the zoo continually utilizes such anthropomorphic language, or the attribution of human traits, emotions, or intentions to non-human beings. A similar example of such is Packy, a 54-year-old Asian elephant at the Oregon Zoo who was born into captivity and euthanized in 2017.

“They’ve constantly said that Packy was the ambassador and he was even the head of a parade, even though he wasn’t there,” Scott recalls. “Well, Pakky had no clue what that was, and he was just exploited for 55 years at the zoo.”

Many say to move Billy to a sanctuary, which, as per the aforementioned report, “are founded on a fundamental belief in the need for quality space — far bigger in size and more diverse in contact than any zoo enclosure.” However, L.A. Zoo clearly states on its site that “there is absolutely no reason for them to be sent to live in a sanctuary,” referencing their status as an “AZA-accredited facility.”

Marielle Williamson, left, joins other activists during a rally with In Defense of Animals, Elephant Guardians of Los Angeles and Los Angeles Animals for Animals at the Los Angeles Zoo on Sunday, Jan. 28, 2024 in Los Angeles, CA.

(Dania Maxwell / Los Angeles Times via Getty Images)

When protestors from the IDA and others calling for the transfer of Billy gathered outside the Zoo on Jan. 28, their presence was addressed in a similar, straightforward fashion: “The small number of activists campaigning to move Billy to another animal holding facility are basing their message on misinformation, untruths, and intentional mischaracterization of the L.A. Zoo elephant care program.”

Los Angeles magazine reached out to the L.A. Zoo to request further information on the alleged “misinformation, untruths, and intentional mischaracterizations” but never received a response.

The work done to free Billy would appear to span more than the “small number of activists” the Zoo claims. Historically, Cher, Lily Tomlin, Kim Bassinger and Bob Barker have advocated in favor of a sanctuary transfer.

“He is in pain both physically and psychologically. He spends 80% of his time rocking back and forth,” Cher told [PEOPLE](#) in 2019. “Billy is standing on hard packed dirt in a small, sterile environment. In the wild, he would be walking hundreds of miles a day on soft earth. In the zoo, Billy can’t choose what he eats at a Sanctuary he will have choices.”

Regardless, the case is still out on whether Billy will remain. A Los Angeles city committee previously [voted to send him to a sanctuary](#), but it’s yet to be approved by the L.A. City Council.

“I don't think I have time the rest of my life to get all the elephants out,” Scott joked. “But yeah, the time is coming for zoos to transition out of the old model.”

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NEWS/LOCAL

LA Zoo Takes Top Spot in List of Worst Zoos in North America for Elephants in 2023

by Gabriel Arizon, San Fernando Valley Sun/El Sol
January 17, 2024



In Defense of Animals holding a vigil Jan. 6 outside the Los Angeles Zoo to honor all the elephants who died at the zoo.
(Photo Courtesy of In Defense of Animals)

The international organization In Defense of Animals named the Los Angeles Zoo & Botanical Gardens the worst zoo in North America for elephants in 2023 due to its treatment of Billy – a 38-year-old Asian bull elephant.

In a list that includes the Houston Zoo, Denver Zoo, Oklahoma City Zoo and Oregon Zoo, the LA Zoo took the top spot owing to what the organization describes as years of zoo-related stress, loneliness and depression causing Billy's mental and physical health to decline. This is the eighth year the LA Zoo has made the organization's annual list.

Courtney Scott, elephant consultant for In Defense of Animals, said Billy exhibits some of the worst zoochotic behavior they've seen of any elephant in zoos. Zoochosis is a form of psychosis commonly observed in captive animals. It manifests as stereotypic activities that are monotonous actions with seemingly no goal or definitive objective. These actions can include head rolling, extreme licking, hair or feather pulling, striding and outline swimming.

Zoochosis appears more frequently in higher-intelligence animals, including monkeys, bears and orcas, but especially elephants.

"That is an indication that he [Billy] is under enormous stress, and he's suffering mentally and physically," Scott said. "He has the most need to get out of there before his body and his mind degenerate any further."

Scott brought up the two most recent deaths of Asian elephants in the care of the LA Zoo, 61-year-old Jewel in January 2023 and 53-year-old Shaunzi on Jan. 3, and said that unless Billy is taken to a sanctuary and begins to heal, he will likely share the same fate. Only one other elephant remains at the zoo, 57-year-old Tina.

Additionally, Scott pointed out that Billy is isolated most of the time because of musth – a naturally occurring, periodic condition in male elephants that typically lasts around two to three months characterized by heightened aggressive behavior and accompanied by a large rise in reproductive hormones. However, being isolated means that Billy has had no way to release all that energy and aggression. He's also been subject to numerous procedures to extract sperm for breeding elephants in other zoos, but those attempts failed.

"They're living with that frustration often for many months," Scott said. "Billy was in musth eight months last year, which is way longer than they would in the wild and it's because he's living in such deprived conditions."

Being in musth for that long meant zoo staff were not able to properly keep up with Billy's footcare. His daily pacing in his "puny-sized" exhibit over ground covered in urine and feces has created deep infections that could lead to fatal foot disease.

"The thing with elephants is that their bodies and their minds [have been] programmed for thousands of years to walk for miles," she continued. "It's literally what keeps them alive because if they don't move, they start degenerating. There's a lot of weight to put on their feet. They have to move to keep their muscles staying healthy and for their minds because they are intelligent. They need stimulation."

Scott said the LA Zoo has been resistant to move Billy to a sanctuary, despite the efforts of animal rights activists, attorneys and celebrities – including Cher, Lily Tomlin and Bob Barker. Even politicians have gotten involved. Former LA City Councilmember Paul Koretz introduced a motion to send Billy to a sanctuary, which was seconded by Councilmember Bob Blumenfield.

However, zoo leadership has downplayed the severity of Billy's zoochosis. In a 2012 lawsuit against the zoo, in which numerous staff were deposed, then LA Zoo Director John Lewis said that Billy's continuous head bobbing was a sign that he was anticipating food.

"Every wild elephant expert contradicted that and explained that it is not true, that it's a condition called ... zoochotic behavior," Scott said.

Currently, In Defense of Animals is focusing on closing elephant exhibits. Scott said that zoos are not a good place to keep any large exotic animal, adding that the ultimate goal is to see zoos transition to digital displays or even holograms.

The long-term goal of the organization is the closure of zoos or to have them transition to different models. Scott described one possible model – proposed by Michael Schmidt, who was a veterinarian at the Oregon Zoo – where zoos would collaborate to create large, sanctuary-like places that people could go to, but the animals would have the maximum amount of space and freedom that could be provided.

"There are all these innovative ideas out there ... so these things can be changed," Scott said. "I have been to zoos and seen animatronics [for a] huge moving dinosaur and kids were all over that thing. They loved it. So there are ways to still have a zoo but adopt different policies and different models that aren't inhumane."

The *San Fernando Valley Sun/el Sol* reached out to the LA Zoo, but they declined to comment.

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Los Angeles Zoo: Release Billy to Sanctuary!

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Los Angeles Zoo: Release Billy to Sanctuary!

16 December 2016 - Posted by Caroline Saxon

Los Angeles Zoo: Release Billy to Sanctuary!

The Los Angeles Zoo confines three Asian elephants in a very small exhibit and operate an invasive captive breeding program. The two females, Tina and Jewel, who are in their fifties and on loan from the San Diego Zoo, live in one portion of the enclosure. On the

other side of the exhibit is the lone male elephant, Billy, abducted from his mother and family in Malaysia as an infant, and acquired by the Los Angeles Zoo in 1989. Billy is kept separate from the two females and lives in chronic isolation. Billy deserves a better life, and he needs our help.

In the wild, elephants live in complex communities and occupy hundreds of miles of natural habitat where they have room to roam and be a part of the complex social network of a herd. In contrast, Billy, Jewel, and Tina live on less than three acres, surrounded by metal bars and electric wires, with no access to the trees or foliage that surround the stark enclosure. Living space is further reduced by the segregation of Billy.

Billy's forced isolation directly conflicts with current research on the social bonds of male elephants in the wild. As infants until about the age of 14, males live within their tightly bonded, matriarchal family group. As adults, males live within a social community where lasting bonds with other male elephants are forged, as well as interaction with females on an intermittent basis. Accordingly, Billy has been and continues to be deprived of companionship, healthy movement, mental stimulation, and social learning opportunities.

In addition, Billy has been forced to endure a highly invasive procedure to collect his semen for the purpose of artificially inseminating females at other zoos to breed baby elephants. According to zoo documents, Billy underwent training for the actual semen collection process at least 55 times between January 20, 2011 and November 14, 2014.

Due to the disparity between Billy's wild homeland of Malaysia, and the artificial prison where he is currently forced to reside, the violent rupture of his attachment to his mother, and the destruction of his complex social network, Billy shows the classic signs of profound and chronic trauma.

To keep up with the latest on Billy, follow the Elephant Guardians of Los Angeles **[Facebook page](#)**.

[Click here to take action.](#)

Communication from Public

Name: Salma Valdez

Date Submitted: 05/13/2025 05:45 PM

Council File No: 25-0600

Comments for Public Posting: I am requesting that funding is NOT taken away from the CEMO office to protect our climate efforts in front line communities, LASAN to be fully staffed as well as protecting the brownfield unit, and to preserve critical projects that protect us from oil and gas drilling. Sincerely, A CBE youth member

Communication from Public

Name: Ariana Miri

Date Submitted: 05/14/2025 11:20 PM

Council File No: 25-0600

Comments for Public Posting: Re: Zoo department and Billy & Tina, the elephants See my full testimony attached. * Send Billy & Tina to an accredited sanctuary. * Require Director Verret to submit \$80,000 transportation cost to send elephants to Tulsa Zoo for review with the Budget Committee. * Find alternate costs (including private funding) to send elephants instead to sanctuary. * Request Zoo Department Audit.

Dear Honorable Council Members,

Watch [Free Billy \(trailer\)](#) Pictures speak 1000 words.

LA Times Magazine: [The Ongoing Saga of Billy the Elephant](#) about the history of LA Zoo (please read entirely).

“Los Angeles Zoo currently stands as one of the most divisive institutions in the city, raising questions...” says LA Times.¹ In Defense of Animals IDS ranked LA Zoo the “worst zoo in North America for elephants in 2023 due to its treatment of Billy the elephant.”²

The key person in charge for last 25 years is Denise Verret, who served as deputy director, interim director, director & CEO commencing in the year 2000. Abuse of Billy has been ongoing for 36 years (since 1989). For 25 years, Verret has been in charge.

Billy was forced into invasive procedures by LA Zoo and AZA to artificially collect semen⁸ from 2011-2014. He was a virgin. **A human inserts his arm into the elephant’s anus to manually stimulate ejaculation.**^{3 8} Billy underwent what the zoo termed “training” for the semen collection process at least 55 times from June 20, 2011, to November 14, 2014.⁴ **He was completely isolated as the only elephant at the zoo for 21 years (1989-2010).** With 3 females added: two in 2010 and one in 2017, he was continuously isolated in his 1-acre encampment separated from the herd. He was anally raped by his caretakers and isolated in his 1-acre encampment with limited elephant socialization for comfort or companionship.

IMPORTANT:

Will artificial semen collection continue if Billy goes to an AZA zoo or AZA sanctuary?

This artificial semen collection procedure was started and directed by Associations of Zoos and Aquariums.⁸ AZA Standards for Elephant Management and Care **3.2.8.**⁵ states “All elephants must be **trained** to accept regular collection of blood, urine, feces, saliva, semen...” (Adopted 3/21/01, Updated 3/5/03).

PLEASE CONFIRM:

Re: artificial semen collection: **“The most recent AZA Asian Elephant Population Analysis and Breeding & Transfer Plan recommends that Billy continue to be used for breeding purposes.”**³

“Billy has never sired any offspring.”

¹ LA Magazine 2/2/24: Elephant Deaths at L.A. Zoo Renew Calls for Gentle Giants to Be Moved to Larger Sanctuaries. By Julius Miller <https://lamag.com/news/elephants-deaths-los-angeles-zoo-captivity-sanctuary>

² The Sun San Fernando Valley 1/17/24: LA Zoo Takes Top Spot in List of Worst Zoos in North America for Elephants in 2023. By Gabriel Arizon <https://sanfernandosun.com/2024/01/17/la-zoo-takes-top-spot-in-list-of-worst-zoos-in-north-america-for-elephants-in-2023/>

³ Free To Be Elephants Billy | 40 years old | Los Angeles Zoo <https://freetobeelephants.com/elephant/billy-2/>

⁴ In Defense of Animals 12/16/16: Los Angeles Zoo: Release Billy to Sanctuary!
Caroline Saxon <https://www.idausa.org/los-angeles-zoo-release-billy-sanctuary/>

⁵ AZA Standards for Elephant Management and Care (Adopted 2001, Updated 2003)
<https://www.elephants.com/pdf/AZA%20Elephant%20Standards%201.pdf>

- Demand for the resignation of Director & CEO of Los Angeles Zoo, Denise Verret until she agrees to a department audit and shows total transparency on the abuse of the elephants during her terms as Deputy Director, Interim Director, Chief Executive Officer and Director from 2000 to present.
- Hire independent counsel for performance and facilities audit. Audit will no doubt reveal compliance failure to AZA Standards for Elephant Management and Care.
- Review prior audit requested by City Council May 2024 of euthanasia of Jewel and Shaunzi, with elimination of half the herd. Report includes care instructions for last two elephants, Billy and Tina. Was care outlined in the audit upheld as being compliant? And compliance with AZA standards of elephant care? Does Billy and Tina exhibit the same health deteriorations as Jewel and Shaunzi? Has further deterioration in health been observed after the death of herd members? Due to lack of care? The zoochotic behavior of Billy has been video recorded as far back as 2007. What was done to help him cope or just years of ignoring?
- If any harm comes to Billy and Tina from this point forward in LA Zoo's custody under Director Verret's executive leadership, immediately suspension should occur for Director Verret.
- Crate train Billy and Tina weeks before transport so no tranquilizer is necessary. Three male bulls in LA Zoo care died in transport due to administering tranquilizers, over sedating, breathing issues, collapsing, or unconsciousness.
- Under no circumstances should Director Verret oversee transportation of Billy and Tina. The elephants are at their most vulnerable: Helpless, sedated, tranquilized, while half-conscious maneuvering into their cages. **An independent company is needed to transport Billy and Tina.**
- Confirm transportation procedures comply with AZA Standards for Elephant Management and Care. 1.4.10. Transport (in accordance with IATA) Sections: 1.4.10.1 – 1.4.10.11 (appvd. 2011, rev. 2012)⁶

CALL TO ACTION:

- Ensure review of \$80,000 transport cost of elephants to Tulsa Zoo from Denise Verret. Pursue accredited sanctuary options and private funding to send Billy and Tina to sanctuary. Do not transport Billy and Tina to AZA Tulsa Zoo.
- Send Billy and Tina to PAWS ARK 2000 Sanctuary in Northern California.
- Do not sent Billy or Tina to AZA sanctuary if AVA policy⁸ of artificial semen extraction will continue, given Billy's prior experiences.

Please review artificial semen collection: AZA Asian Elephant Population Analysis and Breeding & Transfer Plan recommends that Billy continue to be used for breeding purposes.³

⁶ AZA Standards for Elephant Management and Care Adopted (Approved March 2011, Revised April 2012)

https://assets.speakcdn.com/assets/2332/aza_standards_for_elephant_management_and_care.pdf

During the May 5th FY 2025-26 Proposed Budget Hearing, Denise Verret refused to send Billy and Tina to sanctuary and avoided questions repeatedly, replying, “**I am going to continue to make decisions that are in the best interest for the animals at the zoo and that includes the elephants.**”⁷

- **Is it in the best interest** of Billy and Tina to go to another zoo enclosure at AZA Tulsa Zoo with 1.57 acres per elephant? Billy already exhibits zoochotic mental behavior from his 1-acre enclosure.
- **Was it in the best interest** for Billy to be in solitude confinement his entire 36 years at L.A. Zoo? He spent his first 21 years as the only elephant in the zoo. Then another 12 years were spent isolated from female herd in his separate 1-acre enclosure.
- **Was it in the best interest** for Billy when in 2012, he had an opportunity to go to a 2,300-acre elephant sanctuary in Northern California (due to public outcry about his zoochosis) and LA Zoo denied him.⁸
- **Was it in the best interest** of the elephants to have a \$42 million expansion of “Elephants of Asia” exhibit to spend taxpayers money focused mainly on increasing tourist foot traffic areas. Priority was not given to significantly improve the outdoor habitation and welfare of the elephants. Instead, four elephants were given 3.6 acres which is 1-acre per elephant encampment.^{Error! Bookmark not defined.} The elephants became an object of money revenue. Billy’s zoochosis and mental state prior to expansion in 2010 was not priority or a concern. Verret was Deputy Director at the time.

Verret is on the Board of Directors for Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) as an **accreditation inspector** yet under her executive leadership, **LA Zoo is not abiding by AZA Standards for Elephant Management and Care.** (Adopted March 21, 2001, Updated May 5, 2003) and updated (Approved March 2011, Revised April 2012).

- Non-compliant: First 21 years (1989 to 2010), Billy was the only elephant at zoo void of any elephant contact, companionship or socialization till Tina and Jewel arrived 2010. Ten years, Verret was deputy director (2000 to 2010).

AZA Standards for Elephant Management and Care (Adopted 3/21/01, Updated 3/5/03)

- Group Compositions

2.2.4. Institutions must provide an opportunity for each elephant to exercise and interact socially with other elephants (Taylor and Poole 1998, EMA 1999).⁵

With the 2010 arrival of Tina and Jewel, Billy continued to be isolated in his 1-acre encampment, meeting minimal space requirements.

- Non-compliant for 1-year 2010 – 2011. AZA Policy revised March 2011. Female group size was not maintained. Three required. 2010-2017 only two females, Tina and Jewel.

AZA Standards for Elephant Management and Care (Adopted 3/21/01, Updated 3/5/03)

- Group Size

2.3.1. Zoos should make every effort to maintain elephants in social groupings. It is inappropriate to keep highly social female elephants singly (see Sukumar 1992, Taylor and Poole

⁷ 5/5 FY 2025-26 Budget Hearing https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xOtFe_1RqCA Start at 2:34 End at 3:00

⁸ Los Angeles Magazine 11/25/14: The Ongoing Saga of Billy the Elephant by Tamar Brott
<https://lamag.com/news/new-wrinkle>

1998, EMA 1999). Institutions should strive to hold no less than three elephants whenever possible.⁵

- Non-compliant for 16 months (Jan 3, 2024, to May 2025) with euthanasia of Shaunzi (Jan. 3, 2024). Only two elephants remain Billy and Tina. Three elephants are required for mixed gender.

AZA Standards for Elephant Management and Care (Adopted 3/21/01, Updated 3/5/03)

- Group Composition

2.2.1.1 Suggested age and sex structure of social group⁵

Standard: Each zoo holding elephants must hold a minimum of three females (or the space to hold three females), two males or three elephants of mixed gender.

- Non-compliant 8 months. 2023, Billy: Medical records show “his feet left untreated for eight months while...in musth...”⁹

AZA Standards for Elephant Management and Care (Approved March 2011, Revised April 2012)

- Medical Management

3.3.2.2. Foot Care⁶

Standard: The elephants should be free of foot injuries or foot disease...If foot injuries or foot disease are present, a current treatment regimen must be in place.

- Non-compliant for 14 years (AZA approved March 2011 to 2025)
Zoo denied Billy more space than his 1-acre encampment even though Billy exhibits extreme stress (videoed as early as 2007) with zoochotic behavior (standing in place, rocking, swaying repetitively, signs of immense stress and brain damage).

AZA Standards for Elephant Management and Care (Approved March 2011, Revised April 2012)

- **1.4.1.2.** Outdoor space⁶

Standard: Outdoor habitats must provide sufficient space and environmental complexity to both allow for and stimulate natural behavioral activities and social interactions resulting in healthy and well-adapted elephants.

- **Measurement:** If there are elephant behavioral, social, or medical issues shown to be caused by insufficient space, there must be a program in place (from a programmatic and/or facility perspective) to address the issue

We are at a critical time where we make or break Billy. He has endured so much. Have compassion for Billy the LONLIEST ELEPHANT. Send Tina and Billy to Sanctuary.

Watch [Free Billy \(full video\)](#) the Shocking Neglect of an LA Zoo Elephant.

Unravel years of abuse. If Billy's abuse is so well known to the public with outcry for years, what cries are we not hearing and not seeing inside the LA Zoo. There are 1,700 animals at the LA Zoo.

Thank you, Council Members.

⁹ In Defense of Animals: End Elephants Billy & Tina's Torment at The Los Angeles Zoo, Send Them to Sanctuary, Not Another Zoo!

<https://www.idausa.org/campaign/elephants/latest-news/free-la-zoo-elephants-billy-tina/#:~:text=Billy's%20Story,on%20his%201%2Dacre%20yard>

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The Ongoing Saga of Billy the Elephant

The years-long battle over Billy, the Los Angeles Zoo's best-known pachyderm, didn't end when he moved into a new \$42 million enclosure. He's part of a plan to save the very survival of a species—not wild elephants but the ones that live in zoos

TAMAR BROTT • NOV 25, 2014

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In the spring of 2010, a veterinarian named Dr. Thomas Hildebrandt flew over the savannahs of Africa, shooting male elephants with tranquilizer darts and—with the aid of something called an Acujack—masturbating them while they were unconscious so he could collect their sperm and cryogenically freeze it. Hildebrandt planned to inject it into the female zoo elephants of Europe and North America, which are not reproducing quickly enough to sustain the zoo population. One of the reasons they are not doing so is that male zoo elephants suffer from low libido and poor-quality sperm. Hildebrandt saw the project as a much-needed workaround. It was funded by zoos on both continents and dubbed “Operation Frozen Dumbo.”

The operation was the latest in a series of efforts by the zoo industry to address the dwindling number of zoo elephants, which has reached such a low mark that in 2005, the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (the North American zoo industry’s trade group) issued an advisory stating that if something wasn’t done, there would soon be nothing left to display. At present there are only 168 African and 138 Asian elephants in North America. Less than half of those are thought to be still capable of procreation, and of those that are, the majority are precariously close to being inbred. Nearly one-third of the Asian population, for instance, was sired by two elephants named Charlie and Vance.

The zoo elephant shortage is partially the result of the passage of the Endangered Species Act of 1973, which made it nearly impossible to import animals facing extinction. Prior to that, all one had to do was fly to where elephants live, shoot a mother, and capture its baby, so little thought had gone into the challenges of breeding them in captivity, which have proved to be extensive. In the beginning the issues seemed mostly logistical. Since elephants weigh an average of four tons and may be separated by thousands of miles, coupling them sometimes demanded the use of military transport planes. Over time, though, it became



apparent that the real issue was infertility, which for reasons no one understands, afflicts both males and females.



The zoo receives 1.5 million visitors a year. Photographs by Maarten De Boer

Hildebrandt, who was born in East Germany and is 51 years old, heads the Department of Reproduction Management at the Leibniz Institute for Zoo and Wildlife Research in Berlin. He's been attempting to address the procreative problems of near-extinct animals in captivity his entire career. In 1998, Hildebrandt pioneered the method now used to artificially inseminate elephants, but his efforts were stymied by his inability to freeze sperm in such a way that would keep it viable when defrosted. Consequently he was forced to rely on the chilled sperm of bulls living within an eight-hour radius of an ovulating female, which is how long sperm can live outside the body if kept in a solution made from quail or hen egg yolk.

Hildebrandt's difficulties stemmed from ice crystals, which would puncture the sperm cell membranes and destroy them. But in 2009, researchers devised a way to bypass this obstacle, using a method called "directional freezing" that in essence points the sharp ends of the ice crystals away from the cell.

Thus began Operation Frozen Dumbo, which if it succeeded could provide an unlimited supply of elephant sperm and ensure a fresh gene pool. But the outcome would not be known for 22 months, the gestation period for an elephant. In the meantime the AZA continued to pursue other avenues. It had already asked its 156-member zoos to begin collecting sperm from all elephants over the age of six that were not yet represented in the gene pool, which wasn't many. Of the North American Asian elephant population, there were three, to be exact. One lived in Mexico City. The second lived in Albuquerque. The third was a 12-pound virgin in Los Angeles named Billy.

At the time Billy was the Los Angeles Zoo's only elephant, and he did not seem a likely candidate to repopulate anything. He was 24 years old and had spent nearly all of his life in a pen the size of a small bowling alley, where he was often seen rocking back and forth the way some autistic people do and occasionally dry-humping an old tire. He was also the subject of one of the most bitter and longest-running lawsuits in the history of the zoo industry, one that began in 2007 and continues to this day.

The dispute initially appeared to be about the significance of Billy's rocking motion. A group of concerned citizens saw it as an indication that he was not flourishing at the zoo or was possibly going insane, and they petitioned the city, which owns the zoo and all the animals in it, to send Billy to a 2,300-acre elephant sanctuary in Northern California. The zoo did not want him to go, however. Plans were already under way to build him a new enclosure called the Pachyderm Forest. So the zoo mounted a countercampaign to assure the city that Billy's head bobbing was not a sign of distress but a sign of anticipatory pleasure at the thought of seeing his trainers. "It's kind of like when I come home and my dog is jumping up and down on the patio," the zoo's director, John Lewis, told me. He also said that a small enclosure was no impediment to a healthy lifestyle, noting that Billy's keepers had him do wind sprints by throwing carrots from one end of his enclosure to the other.

Billy had become a cause célèbre long before Hildebrandt reached Africa. Since 2003, famous people had been campaigning for his release, chief among them the renowned elephant behaviorist Joyce Poole, who is considered the Jane Goodall of pachyderms. In an open letter she stated that elephants don't rock back and forth in the wild, that it was a coping mechanism for Billy's "loneliness, boredom and frustration." Halle Berry, Cher, and Bill Maher led their own crusades; Lily Tomlin called the zoo "elephant-speak for Guantanamo"; and people were picketing and posting videos on YouTube. One of them featured a song that went "Billy, his name is Billy. / He's confined in a zoo with nothing to do / But bob and sway through every troubled day..."

To read the news accounts is to see how the topic of Billy's well-being became overshadowed by other topics, such as whether a city with no elephant is a city with no self-esteem and whether the people who want Billy sent to the sanctuary are elitists trying to deny the rest of us access to the wild kingdom. When councilman Dennis Zine said he'd seen elephants in Africa and that they don't belong in zoos, councilman Tom LaBonge, in whose district the zoo resides, proclaimed that not everyone can afford to go to Africa but that we can all take the freeway to the zoo. The notion that the public is entitled to see elephants during business hours has been championed by the zoo's supporters, most notably actress Betty White, who declared that the campaign to free Billy was only the opening salvo in a far larger battle. "It will not stop with elephants," she wrote in the zoo's quarterly magazine. "Giraffes will be next. If they win this battle, they will not stop until zoos themselves are extinct."

As farcical as it seemed, the bickering over Billy really was about things more critical than they appeared. In essence it was about what should be done with the last remaining members of a near-extinct species. And whether the zoo industry's commitment to breeding them in captivity has taken the law of supply and demand to its utmost extreme by, in a sense, monetizing extinction itself.

John Lewis, who has been the Los Angeles Zoo's director since 2003, has white hair and a mustache that recalls men who run ice cream parlors in Norman Rockwell paintings. Prior to his arrival in Los Angeles, he led the John Ball Zoo in Grand Rapids, Michigan, for 17 years. He also served as president of the AZA and is a former member of its accreditation committee. At 62 years old Lewis comes across as a cordial man of science. He makes a point never to anthropomorphize the animals in public. In fact, he doesn't know the human names bestowed on most of the animals and doesn't care to. "I know people like to say, 'This is Bob the Monkey,' " he said. "But I find it diminishes them. I prefer to focus on the uniqueness of their digestive systems and whether they eat leaves and ferment them in their stomachs."

Lewis presides over 1,200 animals that live in more or less three concentric circles. In the outer circle are the smaller apes and the hoof stock. In the second circle are the blue-chip animals most people come to the zoo to see: lions, tigers, bears, and apes. Elephants have always lived in the inner circle. Since the zoo is a botanical garden as well, Lewis also presides over the foliage between the cages, which is extraordinarily beautiful, especially in the late afternoon. There are fig trees, palms, honeysuckle, rosebushes, and cycads along with the insects and birds that dwell among them. Approximately 1.5 million people visit the zoo each year, and not all of them come with children. Many adults regard it as a place to commune with nature. I once heard a lady in the aviary cry out that it was like the Garden of Eden, and I've seen more than one woman stare deep into the eyes of a monkey and ask, "What are you thinking?"

Given the size of L.A., our zoo is surprisingly modest. It never makes the list of the country's top ten zoos and is outclassed by those that do. Omaha's zoo has America's largest indoor rain forest and desert. The zoo in Columbus, Ohio, has an adjoining 18-hole golf course and a water park. Closer to home, the Los Angeles Zoo has always lived in the shadow of the San Diego Zoo, whose collection of blue-chip animals is larger by an order of magnitude and includes pandas—something L.A. will probably never have, because the Chinese government rents them out for \$1 million a year and there aren't enough to go around.

The L.A. Zoo was built in 1966, and much of it seems trapped in the past. A good many of the animals still live in tiny enclosures and grottoes, and the people who are upset about Billy tend to be just as upset about the jaguar, whose cage is roughly the size of a food truck. "In a city so wealthy and so preoccupied with storytelling and the creation of illusion, you would expect something spectacular, almost breathtaking," Australian zoo designer David Hancocks told me. "But the Los Angeles Zoo is strangely disappointing."

Lewis was hired by mayor James Hahn in the hope that he would finally make the zoo world-class. He had the capital to do so. In 1998, bond monies were approved for the zoo to build ten new attractions costing \$172 million. Eight have been completed during Lewis's tenure, among them Sea Life Cliffs, Campo Gorilla Reserve, a reptile facility, and Rainforest of the Americas. But Lewis will most likely be remembered for the Pachyderm Forest, where he said he planned to breed elephants in order to save them from extinction.

The L.A. Zoo's jaguar, whose enclosure has stirred criticism for being too small. Photographs by Maarten De Boer.



The dispute over Billy was not the first of its kind. During the past ten years, campaigns have been waged against zoos around the country, and a handful have been effective. Zoos in Detroit, Toronto, Anchorage, San Francisco, and San Jose have sent their elephants to sanctuaries, and the Bronx Zoo has pledged to close its exhibit when the last of its elephants expire. The person behind many of those efforts is a woman in her fifties named Catherine Doyle, who has long brown hair and a nose stud and lives in Hollywood with her husband and son. She has been plaguing Lewis since 2004, when she first began putting the Los Angeles Zoo on her annual list of the worst zoos for elephants.

Doyle currently serves as director of science, research, and advocacy at Performing Animal Welfare Society, the sanctuary in the Northern California town of San Andreas. But in 2004, she was the elephant campaign director of the animal advocacy group In Defense of Animals, which involved flying around the country and trying to persuade zoos to send the elephants to PAWS or to the nation's only other sanctuary, located in Hohenwald, Tennessee. Sometimes Doyle would even provide funding for the animals' transportation, much of it donated by Bob Barker, the former host of *The Price Is Right*. Over the years Barker has spent several million dollars airlifting zoo elephants to sanctuaries and paying for their housing.

Back then Doyle usually dressed in a man's black suit jacket with black leggings, unless she was traveling in the Midwest, in which case she'd remove the nose stud and put on a skirt and heels. "I don't want to look marginal," she said.

She would often begin her presentations by noting that elephants are known to be highly intelligent and self-aware, meaning they can recognize themselves in the mirror, a trait thought to be shared by few animals. After that she might explain how they live in large herds led by matriarchs and that males leave the herd once they reach sexual maturity but that females remain together for life, helping one another through childbirth, rearing one another's offspring, and mourning one another's dead. Keeping such animals and breeding them in captivity, where many lead solitary lives, is both cruel and detrimental to their health, she'd say.

One set of statistics she's frequently cited is that the natural life span of elephants in the wild is 70 years; Africans average 33 years and Asians 44 in zoos, where they suffer from diseases such as herpes, tuberculosis, obesity, and arthritis, not to mention mental problems. "Billy's not the only elephant who rocks back and forth," Doyle told me. "You see the same stereotypical behavior all across the country. I've even heard of elephants self-mutilating. It gets so bad sometimes, they have to be put on Thorazine."

When Doyle first started, she was admittedly naive. She wore an elephant suit to a rally in El Paso and nearly collapsed from heat prostration. But in the years since, she'd come to understand that it is no easy thing to persuade people to give up their elephants. They tend to be associated with the happier aspects of childhood—Babar and Dumbo and the notion of the gentle giant—and some people can become irrational at the thought of their elephants being taken away, even in the face of scientific evidence indicating they'd be better off elsewhere. Doyle learned, whenever possible, to focus on the fiscal irresponsibility of maintaining elephants. It costs an average of \$100,000 a year just to keep one alive at a zoo. They eat 250 pounds of fresh produce a day, for example. They can also be lethal. So many keepers—16—have been killed by elephants during the past 24 years that the AZA now requires its member zoos to install elephant restraint devices, which are steel cages the size of a 7-Eleven, with adjustable walls, a series of small portholes, and hydraulic gates that allow zoo staff to examine the elephant without fear of reprisal. Doyle hoped that once people heard these things, they would conclude that the money might be better spent on, say, expanding the city's police force.

This strategy seemed especially apt in the case of Billy. His new enclosure, which would eventually cost \$12 million, was to be constructed during a period when L.A. was cutting city services in order to avoid

bankruptcy in the future. Doyle argued that it would be economical and humane to send Billy to PAWs, the only North American sanctuary with the capacity to contain male elephants. Barker, Tomlin, and Cher had pledged \$1.5 million between them to cover Billy's costs, and according to Doyle, a barn had already been reserved for him. It was set in the middle of the sanctuary, on a three-acre hillock that has a view of the Sierra, with other elephants nearby. There was Maggie from Anchorage, Lulu from San Francisco, Mara from San Jose, Wanda from Detroit, and Nicholas, who used to ride a bicycle in the circus. From the barn you could see their silhouettes tearing down branches and napping in the grass. But you would never be able to see them having sex, because the sanctuary finds the idea of raising more elephants in captivity to be repugnant. "The day they bring in a breeding female for Billy," Ed Stewart, who runs the sanctuary, told me, "is the day I lie down in front of a truck."

One of the sad facts of life is the ever-growing list of things we used to regard as wholesome that are now widely thought to be vaguely sinister, like priests or doughnuts or zoos. That zoos have come to be on this list is partly due to activists like Doyle and partly due to the proliferation of nature documentaries that serve only to reinforce their claims that zoo animals are torpid and sad and not living as they should. The frequency of bizarre zoo tragedies involving negligence has not helped matters. In the past eight years alone a zookeeper in Tucson inadvertently killed a giraffe by feeding it a poisonous plant, a goat at the Calgary Zoo accidentally strangled itself to death in front of small children while playing with a rope toy, and a hippopotamus in Topeka was parboiled in its own wading pool as a result of a boiler malfunction.

It is only natural that the AZA, whose member zoos generate an estimated \$2 billion a year, has a crisis management team dedicated to neutralizing the effect of such mishaps and the detractors who cite them. One way it does so is by downplaying the notion that zoos constitute an industry at all. The AZA portrays itself as the "world's preeminent wildlife conservation association" whose mission is not to entertain so much as to educate the public about the mysteries of the animal kingdom, a rapidly growing portion of which faces extinction. To visit a zoo these days is to see merry-go-rounds that have been transformed into "endangered species carousels" and signs posted outside the animals' cages noting how many are left on earth and soliciting donations on their behalf. The AZA claims that these efforts, along with its breeding programs, are so important, the animal kingdom's very survival depends on zoos. "We're not like the steel industry," an AZA spokesman told me. "We're a hedge against extinction."

This is a line of thinking Lewis adheres to. He argues that if Billy were hidden away near the Sierra, where no one could see him, the public would have no way of knowing about the plight of wild elephants. They are being killed by poachers at an estimated rate of one every 15 minutes, and the forests and savannahs where they used to live are being turned into farmland. Because there is nowhere left to hide or forage, they devour the crops and are frequently killed by farmers, who regard them less as a dwindling species and more as a terrifying breed of giant locust. "By keeping them in zoos and getting people excited about them and spending money while they're here, we can send money to Cambodia to support what's going on with

elephants in the wild,” Lewis said. “We have been donating close to \$30,000 a year to Flora & Fauna International. They’re teaching farmers how to protect their crops from elephants.”

Billy in his two-acre portion of the Elephants of Asia exhibit. Photographs by Maarten De Boer.

The idea that elephants must remain in zoos so they can serve as ambassadors and fund-raisers for their brethren in the wild became a dominant theme in the debate over Billy. Doyle had come up against this argument in previous campaigns, because it is one of the primary talking points of the AZA, which has framed its desire to breed elephants as a moral imperative.

And many of the zoo’s supporters believe that it is. Karen Winnick, who is president of the Zoo Commission (the five-member oversight panel appointed by the mayor), told the L.A. city council that the survival of elephants depended on the donations of zoo-goers. “Once we no longer exhibit an animal, we can no longer support conservation efforts in the wild,” she said.

It was partly on the basis of this argument that the city council approved construction of the Pachyderm Forest and later its expansion to six manicured acres. However, the true scope of Lewis’s ambitions could only be seen in the renderings of the elephant barn: The building had 11 stalls, which the zoo evidently hoped Billy would populate himself, giving it one of the largest zoo-elephant populations in North America. A call had already gone out to find him a mate, and staff had begun training him to stand on his hind legs so he would know what to do when she arrived. What’s more, Billy was being prepped for sperm collection, which is generally accomplished by inserting one’s arm into the elephant’s anus and massaging his prostate until he ejaculates. If that doesn’t work, a rubber elephant vagina can be used, but these can be cumbersome.



Construction on the Pachyderm Forest began in 2006. The following year the late actor Robert Culp and a Brentwood real estate agent named Aaron Leider sued the City of Los Angeles and John Lewis to halt construction, arguing that even if it were significantly larger than Billy's existing pen and made to look like paradise, the Pachyderm Forest's six acres would never be adequate for a bull elephant. "It's like raising a human child in a regular-size closet, then you move him to a walk-in closet and hail it as some kind of a wonderful change," said Culp and Leider's attorney, David Casselman.

A 61-year-old with white, receding hair and a rapid-fire way of speaking, Casselman works in Tarzana but frequently flies to Cambodia, where he's established his own elephant sanctuary. It was clear from the start that Casselman hoped to use the lawsuit to expose what he considered the mendacity of the zoo industry, of which there was no clearer evidence in his mind than the \$42 million price tag of the Pachyderm Forest. "Do you have any idea what that amount of money could do for the elephants of Cambodia?" he said to me. "I personally bought a million acres there for a quarter of a million dollars. They could have bought a hundred square miles of land that would have protected them in perpetuity." As for the \$30,000 the zoo donates each year to Cambodia, he scoffed. "The AZA has done nothing to help the elephants of Cambodia that I'm aware of. It's all just a grandiose scheme to imprison animals and use them to raise money in the name of conservation."

Casselmann filed suit under an obscure taxpayer statute that allows citizens to sue their government if it has engaged in waste or fraud. By reframing Billy as a piece of city property and using the industry's own elephant mortality rates against it, he could argue that if Billy were placed in the Pachyderm Forest, he would perish prematurely, thereby wasting taxpayer money. The city tried to have the lawsuit dismissed, but the court agreed to hear it, which Casselman regarded as a fortuitous sign, if not a victory unto itself. No one had used this legal strategy before, and the interest it generated in the animal rights community was immense. "I'm getting calls from all over the country," Casselman told me when I met him. "People are watching."

Despite the lawsuit, the Pachyderm Forest opened in December 2010. The exhibit, which had been renamed Elephants of Asia, had a giant red-and-orange Thai-themed barn, two ponds, a waterfall, a mud wallow, and additional features not visible to visitors. The rock formation behind the waterfall was actually a hollow booth with little windows for the staff to fill with vegetables, and the depth of the smaller pond was adjustable so that, in the event a baby were born, it could splash around without drowning.

The zoo had even managed to procure a pair of females. However, the shortage is so profound, the only ones available were two circus refugees named Tina and Jewel, both of whom were past childbearing age and suffered from gum disease. They wouldn't be able to share Billy's space, either; the zoo feared that in his near-constant state of sexual arousal, he might inadvertently kill them. And so he and the pair were cordoned off from one another by a series of fences and hydraulic gates through which Billy could touch them only with his trunk.

Lewis and I went to see Elephants of Asia one morning not long after it opened. The trial was still ahead, but he was confident the zoo would prevail. "I know they're wrong," he said of his opponents. It galled Lewis how they claimed that elephants live an average of 70 years in the wild and only 40 in zoos. "The reality is, elephants in the wild and zoos live an average of 40 years," he said. Lewis's statement is based on the position of the AZA, which allows that elephants do live to 70 in an ideal world, but since the world is not ideal, one must factor in the 35,000 elephants reportedly killed by poachers each year, which lowers the



combined life expectancy to about 40. “You and I can live to 115, but probably we’re going to live until about 80,” he said. “And they weren’t explaining that context.”

The Chimpanzees of Mahale Mountains exhibit opened in 1998, replacing a concrete enclosure. Photographs by Maarten De Boer.

Because Lewis does not give interviews alone, we were accompanied by the zoo’s then-marketing director, Jason Jacobs, who drove us along in a little cart that had been painted in zebra stripes. Every so often he would peer at us in the rearview mirror with a look of weariness. Jacobs could not grasp why the media had focused on Billy when there were so many other animals at the zoo whose stories sometimes bordered on the miraculous. “The Los Angeles Zoo has successfully raised condors, bringing them back from the brink of extinction, but nobody ever talks about that,” he said, adding that one of the orangutan’s air sacs had been surgically removed in a groundbreaking operation.

The Los Angeles Zoo also has among the largest collections of chimpanzees in the country and is only 1 of 14 zoos in North America to house François’ langurs, an endangered leaf-eating monkey. In some cases the most interesting thing about the animals is how they came to be at the zoo. Many of the reptiles were confiscated from a Malaysian smuggling ring, and customs agents at LAX once donated a baby pangolin, a Congolese anteater prized for its delicate meat. This one was too young to eat when captured, so hunters sold it to some tourists who tried to bring it back to Sherman Oaks in a basket. “And then there was Alfred the blind sea lion,” Jacobs said. “He washed ashore with head trauma, and we decided to take him in, and now he’s sired offspring.”





When we pulled up to Elephants of Asia, Tina and Jewel were sunning themselves in the yard. Across the way was a pavilion where people could learn how much the creatures eat and defecate and similar details. “After rainstorms elephants move toward the rainy spots, looking for tender new grasses,” one of the signs read. Other signs explained how you could text money to help resolve the human-elephant conflicts in Cambodia. “People can actually make donations right there to that fieldwork,” Lewis said.

Billy was in the barn in his elephant restraint device. Up close he was massive, with speckled, leathery skin and tiny eyes. Behind him there were rows of empty stalls. Two had padded floors on which a baby might someday be born. Lewis appeared resigned to the fact that a fertile female would not be arriving in the foreseeable future. The AZA has instituted new guidelines, he explained, stipulating that groups of bonded elephants should not be split up. “Our hope is if there is a pair of females somewhere and one dies...” Lewis said. If that didn’t work, the zoo was prepared to house a bachelor herd. “One of the things that all the zoos are dealing with now is that if we’re going to breed elephants, 50 percent are going to be bulls,” he said, noting that three of the larger stalls had been sized and reinforced for male elephants. In the meantime the zoo was continuing to attempt to collect Billy’s sperm. “This is where it all happens,” Lewis said, referring to the elephant restraint device. But things had not happened as planned. Though Billy tolerated the prostate massage, thus far he had refused to ejaculate. “We may have to call in experts,” Lewis said.

By that Lewis no doubt meant Thomas Hildebrandt, who was trying to get the African sperm past customs agents in Europe and America. He was also monitoring the menstrual cycle of female zoo elephants on both continents to determine which should receive it. The process would be costly and complicated, involving three-meter catheters, light-emitting endoscopes, video monitors, and a staff of at least eight. It has proved unreliable as well. A female at the Woodland Park Zoo in Seattle has reportedly been inseminated more than 100 times to no avail. And since the first procedure took place in 2000, nearly half of the 50 babies conceived through artificial insemination have died—14 of them in utero or at birth. Eight never made it to their fifth birthdays.

In June 2012, the lawsuit finally went to trial, and the zoo had done all it could to cast doubt on the legitimacy of PAWS. Jason Jacobs noted that the facility was not accredited by the AZA, that it didn’t allow visitors without appointments, and that it didn’t have 24-hour veterinary service like the zoo. “Sanctuaries are for animals who don’t have options,” he told *L.A. Weekly*, as if PAWS were a halfway house for unwanted elephants. Zoo supporters went so far as to suggest that the facility was so large, people who wanted to visit Billy might not be able to see him through the foliage. The campaign appeared to have its intended effect. According to pollsters hired by the zoo, the majority of those surveyed believed that “closing the habitat and shipping Billy to a distant location would deprive local schoolchildren and their families of the opportunity to learn about the threat of extinction facing Asian elephants today.”

But now the zoo would be forced to make sound legal arguments against the expert witnesses assembled by Casselman. There was Joyce Poole, who would be flying in from Norway; Lori Marino, a professor of neuropsychology at Emory University; renowned zoo designer David Hancocks from Australia; and veterinarians appalled by Billy’s condition. The zoo couldn’t discredit all that expertise, so instead it tried to discredit the relevance of their testimony. To this end the city attorney representing the zoo sought to bifurcate the universe of elephants into two distinct groups: those that live in the wild and those that live in zoos. This would enable the zoo to argue that while the plaintiffs’ witnesses may be knowledgeable about wild elephants, they knew little about zoo elephants, of which there was only one true expert: the zoo industry itself. As Lewis explained, “We have experience caring for animals in the zoo, and that can be very different from the way animals care for themselves in the wild.”

The legal strategy was undermined by the zoo’s own witnesses, most of them zoo staff. For instance,   t of captive elephants are prone to arthritis and other ailments related to the soil in their enclosures being too

compacted by their great weight. During the course of the dispute, Lewis had assured the city that the zoo went to tremendous lengths to protect Billy's feet by rototilling the soil every few days to keep it from hardening. The zoo's witnesses, however, testified that the new enclosure had never once been rototilled. They also testified that the Elephants of Asia exhibit was not all that Lewis had claimed it would be to the city council. Of the six acres he promised, only two were accessible to Billy, partly because the enclosure had been subdivided to keep him away from the females and partly because the vegetation throughout his pen had been electrified to prevent him from devouring it.

The most noteworthy revelation pertained to the zoo's animal behavior department, on whose opinions Lewis had based his claims that Billy's rocking motion was not a sign of distress. During the trial it was revealed that the department head, Cathleen Cox, specialized in primates. Cox testified that she had no firsthand experience with pachyderms and had never even read a book about one; Billy was the only elephant she'd ever known. As for Billy's keeper, Vicky Guarnett, she maintained she knew in her heart that he was happy.

The judge was unconvinced. His decision began with the line "All is not well at the Elephants of Asia exhibit at the Los Angeles Zoo," and it grew worse from there as he recounted the misleading statements made by the zoo and commented on the ignorance of its staff, which he described as suffering from an "anthropomorphic fantasy that the elephants are happy...in captivity." As appalled as the judge was by the goings-on at the zoo, however, he did not see that it met the legal definition of cruelty or negligence. And so Elephants of Asia was not shut down, and Billy was not sent to the sanctuary. The zoo was simply ordered to rototill the soil in Billy's enclosure and exercise him more.

If Lewis found the revelations embarrassing, he gave no indication in public. "It's the zoo version of, 'Do you still beat your wife?'" he told the *Los Angeles Times* when the trial ended. A few days later the zoo posted a coloring book drawing of an elephant on its Web site, stating, "Asian elephants are an endangered species threatened by habitat loss and fragmentation," and that for every colored-in elephant sent in, the zoo would donate \$1 to conservation programs in Sri Lanka and Cambodia.

Casselman and the zoo appealed the judge's ruling, but the lawsuit has since been eclipsed by other events. In August 2012, a month after the trial ended, the Vienna Schönbrunn Zoo held a press conference to announce that one of its females had been impregnated with the defrosted sperm of an elephant named Steve, who resides at the Phinda private game reserve in South Africa. The director of the zoo held up an ultrasound of the fetus, whose trunk and large ears were unmistakable. A year later the baby was born, and in May 2014, a second was born in England, also from Steve's sperm, and two more females have since been inseminated.

When I spoke to Hildebrandt afterward, he seemed both elated and sad. He knew the elephants that he helped bring into the world would not be normal in the true sense of the word. "Elephants in zoos will never have behavior like they do in the wild," he said. "That's for sure." As he saw it, though, the only answer to this problem was to breed more of them. If he could do that, he might at least create larger groups that approximate the normal herd structure in the wild. This, in turn, might make the elephants less neurotic and possibly even more fertile. "The most important element in the life of an animal is offspring," he said, "and having elephants with babies will be ten times better than what we have now." There was no time to dispute the ethics. "All we can hope for is that the zoos improve," Hildebrandt said, adding that he thinks they are.



The African elephant sperm he's collected is now being stored in cryobanks in Europe. As of early summer, he had not been able to get it through the red tape of U.S. Customs, nor had he found a way to freeze the sperm of Asian elephants. But success on both fronts is surely imminent, and the zoos of North America are readying themselves for it. In the last three years alone Oklahoma City spent \$13 million on a new enclosure that hopes to house 5, and the Denver Zoo spent \$55 million, where 12 could live. This year Wichita's Sedgwick Zoo announced it was breaking ground on a \$10 million exhibit wherein visitors will be able to boat alongside the elephants. And next year the Oregon Zoo plans to open an exhibit that is expected to cost nearly \$60 million, with room for a dozen.

So far no zoo seems to be going the route Casselman and Doyle have strongly recommended to the L.A. Zoo: Casselman had hoped to persuade it to replace Billy with an animatronic elephant. He envisioned children climbing atop it so as to better appreciate its massiveness and the complexity of its trunk, while Doyle envisioned interactive consoles and giant screens projecting live feeds from a national park in Kenya. It is more than likely that Billy will live out the rest of his days at Elephants of Asia, where he continues rocking back and forth before tens of thousands of visitors each year. But if and when he produces enough viable sperm, Doyle sees a new legal battle over who will control it. "After all," she says, "doesn't it technically belong to the taxpayers of Los Angeles?"

Tamar Brott is a writer based in Oakland. Her story about dog trainer Vladislav Roytapel appeared in the May 2009 issue.

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FREE



BILLY

40 YEARS OLD | MALE | ASIAN | WILD
LOS ANGELES ZOO (LOS ANGELES, CA)

Billy is a wild-born male Asian elephant who has spent all but one year of his life in captivity. Born roaming freely with his familial herd in Malaysia around 1985, Billy was captured less than a year after his birth. In 1989 he was imported to the United

States and brought to the Los Angeles Zoo. For the majority of the time Billy has been confined at the zoo, he has been held alone in a barren enclosure. Captivity in such an impoverished environment causes brain damage by subjecting elephants to extreme psychological stress. For decades, Billy has been observed engaging in stereotypic behavior, most frequently intense head bobbing, which is a coping mechanism for dealing with stress.

TAKE ACTION >

BILLY'S STORY

Billy is a wild-born male Asian elephant who has spent all but one year of his life in captivity. Born roaming freely with his familial herd in Malaysia around 1985, Billy was captured less than a year after his birth. In 1989 he was imported to the United States and brought to the Los Angeles Zoo.

A 1989 training **video** shows Billy being repeatedly jabbed and led around by a bullhook, a weapon-like device that is used to control elephants through the infliction of pain. In the video, a zoo employee talks about chaining Billy and using the bullhook in various ways to exert control over him, such as touching Billy's hypersensitive body parts. In 1993, Billy was sent to Have Trunk Will Travel, most likely for training to submit to human commands. Have Trunk Will Travel was a notorious traveling entertainment operation that had been plagued by allegations of **extreme cruelty** to elephants. In 1994, Billy returned to the Los Angeles Zoo where he has remained ever since.

In 2012, a lawsuit was brought against the Los Angeles Zoo regarding its treatment of elephants, and the extent of the physical abuse Billy endured—in what the zoo referred to as “training”—was laid bare. After a trial, the presiding judge **wrote**: “The evidence shows that when Billy was much younger, trainers formerly with the Los Angeles Zoo trained him to lie down using a block and tackle. Trainers also used a bull hook, a stick with a nail, or other similar tool. When elephants that were trained or ‘broken’ with a bull hook are subsequently shown a bull hook or an object that looks like a bull hook, they (quite understandably) become afraid, and comply with requests by the trainer or keeper. [The Los Angeles Zoo director] confirmed that if an elephant has been hurt by a bull hook in the past, the elephant will react negatively if a keeper merely shows or displays a bull hook.”

The Los Angeles Zoo has just 3 acres of usable outdoor space for elephants, which is divided into 4 yards. For the majority of the time Billy has been confined at the zoo, he has been held alone in a barren enclosure. Captivity in such an impoverished environment causes brain damage by subjecting elephants to extreme psychological stress. For decades, Billy has been observed engaging in stereotypic behavior, most frequently intense head bobbing, which is a coping mechanism for dealing with stress.

Billy has been forced to participate in the **Association of Zoos and Aquariums’ captive breeding program**. Public records reveal that during a three year period, the zoo attempted to collect Billy’s semen at least 55 times. The semen collection procedure was a gross violation of Billy’s autonomy, in addition to being a great risk to his health and safety. It often involved placing Billy in an elephant restraint device, rendering him unable to freely move, and having a human insert their arm into his anus and massage his prostate to stimulate ejaculation. **Despite years of semen collection attempts, Billy has never sired any offspring. The most recent AZA Asian Elephant Population Analysis and Breeding &**

Transfer Plan recommends that Billy continue to be used for breeding purposes.

In addition to enduring traumatic trainings, long-term isolation, and grotesque semen collection procedures, Billy has also suffered from inadequate foot care—for elephants held in small captive environments, foot care is incredibly important. Foot disease is a leading **cause** of death in captive elephants. Records from 2023 show that the zoo did not perform regular foot care on Billy for eight months while he was in **musth**, resulting in overgrown nails and a significant accumulation of dead tissue.

There has been a long campaign, spanning decades, calling for Billy's release to an elephant sanctuary where his complex physical and psychological needs can be met. Celebrities such as **Bob Barker**, **Lily Tomlin**, and **Cher** have championed his freedom. Over 800,000 people have signed a **petition** calling for his release to sanctuary. Several Los Angeles City Council members have introduced **multiple** motions over the years to **close** the zoo's elephant exhibit or **relocate** Billy to a sanctuary. The Los Angeles Times' Editorial Board **wrote** a powerful article advocating for Billy's transfer to a sanctuary.

Despite the public outcry regarding Billy's plight, zoo officials have steadfastly refused to grant him a measure of freedom that was stolen from him. They justify his captivity by claiming he plays an important role in conservation by serving as an ambassador for his species, but nothing could be further from the truth. Seeing an elephant suffering day in and day out, in an unnatural space and engaging in behaviors unseen in the wild, serves no legitimate purpose. If anything, Billy is an ambassador for why confining elephants in zoos is an archaic and shameful practice, one that future generations will rightly view with moral outrage. The judge in the 2012 lawsuit against the Los Angeles Zoo recognized as much, when he wrote: "Captivity is a terrible existence for any intelligent, self-aware species, which the undisputed evidence shows elephants are."

Billy is not living at the Los Angeles Zoo; he is deteriorating as zoo officials look on. For once, the zoo must prioritize Billy's interests before its own and relocate him to a sanctuary that can meet his complex needs.

TAKE ACTION TODAY

A future where no elephant has to endure the traumas of being torn from their families and natural habitats, bred against their will, and shipped from zoo to zoo is possible, and we need your help to make it a reality.

TAKE ACTION >

SUBMIT INFORMATION

Do you have a tip for us? The Free to be Elephants project relies on our supporters to keep us up-to-date with the latest news, updates and photos about elephants in their local facilities. Use this form to submit your info and help us expose the reality of elephant captivity across America.

Drop files here or
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Accepted file types: jpg, png, gif, mov, mp4, avi, Max. file size: 50 MB, Max. files: 5.

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**End Elephants Billy & Tina's Torment At
The Los Angeles Zoo, Send Them To
Sanctuary, Not Another Zoo!**

**End Elephants Billy & Tina's Torment At
The Los Angeles Zoo, Send Them To
Sanctuary, Not Another Zoo!**

Supporters

18129



UPDATE: The Los Angeles Zoo recently announced its plan to send Billy and Tina to the Tulsa Zoo in Oklahoma, defying the years of advocacy by impassioned activists, renowned elephant experts and lawmakers to send them to a true sanctuary. Please sign this alert to keep the pressure on the zoo to honor the will of those who want these elephants to finally experience the peace and freedom they deserve. Speak up, call and write to the zoo with the message: not another zoo!

Elephants Tina and Billy are two decades apart in age, but two factors unite them: their many years of suffering at the Los Angeles Zoo and the obvious stress they endure as evidenced by their advanced zoochotic behavior. Act now to send these beleaguered elephants to a sanctuary where they can rest and heal from their years of anguish at the LA Zoo.

End Billy & Tina's Torment At The LA Zoo



Tina, born in the wild, was ripped from her home in Asia and now at 58 has spent all but one year of her life in captivity. Billy was snatched from his home in Malaysia at just 4 years old and has existed in a zombie-like state at the zoo for 35 years.

Tina's Story

At just 1 year old, Tina was separated from her mother and family and shipped across the world to be exploited in circuses in the U.S. For over 30 years, she was punished with bullhooks to perform tricks. In 2009, she and her circus mate, Jewel, were confiscated from their abusive trainer by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and sent to the San Diego Zoo. One year later, she and Jewel landed at the Los Angeles Zoo where Tina remains today.

Sadly, her longtime companion Jewel died in 2023, and not long after, another zoo inmate, Shaunzi, died, leaving Tina alone and grieving over now two losses. Despite her zoo-related ailments including joint disease and arthritis, her medical records indicate that Tina is doing well overall for her age. Therefore we can conclude that she is fit for transport to sanctuary. It is imperative that she goes soon before her health takes a downward turn and she dies like Shaunzi and Jewel before her.



Billy's Story

Billy has been alone for his entire 35 years at the LA Zoo. He was introduced to the three elderly females but spent little of his life in their company. Instead every day, for hours on end, Billy continually rocks, sways, or paces back and forth on his 1-acre yard.

The zoo's medical records indicate that his feet were left untreated for eight months while he was in musth, a periodic reproductive phase. As a result, the conditions of Billy's feet are described by a former elephant keeper as abysmal and clearly show he is living in pain. The lack of treatment has left him vulnerable to fatal foot disease. The zoo's inability to care for him is a prime indicator that he should be retired from the zoo.

Billy was also subjected to dozens of highly invasive procedures to extract sperm with no success. Billy has endured enough misery, it is time for him to be released from his hellish experience at the LA Zoo and given the gift of freedom and expert veterinary care he so richly deserves.

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Elephants Assaulted in the Wild to Increase Zoo Populations

End Elephant
Exploitation

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Elephants Assaulted in the Wild to Increase Zoo Populations

January 26, 2024 - Posted by Courtney Scott

TAG: ELEPHANTS, ZOOS

Elephants die faster than they can reproduce in zoos. In desperation to increase their population of elephants, zoos have resorted to stealing sperm from elephants in the wild.

Operation Frozen Jumbo 3 is underway in Kruger National Park, South Africa. It's a collaboration with zoo organizations around the world, expanding on a sperm extraction procedure dubbed "Sperminator."

Freezing sperm to inseminate female elephants has been fraught with failure in the wild and in captivity. Now this dreadfully cruel and inefficient process has been refined and is able to get more pregnancies from fewer invasive procedures. However, what is the cost of this success for the elephants?

Elephant semen



"Forcing captive and wild male elephants into involuntary sperm extraction, sometimes via chemical immobilization, and then coercively inseminating female elephants without their choice of partner, is rape. These violations, hidden behind the guise of conservation, are a trespass on personal autonomy and remove all choice and control over an individual's outcomes or mates."

— Les O'Brien, Elephant Consultant and former Zoo Elephant Keeper



It is a gruesome operation for the elephants. As reported in the Boston Globe: "First, the vet inserts a pump into the elephant's rectum and fills the intestines with an enormous quantity of water — to create space that makes an ultrasound exam possible. Next, he inserts an electric stimulation device into the animal's rectum to initiate orgasms to produce sperm."

After the unconscious elephant's tail, tusks, penis, and testes are measured, the vets collect the blood and DNA and finally inject him with the antidote to wake him. Many elephants have been subjected to this extraction in the wild and captivity with little success.

"Elephants, when protected in their natural home-range habitats, live active lives and fulfill crucial ecological roles as keystone species, ecosystem engineers, and seed dispersers – contributions obstructed by human interference and forced imprisonment. In their countries of origin, natural environments where elephants are well-protected have witnessed a rise in their wild numbers, free from artificial insemination (AI) and other human intervention."

— Les O'Brien, Elephant Consultant and former Zoo Elephant Keeper

At In Defense of Animals, we believe we should leave wild animals alone in the one place where they can genuinely live wild and free. Instead, zoos are tampering with nature, creating unnecessary trauma for these majestic elephants and populating zoos with more elephants who will live out deprived lives in captivity. Disturbingly, research needs to be done into how much this invasion into wild herds disrupts elephant societies.

"If captive zoo environments were truly the utopias advertised by zoos, the need for artificial insemination (AI) would be non-existent. Strikingly, behaviors such as infanticide, fratricide, the inability to reproduce, and stereotypies, to name but a few, observed exclusively in captive elephants, are absent with free-ranging elephants. AI exacerbates the suffering of elephants and will only add to the species decline, not save it."

— Les O'Brien, Elephant Consultant and former Zoo Elephant Keeper

You can help to free one captive elephant to a sanctuary, where he will never be forced to endure any more invasive sperm extraction procedures. Please take action now to **[free Billy from the Los Angeles Zoo](#)**.

[Donations to support our work](#) to free captive elephants are also needed and very much appreciated.



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Elephant Deaths at L.A. Zoo Renew Calls for Gentle Giants to Be Moved to Larger Sanctuaries

Home ranges for Asian elephants begin at a minimum of 2,471 acres, but the two left living at the city's zoo are confined to just a few acres — a circumstance activists believe to be deadly

JULIUS MILLER • FEB 2, 2024



A photo of Billy, one of the elephants at the Los Angeles Zoo.

(Photo by Glenn Koenig/Los Angeles Times via Getty Images)

Los Angeles Zoo currently stands as one of the most divisive institutions in the city, raising questions about its old sacraments.

It's no secret that under the Zoo's supervision, 16 elephants have died since it opened in 1966. Two of those came in the past year, with Shaunzi, a 53-year-old female Asian elephant being euthanized in January 2024 and Jewel, a 61-year-old female meeting the same fate just 12 months earlier, the [Los Angeles Times](#) previously reported.

L.A. Zoo tacked up Shaunzi's cause of death to "her age, past medical history" and her "inability to right herself with supportive efforts to raise her." However, their shrouded explanation veers away from the

expected: Shaunzi and other Asian elephants that have died may have suffered as a result of their constructed habitats.

Lights were placed around a photograph of a 53-year-old female Asian elephant named Shaunzi outside the Los Angeles Zoo, who was euthanized at the start of 2024.

(Francine Orr/ Los Angeles Times via Getty Images)

“I would say all of them [the elephants] died from that [a lack of space] because it accumulates over time,” Courtney Scott, Elephant Consultant for [In Defense of Animals](#), tells *Los Angeles* magazine.

“They have arthritis, they have joint disease, they have zoonotic behavior... there’s another study that shows they develop brain damage from lack of stimulation and space,” she adds.

The [study in question](#) comes from the Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation, an animal welfare organization in the United Kingdom. Not only does it reveal that “elephants in zoos stereotyped less, explored more, and showed more behavioral diversity in bigger enclosures than smaller ones,” but it also found that home ranges for Asian elephants begin at a minimum of 2,471 acres. Comparatively, Los Angeles Zoo’s elephant population currently [lives](#) in a 3.6 to 6.56-acre space.

“10 acres is considered large for a city zoo... The Houston Zoo has 12 elephants in three acres, so even if there was only one elephant, it’s unbelievably inadequate,” Scott says. “In captivity, they live about half as long on average.”

The IDA has recently honed in on Billy, an elephant that has been at L.A. Zoo since 1989. Zoo officials describe him and their other current resident, Tina, as “ambassadors for their endangered species” and say they must remain as “millions of Angelenos with the opportunity to establish meaningful, empathy-building connections with animals they might otherwise never see.”

Scott says the zoo continually utilizes such anthropomorphic language, or the attribution of human traits, emotions, or intentions to non-human beings. A similar example of such is Packy, a 54-year-old Asian elephant at the Oregon Zoo who was born into captivity and euthanized in 2017.

“They’ve constantly said that Packy was the ambassador and he was even the head of a parade, even though he wasn’t there,” Scott recalls. “Well, Pakky had no clue what that was, and he was just exploited for 55 years at the zoo.”

Many say to move Billy to a sanctuary, which, as per the aforementioned report, “are founded on a fundamental belief in the need for quality space — far bigger in size and more diverse in contact than any zoo enclosure.” However, L.A. Zoo clearly states on its site that “there is absolutely no reason for them to be sent to live in a sanctuary,” referencing their status as an “AZA-accredited facility.”

Marielle Williamson, left, joins other activists during a rally with In Defense of Animals, Elephant Guardians of Los Angeles and Los Angeles Animals for Animals at the Los Angeles Zoo on Sunday, Jan. 28, 2024 in Los Angeles, CA.

(Dania Maxwell / Los Angeles Times via Getty Images)

When protestors from the IDA and others calling for the transfer of Billy gathered outside the Zoo on Jan. 28, their presence was addressed in a similar, straightforward fashion: “The small number of activists campaigning to move Billy to another animal holding facility are basing their message on misinformation, untruths, and intentional mischaracterization of the L.A. Zoo elephant care program.”

Los Angeles magazine reached out to the L.A. Zoo to request further information on the alleged “misinformation, untruths, and intentional mischaracterizations” but never received a response.

The work done to free Billy would appear to span more than the “small number of activists” the Zoo claims. Historically, Cher, Lily Tomlin, Kim Bassinger and Bob Barker have advocated in favor of a sanctuary transfer.

“He is in pain both physically and psychologically. He spends 80% of his time rocking back and forth,” Cher told [PEOPLE](#) in 2019. “Billy is standing on hard packed dirt in a small, sterile environment. In the wild, he would be walking hundreds of miles a day on soft earth. In the zoo, Billy can’t choose what he eats at a Sanctuary he will have choices.”

Regardless, the case is still out on whether Billy will remain. A Los Angeles city committee previously [voted to send him to a sanctuary](#), but it’s yet to be approved by the L.A. City Council.

“I don't think I have time the rest of my life to get all the elephants out,” Scott joked. “But yeah, the time is coming for zoos to transition out of the old model.”

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NEWS/LOCAL

LA Zoo Takes Top Spot in List of Worst Zoos in North America for Elephants in 2023

by Gabriel Arizon, San Fernando Valley Sun/El Sol
January 17, 2024



In Defense of Animals holding a vigil Jan. 6 outside the Los Angeles Zoo to honor all the elephants who died at the zoo.
(Photo Courtesy of In Defense of Animals)

The international organization In Defense of Animals named the Los Angeles Zoo & Botanical Gardens the worst zoo in North America for elephants in 2023 due to its treatment of Billy – a 38-year-old Asian bull elephant.

In a list that includes the Houston Zoo, Denver Zoo, Oklahoma City Zoo and Oregon Zoo, the LA Zoo took the top spot owing to what the organization describes as years of zoo-related stress, loneliness and depression causing Billy's mental and physical health to decline. This is the eighth year the LA Zoo has made the organization's annual list.

Courtney Scott, elephant consultant for In Defense of Animals, said Billy exhibits some of the worst zoochotic behavior they've seen of any elephant in zoos. Zoochosis is a form of psychosis commonly observed in captive animals. It manifests as stereotypic activities that are monotonous actions with seemingly no goal or definitive objective. These actions can include head rolling, extreme licking, hair or feather pulling, striding and outline swimming.

Zoochosis appears more frequently in higher-intelligence animals, including monkeys, bears and orcas, but especially elephants.

"That is an indication that he [Billy] is under enormous stress, and he's suffering mentally and physically," Scott said. "He has the most need to get out of there before his body and his mind degenerate any further."

Scott brought up the two most recent deaths of Asian elephants in the care of the LA Zoo, 61-year-old Jewel in January 2023 and 53-year-old Shaunzi on Jan. 3, and said that unless Billy is taken to a sanctuary and begins to heal, he will likely share the same fate. Only one other elephant remains at the zoo, 57-year-old Tina.

Additionally, Scott pointed out that Billy is isolated most of the time because of musth – a naturally occurring, periodic condition in male elephants that typically lasts around two to three months characterized by heightened aggressive behavior and accompanied by a large rise in reproductive hormones. However, being isolated means that Billy has had no way to release all that energy and aggression. He's also been subject to numerous procedures to extract sperm for breeding elephants in other zoos, but those attempts failed.

"They're living with that frustration often for many months," Scott said. "Billy was in musth eight months last year, which is way longer than they would in the wild and it's because he's living in such deprived conditions."

Being in musth for that long meant zoo staff were not able to properly keep up with Billy's footcare. His daily pacing in his "puny-sized" exhibit over ground covered in urine and feces has created deep infections that could lead to fatal foot disease.

"The thing with elephants is that their bodies and their minds [have been] programmed for thousands of years to walk for miles," she continued. "It's literally what keeps them alive because if they don't move, they start degenerating. There's a lot of weight to put on their feet. They have to move to keep their muscles staying healthy and for their minds because they are intelligent. They need stimulation."

Scott said the LA Zoo has been resistant to move Billy to a sanctuary, despite the efforts of animal rights activists, attorneys and celebrities – including Cher, Lily Tomlin and Bob Barker. Even politicians have gotten involved. Former LA City Councilmember Paul Koretz introduced a motion to send Billy to a sanctuary, which was seconded by Councilmember Bob Blumenfield.

However, zoo leadership has downplayed the severity of Billy's zoochosis. In a 2012 lawsuit against the zoo, in which numerous staff were deposed, then LA Zoo Director John Lewis said that Billy's continuous head bobbing was a sign that he was anticipating food.

"Every wild elephant expert contradicted that and explained that it is not true, that it's a condition called ... zoochotic behavior," Scott said.

Currently, In Defense of Animals is focusing on closing elephant exhibits. Scott said that zoos are not a good place to keep any large exotic animal, adding that the ultimate goal is to see zoos transition to digital displays or even holograms.

The long-term goal of the organization is the closure of zoos or to have them transition to different models. Scott described one possible model – proposed by Michael Schmidt, who was a veterinarian at the Oregon Zoo – where zoos would collaborate to create large, sanctuary-like places that people could go to, but the animals would have the maximum amount of space and freedom that could be provided.

"There are all these innovative ideas out there ... so these things can be changed," Scott said. "I have been to zoos and seen animatronics [for a] huge moving dinosaur and kids were all over that thing. They loved it. So there are ways to still have a zoo but adopt different policies and different models that aren't inhumane."

The *San Fernando Valley Sun/el Sol* reached out to the LA Zoo, but they declined to comment.

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Los Angeles Zoo: Release Billy to Sanctuary!

Fight Animal Cruelty!

[DONATE](#)

Los Angeles Zoo: Release Billy to Sanctuary!

16 December 2016 - Posted by Caroline Saxon

Los Angeles Zoo: Release Billy to Sanctuary!

The Los Angeles Zoo confines three Asian elephants in a very small exhibit and operate an invasive captive breeding program. The two females, Tina and Jewel, who are in their fifties and on loan from the San Diego Zoo, live in one portion of the enclosure. On the

other side of the exhibit is the lone male elephant, Billy, abducted from his mother and family in Malaysia as an infant, and acquired by the Los Angeles Zoo in 1989. Billy is kept separate from the two females and lives in chronic isolation. Billy deserves a better life, and he needs our help.

In the wild, elephants live in complex communities and occupy hundreds of miles of natural habitat where they have room to roam and be a part of the complex social network of a herd. In contrast, Billy, Jewel, and Tina live on less than three acres, surrounded by metal bars and electric wires, with no access to the trees or foliage that surround the stark enclosure. Living space is further reduced by the segregation of Billy.

Billy's forced isolation directly conflicts with current research on the social bonds of male elephants in the wild. As infants until about the age of 14, males live within their tightly bonded, matriarchal family group. As adults, males live within a social community where lasting bonds with other male elephants are forged, as well as interaction with females on an intermittent basis. Accordingly, Billy has been and continues to be deprived of companionship, healthy movement, mental stimulation, and social learning opportunities.

In addition, Billy has been forced to endure a highly invasive procedure to collect his semen for the purpose of artificially inseminating females at other zoos to breed baby elephants. According to zoo documents, Billy underwent training for the actual semen collection process at least 55 times between January 20, 2011 and November 14, 2014.

Due to the disparity between Billy's wild homeland of Malaysia, and the artificial prison where he is currently forced to reside, the violent rupture of his attachment to his mother, and the destruction of his complex social network, Billy shows the classic signs of profound and chronic trauma.

To keep up with the latest on Billy, follow the Elephant Guardians of Los Angeles **[Facebook page](#)**.

[Click here to take action.](#)

Communication from Public

Name:

Date Submitted: 05/14/2025 03:07 PM

Council File No: 25-0600

Comments for Public Posting: Los Angeles has some truly unique architecture in the world. No other place on earth has such a wonderful diversity of fantastic modern, organic, mid-century buildings. This is L.A.'s world heritage in a sense. This is Los Angeles through and through. I am deeply concerned that budget cuts will destroy that heritage. I understand that the Hollyhock House is expensive to maintain and is demanding in that sense. But we ought to find a way to preserve it as best as we can. I visited it. It impacted me. It gave me ideas. It made me think. It is an essential piece of Los Angeles' culture and lore. When companies, individuals or organizations try to balance their budget, they go for the biggest expense. Not the small ones. The biggest expense in the budget is not Arts and Cultural Opportunities, which is one of the smallest. The biggest is crime control. Please cut a tiny bit there. Police departments won't suffer. The Hollyhock House and other unique and remarkable structures need to exist in the best shape we can have them. This is truly beneficial to this city. Please do not cut the Arts budget. Thank you.

Communication from Public

Name: Dakotah

Date Submitted: 05/14/2025 03:52 PM

Council File No: 25-0600

Comments for Public Posting: Re: Zoo department and Billy & Tina, the elephants Send Billy & Tina to an accredited sanctuary. Require Director Verret to submit \$80,000 transportation cost to send elephants to Tulsa Zoo for review with the Budget Committee. Find alternate costs (including private funding) to send elephants instead to sanctuary. Request Zoo Department Audit.

Communication from Public

Name: Chelsey Crabbe

Date Submitted: 05/14/2025 04:29 PM

Council File No: 25-0600

Comments for Public Posting: This park is my safe space. This park is the city's only UNESCO World Heritage Site. This park is one of the only places in the city where one can see the mountains and the ocean from the same vantage point, equally in the middle of both. This park is one of the only parks in the city where art, culture, and nature are intentionally joined together, proving how vital this holistic vision of our public square really is... Cutting the budget for things that support a vision of what humanity could be and what society could look like in this city is wrong, especially when the police budget is simultaneously being increased. This choice perpetuates the belief that many of this city's population should be treated like criminals, rather than investing in programs and spaces that adhere to the potentiality of a better society. Cutting this budget line is a really bad move, especially for political gain. Putting Barnsdall Art Park on the chopping block is an egregious misstep in budgetary allocations. Not just policy-wise, but on a human-level -- how is the world expected to come to this city for the Olympics and believe in something greater if this city chooses to fold so easily in the face of elevating our humanity? This choice is a cop-out, so more cops can come in which is ironic and deeply upsetting for myself, my community, and our world's heritage sites.

Communication from Public

Name: stephanie pincetl

Date Submitted: 05/14/2025 12:49 PM

Council File No: 25-0600

Comments for Public Posting: Dear Budget Committee I would like to commend to committee for its hard work regarding the budget shortage the city faces, and the very difficult choices before us. I would like to strongly support the thoughtful parsing of staffing for the Police Department and the Fire Department. It takes courage to stand up for the police staff that does all the back office work that enables better policing and crime solving over officers on the street. Likewise, the understanding of the staffing needs of the Fire Department is a nuanced question and one that, due to the recent fires, has become very contested (despite numerous fire fighters having been sent home, the overwhelming winds and much more). Then we learn of the Fire Department union head making nearly \$540,000 due to overtime. . . Neither ethical nor professional. And his is not alone. If he were paid less, perhaps we could afford more fire fighters, for example, but it is an indication of internal problems in the LAFD and how funds are allocated, including toward paying mechanics to service the equipment. I would like to urge the budget committee to preserve funding for departments like CEMO whose work means - in the end - savings for the city and the public health system (less exposures to high heat etc. . .), and for housing services. As the saying goes, prevention is worth a pound of cure. This also applies to the Police Department. Less police violence means less law suits, and enormous savings for the city. The settlements the city is facing are tearing a huge hole in the city's budget. This is unconscienable and should cause the Police Department pause. Rogue behavior undermining so many essential services. Finally, I would like to suggest the Committee call for a Blue Ribbon Commission to investigate both the policy and fire unions for their role in our massive budget deficit, protection of egregious behavior, and general lack of responsibility to the tax payers. I am not one to advocate for defunding the police, but I do think its clearly time for accountability. Thank you again for your work, your difficult work. best regards Stephanie Pincetl 10757 Westminster Ave LA 90034

Communication from Public

Name: Elaine Felde

Date Submitted: 05/13/2025 02:27 AM

Council File No: 25-0600

Comments for Public Posting: Reducing our city's Police Department??! We're already WELL BELOW the number necessary, and well below the number we had in 2020 while crime has only increased. Neighborhoods are under attack from the homeless, burglars, armed robbers, gang offenses, etc. Perhaps murders and other violent crimes have decreased, but in my neighborhood all of the above have increased. I firmly disagree with this proposal, in addition to reducing the civilian force directing traffic, etc. We're living in the Wild West here. We need an enlarged police force for a city of this magnitude.

Communication from Public

Name: Scott Lee

Date Submitted: 05/14/2025 01:00 PM

Council File No: 25-0600

Comments for Public Posting: I recently heard the elimination of City Planning's Wildlife and Rim of the Valley and Environmental Justice work programs, LASAN's Biodiversity and Healthy Soils Program and the elimination of the Climate Emergency Mobilization Office was under consideration. While I understand the deficit the city faces, what I don't understand is the cutting of programs that mean so much to the future of this city. As the recent fires have shown us, without a deep understanding of the impact of climate change, we face more of these catastrophes in the future. I worked at the disaster recovery center in Altadena for three months after the fires and saw first hand the impact on the people of Altadena. I can only imagine what the impact was on wildlife and the environment. These programs are vital to preparing this city for the future we face with further climate change. I appeal to you to keep these programs running so Los Angeles can have a sustainable future and meet the inevitable challenge of climate change with knowledge and understanding.

Communication from Public

Name: Lynne Chao

Date Submitted: 05/14/2025 01:13 PM

Council File No: 25-0600

Comments for Public Posting: re: LA Zoo and Tina & Billy • Request Director Denise Verret of LA Zoo to submit \$80,000 transportation cost to ship Tina and Billy to Tulsa Zoo so that it can be reviewed by the Budget Committee. • Seek alternate costs (as well as by private funding) to send Billy and Tina to an accredited sanctuary. • Audit Zoo Department with independent counsel. My full testimony is attached.

Dear Honorable Council Members,

Watch [Free Billy \(trailer\)](#) Pictures speak 1000 words.

LA Times Magazine: [The Ongoing Saga of Billy the Elephant](#) about the history of LA Zoo (please read entirely).

“Los Angeles Zoo currently stands as one of the most divisive institutions in the city, raising questions...” says LA Times.¹ In Defense of Animals IDS ranked LA Zoo the “worst zoo in North America for elephants in 2023 due to its treatment of Billy the elephant.”²

The key person in charge for last 25 years is Denise Verret, who served as deputy director, interim director, director & CEO commencing in the year 2000. Abuse of Billy has been ongoing for 36 years (since 1989). For 25 years, Verret has been in charge.

Billy was forced into invasive procedures by LA Zoo and AZA to artificially collect semen⁸ from 2011-2014. He was a virgin. **A human inserts his arm into the elephant’s anus to manually stimulate ejaculation.**^{3 8} Billy underwent what the zoo termed “training” for the semen collection process at least 55 times from June 20, 2011, to November 14, 2014.⁴ **He was completely isolated as the only elephant at the zoo for 21 years (1989-2010).** With 3 females added: two in 2010 and one in 2017, he was continuously isolated in his 1-acre encampment separated from the herd. He was anally raped by his caretakers and isolated in his 1-acre encampment with limited elephant socialization for comfort or companionship.

IMPORTANT:

Will artificial semen collection continue if Billy goes to an AZA zoo or AZA sanctuary?

This artificial semen collection procedure was started and directed by Associations of Zoos and Aquariums.⁸ AZA Standards for Elephant Management and Care **3.2.8.**⁵ states “All elephants must be **trained** to accept regular collection of blood, urine, feces, saliva, semen...” (Adopted 3/21/01, Updated 3/5/03).

PLEASE CONFIRM:

Re: artificial semen collection: **“The most recent AZA Asian Elephant Population Analysis and Breeding & Transfer Plan recommends that Billy continue to be used for breeding purposes.”**³

“Billy has never sired any offspring.”

¹ LA Magazine 2/2/24: Elephant Deaths at L.A. Zoo Renew Calls for Gentle Giants to Be Moved to Larger Sanctuaries. By Julius Miller <https://lamag.com/news/elephants-deaths-los-angeles-zoo-captivity-sanctuary>

² The Sun San Fernando Valley 1/17/24: LA Zoo Takes Top Spot in List of Worst Zoos in North America for Elephants in 2023. By Gabriel Arizon <https://sanfernandosun.com/2024/01/17/la-zoo-takes-top-spot-in-list-of-worst-zoos-in-north-america-for-elephants-in-2023/>

³ Free To Be Elephants Billy | 40 years old | Los Angeles Zoo <https://freetobeelephants.com/elephant/billy-2/>

⁴ In Defense of Animals 12/16/16: Los Angeles Zoo: Release Billy to Sanctuary!
Caroline Saxon <https://www.idausa.org/los-angeles-zoo-release-billy-sanctuary/>

⁵ AZA Standards for Elephant Management and Care (Adopted 2001, Updated 2003)
<https://www.elephants.com/pdf/AZA%20Elephant%20Standards%201.pdf>

- Demand for the resignation of Director & CEO of Los Angeles Zoo, Denise Verret until she agrees to a department audit and shows total transparency on the abuse of the elephants during her terms as Deputy Director, Interim Director, Chief Executive Officer and Director from 2000 to present.
- Hire independent counsel for performance and facilities audit. Audit will no doubt reveal compliance failure to AZA Standards for Elephant Management and Care.
- Review prior audit requested by City Council May 2024 of euthanasia of Jewel and Shaunzi, with elimination of half the herd. Report includes care instructions for last two elephants, Billy and Tina. Was care outlined in the audit upheld as being compliant? And compliance with AZA standards of elephant care? Does Billy and Tina exhibit the same health deteriorations as Jewel and Shaunzi? Has further deterioration in health been observed after the death of herd members? Due to lack of care? The zoochotic behavior of Billy has been video recorded as far back as 2007. What was done to help him cope or just years of ignoring?
- If any harm comes to Billy and Tina from this point forward in LA Zoo's custody under Director Verret's executive leadership, immediately suspension should occur for Director Verret.
- Crate train Billy and Tina weeks before transport so no tranquilizer is necessary. Three male bulls in LA Zoo care died in transport due to administering tranquilizers, over sedating, breathing issues, collapsing, or unconsciousness.
- Under no circumstances should Director Verret oversee transportation of Billy and Tina. The elephants are at their most vulnerable: Helpless, sedated, tranquilized, while half-conscious maneuvering into their cages. **An independent company is needed to transport Billy and Tina.**
- Confirm transportation procedures comply with AZA Standards for Elephant Management and Care. 1.4.10. Transport (in accordance with IATA) Sections: 1.4.10.1 – 1.4.10.11 (appvd. 2011, rev. 2012)⁶

CALL TO ACTION:

- Ensure review of \$80,000 transport cost of elephants to Tulsa Zoo from Denise Verret. Pursue accredited sanctuary options and private funding to send Billy and Tina to sanctuary. Do not transport Billy and Tina to AZA Tulsa Zoo.
- Send Billy and Tina to PAWS ARK 2000 Sanctuary in Northern California.
- Do not sent Billy or Tina to AZA sanctuary if AVA policy⁸ of artificial semen extraction will continue, given Billy's prior experiences.

Please review artificial semen collection: AZA Asian Elephant Population Analysis and Breeding & Transfer Plan recommends that Billy continue to be used for breeding purposes.³

⁶ AZA Standards for Elephant Management and Care Adopted (Approved March 2011, Revised April 2012)

https://assets.speakcdn.com/assets/2332/aza_standards_for_elephant_management_and_care.pdf

During the May 5th FY 2025-26 Proposed Budget Hearing, Denise Verret refused to send Billy and Tina to sanctuary and avoided questions repeatedly, replying, “**I am going to continue to make decisions that are in the best interest for the animals at the zoo and that includes the elephants.**”⁷

- **Is it in the best interest** of Billy and Tina to go to another zoo enclosure at AZA Tulsa Zoo with 1.57 acres per elephant? Billy already exhibits zoochotic mental behavior from his 1-acre enclosure.
- **Was it in the best interest** for Billy to be in solitude confinement his entire 36 years at L.A. Zoo? He spent his first 21 years as the only elephant in the zoo. Then another 12 years were spent isolated from female herd in his separate 1-acre enclosure.
- **Was it in the best interest** for Billy when in 2012, he had an opportunity to go to a 2,300-acre elephant sanctuary in Northern California (due to public outcry about his zoochosis) and LA Zoo denied him.⁸
- **Was it in the best interest** of the elephants to have a \$42 million expansion of “Elephants of Asia” exhibit to spend taxpayers money focused mainly on increasing tourist foot traffic areas. Priority was not given to significantly improve the outdoor habitation and welfare of the elephants. Instead, four elephants were given 3.6 acres which is 1-acre per elephant encampment.^{Error! Bookmark not defined.} The elephants became an object of money revenue. Billy’s zoochosis and mental state prior to expansion in 2010 was not priority or a concern. Verret was Deputy Director at the time.

Verret is on the Board of Directors for Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) as an **accreditation inspector** yet under her executive leadership, **LA Zoo is not abiding by AZA Standards for Elephant Management and Care.** (Adopted March 21, 2001, Updated May 5, 2003) and updated (Approved March 2011, Revised April 2012).

- Non-compliant: First 21 years (1989 to 2010), Billy was the only elephant at zoo void of any elephant contact, companionship or socialization till Tina and Jewel arrived 2010. Ten years, Verret was deputy director (2000 to 2010).

AZA Standards for Elephant Management and Care (Adopted 3/21/01, Updated 3/5/03)

- Group Compositions

2.2.4. Institutions must provide an opportunity for each elephant to exercise and interact socially with other elephants (Taylor and Poole 1998, EMA 1999).⁵

With the 2010 arrival of Tina and Jewel, Billy continued to be isolated in his 1-acre encampment, meeting minimal space requirements.

- Non-compliant for 1-year 2010 – 2011. AZA Policy revised March 2011. Female group size was not maintained. Three required. 2010-2017 only two females, Tina and Jewel.

AZA Standards for Elephant Management and Care (Adopted 3/21/01, Updated 3/5/03)

- Group Size

2.3.1. Zoos should make every effort to maintain elephants in social groupings. It is inappropriate to keep highly social female elephants singly (see Sukumar 1992, Taylor and Poole

⁷ 5/5 FY 2025-26 Budget Hearing https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xOtFe_1RqCA Start at 2:34 End at 3:00

⁸ Los Angeles Magazine 11/25/14: The Ongoing Saga of Billy the Elephant by Tamar Brott
<https://lamag.com/news/new-wrinkle>

1998, EMA 1999). Institutions should strive to hold no less than three elephants whenever possible.⁵

- Non-compliant for 16 months (Jan 3, 2024, to May 2025) with euthanasia of Shaunzi (Jan. 3, 2024). Only two elephants remain Billy and Tina. Three elephants are required for mixed gender.

AZA Standards for Elephant Management and Care (Adopted 3/21/01, Updated 3/5/03)

- Group Composition

2.2.1.1 Suggested age and sex structure of social group⁵

Standard: Each zoo holding elephants must hold a minimum of three females (or the space to hold three females), two males or three elephants of mixed gender.

- Non-compliant 8 months. 2023, Billy: Medical records show “his feet left untreated for eight months while...in musth...”⁹

AZA Standards for Elephant Management and Care (Approved March 2011, Revised April 2012)

- Medical Management

3.3.2.2. Foot Care⁶

Standard: The elephants should be free of foot injuries or foot disease...If foot injuries or foot disease are present, a current treatment regimen must be in place.

- Non-compliant for 14 years (AZA approved March 2011 to 2025)
Zoo denied Billy more space than his 1-acre encampment even though Billy exhibits extreme stress (videoed as early as 2007) with zoochotic behavior (standing in place, rocking, swaying repetitively, signs of immense stress and brain damage).

AZA Standards for Elephant Management and Care (Approved March 2011, Revised April 2012)

- **1.4.1.2.** Outdoor space⁶

Standard: Outdoor habitats must provide sufficient space and environmental complexity to both allow for and stimulate natural behavioral activities and social interactions resulting in healthy and well-adapted elephants.

- **Measurement:** If there are elephant behavioral, social, or medical issues shown to be caused by insufficient space, there must be a program in place (from a programmatic and/or facility perspective) to address the issue

We are at a critical time where we make or break Billy. He has endured so much. Have compassion for Billy the LONLIEST ELEPHANT. Send Tina and Billy to Sanctuary.

Watch [Free Billy \(full video\)](#) the Shocking Neglect of an LA Zoo Elephant.

Unravel years of abuse. If Billy's abuse is so well known to the public with outcry for years, what cries are we not hearing and not seeing inside the LA Zoo. There are 1,700 animals at the LA Zoo.

Thank you, Council Members.

⁹ In Defense of Animals: End Elephants Billy & Tina's Torment at The Los Angeles Zoo, Send Them to Sanctuary, Not Another Zoo!

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The Ongoing Saga of Billy the Elephant

The years-long battle over Billy, the Los Angeles Zoo's best-known pachyderm, didn't end when he moved into a new \$42 million enclosure. He's part of a plan to save the very survival of a species—not wild elephants but the ones that live in zoos

TAMAR BROTT • NOV 25, 2014

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In the spring of 2010, a veterinarian named Dr. Thomas Hildebrandt flew over the savannahs of Africa, shooting male elephants with tranquilizer darts and—with the aid of something called an Acujack—masturbating them while they were unconscious so he could collect their sperm and cryogenically freeze it. Hildebrandt planned to inject it into the female zoo elephants of Europe and North America, which are not reproducing quickly enough to sustain the zoo population. One of the reasons they are not doing so is that male zoo elephants suffer from low libido and poor-quality sperm. Hildebrandt saw the project as a much-needed workaround. It was funded by zoos on both continents and dubbed “Operation Frozen Dumbo.”

The operation was the latest in a series of efforts by the zoo industry to address the dwindling number of zoo elephants, which has reached such a low mark that in 2005, the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (the North American zoo industry’s trade group) issued an advisory stating that if something wasn’t done, there would soon be nothing left to display. At present there are only 168 African and 138 Asian elephants in North America. Less than half of those are thought to be still capable of procreation, and of those that are, the majority are precariously close to being inbred. Nearly one-third of the Asian population, for instance, was sired by two elephants named Charlie and Vance.

The zoo elephant shortage is partially the result of the passage of the Endangered Species Act of 1973, which made it nearly impossible to import animals facing extinction. Prior to that, all one had to do was fly to where elephants live, shoot a mother, and capture its baby, so little thought had gone into the challenges of breeding them in captivity, which have proved to be extensive. In the beginning the issues seemed mostly logistical. Since elephants weigh an average of four tons and may be separated by thousands of miles, coupling them sometimes demanded the use of military transport planes. Over time, though, it became



apparent that the real issue was infertility, which for reasons no one understands, afflicts both males and females.



The zoo receives 1.5 million visitors a year. Photographs by Maarten De Boer

Hildebrandt, who was born in East Germany and is 51 years old, heads the Department of Reproduction Management at the Leibniz Institute for Zoo and Wildlife Research in Berlin. He's been attempting to address the procreative problems of near-extinct animals in captivity his entire career. In 1998, Hildebrandt pioneered the method now used to artificially inseminate elephants, but his efforts were stymied by his inability to freeze sperm in such a way that would keep it viable when defrosted. Consequently he was forced to rely on the chilled sperm of bulls living within an eight-hour radius of an ovulating female, which is how long sperm can live outside the body if kept in a solution made from quail or hen egg yolk.

Hildebrandt's difficulties stemmed from ice crystals, which would puncture the sperm cell membranes and destroy them. But in 2009, researchers devised a way to bypass this obstacle, using a method called "directional freezing" that in essence points the sharp ends of the ice crystals away from the cell.

Thus began Operation Frozen Dumbo, which if it succeeded could provide an unlimited supply of elephant sperm and ensure a fresh gene pool. But the outcome would not be known for 22 months, the gestation period for an elephant. In the meantime the AZA continued to pursue other avenues. It had already asked its 156-member zoos to begin collecting sperm from all elephants over the age of six that were not yet represented in the gene pool, which wasn't many. Of the North American Asian elephant population, there were three, to be exact. One lived in Mexico City. The second lived in Albuquerque. The third was a 12-pound virgin in Los Angeles named Billy.

At the time Billy was the Los Angeles Zoo's only elephant, and he did not seem a likely candidate to repopulate anything. He was 24 years old and had spent nearly all of his life in a pen the size of a small bowling alley, where he was often seen rocking back and forth the way some autistic people do and occasionally dry-humping an old tire. He was also the subject of one of the most bitter and longest-running lawsuits in the history of the zoo industry, one that began in 2007 and continues to this day.

The dispute initially appeared to be about the significance of Billy's rocking motion. A group of concerned citizens saw it as an indication that he was not flourishing at the zoo or was possibly going insane, and they petitioned the city, which owns the zoo and all the animals in it, to send Billy to a 2,300-acre elephant sanctuary in Northern California. The zoo did not want him to go, however. Plans were already under way to build him a new enclosure called the Pachyderm Forest. So the zoo mounted a countercampaign to assure the city that Billy's head bobbing was not a sign of distress but a sign of anticipatory pleasure at the thought of seeing his trainers. "It's kind of like when I come home and my dog is jumping up and down on the patio," the zoo's director, John Lewis, told me. He also said that a small enclosure was no impediment to a healthy lifestyle, noting that Billy's keepers had him do wind sprints by throwing carrots from one end of his enclosure to the other.

Billy had become a cause célèbre long before Hildebrandt reached Africa. Since 2003, famous people had been campaigning for his release, chief among them the renowned elephant behaviorist Joyce Poole, who is considered the Jane Goodall of pachyderms. In an open letter she stated that elephants don't rock back and forth in the wild, that it was a coping mechanism for Billy's "loneliness, boredom and frustration." Halle Berry, Cher, and Bill Maher led their own crusades; Lily Tomlin called the zoo "elephant-speak for Guantanamo"; and people were picketing and posting videos on YouTube. One of them featured a song that went "Billy, his name is Billy. / He's confined in a zoo with nothing to do / But bob and sway through every troubled day..."

To read the news accounts is to see how the topic of Billy's well-being became overshadowed by other topics, such as whether a city with no elephant is a city with no self-esteem and whether the people who want Billy sent to the sanctuary are elitists trying to deny the rest of us access to the wild kingdom. When councilman Dennis Zine said he'd seen elephants in Africa and that they don't belong in zoos, councilman Tom LaBonge, in whose district the zoo resides, proclaimed that not everyone can afford to go to Africa but that we can all take the freeway to the zoo. The notion that the public is entitled to see elephants during business hours has been championed by the zoo's supporters, most notably actress Betty White, who declared that the campaign to free Billy was only the opening salvo in a far larger battle. "It will not stop with elephants," she wrote in the zoo's quarterly magazine. "Giraffes will be next. If they win this battle, they will not stop until zoos themselves are extinct."

As farcical as it seemed, the bickering over Billy really was about things more critical than they appeared. In essence it was about what should be done with the last remaining members of a near-extinct species. And whether the zoo industry's commitment to breeding them in captivity has taken the law of supply and demand to its utmost extreme by, in a sense, monetizing extinction itself.

John Lewis, who has been the Los Angeles Zoo's director since 2003, has white hair and a mustache that recalls men who run ice cream parlors in Norman Rockwell paintings. Prior to his arrival in Los Angeles, he led the John Ball Zoo in Grand Rapids, Michigan, for 17 years. He also served as president of the AZA and is a former member of its accreditation committee. At 62 years old Lewis comes across as a cordial man of science. He makes a point never to anthropomorphize the animals in public. In fact, he doesn't know the human names bestowed on most of the animals and doesn't care to. "I know people like to say, 'This is Bob the Monkey,' " he said. "But I find it diminishes them. I prefer to focus on the uniqueness of their digestive systems and whether they eat leaves and ferment them in their stomachs."

Lewis presides over 1,200 animals that live in more or less three concentric circles. In the outer circle are the smaller apes and the hoof stock. In the second circle are the blue-chip animals most people come to the zoo to see: lions, tigers, bears, and apes. Elephants have always lived in the inner circle. Since the zoo is a botanical garden as well, Lewis also presides over the foliage between the cages, which is extraordinarily beautiful, especially in the late afternoon. There are fig trees, palms, honeysuckle, rosebushes, and cycads along with the insects and birds that dwell among them. Approximately 1.5 million people visit the zoo each year, and not all of them come with children. Many adults regard it as a place to commune with nature. I once heard a lady in the aviary cry out that it was like the Garden of Eden, and I've seen more than one woman stare deep into the eyes of a monkey and ask, "What are you thinking?"

Given the size of L.A., our zoo is surprisingly modest. It never makes the list of the country's top ten zoos and is outclassed by those that do. Omaha's zoo has America's largest indoor rain forest and desert. The zoo in Columbus, Ohio, has an adjoining 18-hole golf course and a water park. Closer to home, the Los Angeles Zoo has always lived in the shadow of the San Diego Zoo, whose collection of blue-chip animals is larger by an order of magnitude and includes pandas—something L.A. will probably never have, because the Chinese government rents them out for \$1 million a year and there aren't enough to go around.

The L.A. Zoo was built in 1966, and much of it seems trapped in the past. A good many of the animals still live in tiny enclosures and grottoes, and the people who are upset about Billy tend to be just as upset about the jaguar, whose cage is roughly the size of a food truck. "In a city so wealthy and so preoccupied with storytelling and the creation of illusion, you would expect something spectacular, almost breathtaking," Australian zoo designer David Hancocks told me. "But the Los Angeles Zoo is strangely disappointing."

Lewis was hired by mayor James Hahn in the hope that he would finally make the zoo world-class. He had the capital to do so. In 1998, bond monies were approved for the zoo to build ten new attractions costing \$172 million. Eight have been completed during Lewis's tenure, among them Sea Life Cliffs, Campo Gorilla Reserve, a reptile facility, and Rainforest of the Americas. But Lewis will most likely be remembered for the Pachyderm Forest, where he said he planned to breed elephants in order to save them from extinction.

The L.A. Zoo's jaguar, whose enclosure has stirred criticism for being too small. Photographs by Maarten De Boer.



The dispute over Billy was not the first of its kind. During the past ten years, campaigns have been waged against zoos around the country, and a handful have been effective. Zoos in Detroit, Toronto, Anchorage, San Francisco, and San Jose have sent their elephants to sanctuaries, and the Bronx Zoo has pledged to close its exhibit when the last of its elephants expire. The person behind many of those efforts is a woman in her fifties named Catherine Doyle, who has long brown hair and a nose stud and lives in Hollywood with her husband and son. She has been plaguing Lewis since 2004, when she first began putting the Los Angeles Zoo on her annual list of the worst zoos for elephants.

Doyle currently serves as director of science, research, and advocacy at Performing Animal Welfare Society, the sanctuary in the Northern California town of San Andreas. But in 2004, she was the elephant campaign director of the animal advocacy group In Defense of Animals, which involved flying around the country and trying to persuade zoos to send the elephants to PAWS or to the nation's only other sanctuary, located in Hohenwald, Tennessee. Sometimes Doyle would even provide funding for the animals' transportation, much of it donated by Bob Barker, the former host of *The Price Is Right*. Over the years Barker has spent several million dollars airlifting zoo elephants to sanctuaries and paying for their housing.

Back then Doyle usually dressed in a man's black suit jacket with black leggings, unless she was traveling in the Midwest, in which case she'd remove the nose stud and put on a skirt and heels. "I don't want to look marginal," she said.

She would often begin her presentations by noting that elephants are known to be highly intelligent and self-aware, meaning they can recognize themselves in the mirror, a trait thought to be shared by few animals. After that she might explain how they live in large herds led by matriarchs and that males leave the herd once they reach sexual maturity but that females remain together for life, helping one another through childbirth, rearing one another's offspring, and mourning one another's dead. Keeping such animals and breeding them in captivity, where many lead solitary lives, is both cruel and detrimental to their health, she'd say.

One set of statistics she's frequently cited is that the natural life span of elephants in the wild is 70 years; Africans average 33 years and Asians 44 in zoos, where they suffer from diseases such as herpes, tuberculosis, obesity, and arthritis, not to mention mental problems. "Billy's not the only elephant who rocks back and forth," Doyle told me. "You see the same stereotypical behavior all across the country. I've even heard of elephants self-mutilating. It gets so bad sometimes, they have to be put on Thorazine."

When Doyle first started, she was admittedly naive. She wore an elephant suit to a rally in El Paso and nearly collapsed from heat prostration. But in the years since, she'd come to understand that it is no easy thing to persuade people to give up their elephants. They tend to be associated with the happier aspects of childhood—Babar and Dumbo and the notion of the gentle giant—and some people can become irrational at the thought of their elephants being taken away, even in the face of scientific evidence indicating they'd be better off elsewhere. Doyle learned, whenever possible, to focus on the fiscal irresponsibility of maintaining elephants. It costs an average of \$100,000 a year just to keep one alive at a zoo. They eat 250 pounds of fresh produce a day, for example. They can also be lethal. So many keepers—16—have been killed by elephants during the past 24 years that the AZA now requires its member zoos to install elephant restraint devices, which are steel cages the size of a 7-Eleven, with adjustable walls, a series of small portholes, and hydraulic gates that allow zoo staff to examine the elephant without fear of reprisal. Doyle hoped that once people heard these things, they would conclude that the money might be better spent on, say, expanding the city's police force.

This strategy seemed especially apt in the case of Billy. His new enclosure, which would eventually cost \$12 million, was to be constructed during a period when L.A. was cutting city services in order to avoid

bankruptcy in the future. Doyle argued that it would be economical and humane to send Billy to PAWs, the only North American sanctuary with the capacity to contain male elephants. Barker, Tomlin, and Cher had pledged \$1.5 million between them to cover Billy's costs, and according to Doyle, a barn had already been reserved for him. It was set in the middle of the sanctuary, on a three-acre hillock that has a view of the Sierra, with other elephants nearby. There was Maggie from Anchorage, Lulu from San Francisco, Mara from San Jose, Wanda from Detroit, and Nicholas, who used to ride a bicycle in the circus. From the barn you could see their silhouettes tearing down branches and napping in the grass. But you would never be able to see them having sex, because the sanctuary finds the idea of raising more elephants in captivity to be repugnant. "The day they bring in a breeding female for Billy," Ed Stewart, who runs the sanctuary, told me, "is the day I lie down in front of a truck."

One of the sad facts of life is the ever-growing list of things we used to regard as wholesome that are now widely thought to be vaguely sinister, like priests or doughnuts or zoos. That zoos have come to be on this list is partly due to activists like Doyle and partly due to the proliferation of nature documentaries that serve only to reinforce their claims that zoo animals are torpid and sad and not living as they should. The frequency of bizarre zoo tragedies involving negligence has not helped matters. In the past eight years alone a zookeeper in Tucson inadvertently killed a giraffe by feeding it a poisonous plant, a goat at the Calgary Zoo accidentally strangled itself to death in front of small children while playing with a rope toy, and a hippopotamus in Topeka was parboiled in its own wading pool as a result of a boiler malfunction.

It is only natural that the AZA, whose member zoos generate an estimated \$2 billion a year, has a crisis management team dedicated to neutralizing the effect of such mishaps and the detractors who cite them. One way it does so is by downplaying the notion that zoos constitute an industry at all. The AZA portrays itself as the "world's preeminent wildlife conservation association" whose mission is not to entertain so much as to educate the public about the mysteries of the animal kingdom, a rapidly growing portion of which faces extinction. To visit a zoo these days is to see merry-go-rounds that have been transformed into "endangered species carousels" and signs posted outside the animals' cages noting how many are left on earth and soliciting donations on their behalf. The AZA claims that these efforts, along with its breeding programs, are so important, the animal kingdom's very survival depends on zoos. "We're not like the steel industry," an AZA spokesman told me. "We're a hedge against extinction."

This is a line of thinking Lewis adheres to. He argues that if Billy were hidden away near the Sierra, where no one could see him, the public would have no way of knowing about the plight of wild elephants. They are being killed by poachers at an estimated rate of one every 15 minutes, and the forests and savannahs where they used to live are being turned into farmland. Because there is nowhere left to hide or forage, they devour the crops and are frequently killed by farmers, who regard them less as a dwindling species and more as a terrifying breed of giant locust. "By keeping them in zoos and getting people excited about them and spending money while they're here, we can send money to Cambodia to support what's going on with

elephants in the wild,” Lewis said. “We have been donating close to \$30,000 a year to Flora & Fauna International. They’re teaching farmers how to protect their crops from elephants.”

Billy in his two-acre portion of the Elephants of Asia exhibit. Photographs by Maarten De Boer.

The idea that elephants must remain in zoos so they can serve as ambassadors and fund-raisers for their brethren in the wild became a dominant theme in the debate over Billy. Doyle had come up against this argument in previous campaigns, because it is one of the primary talking points of the AZA, which has framed its desire to breed elephants as a moral imperative.

And many of the zoo’s supporters believe that it is. Karen Winnick, who is president of the Zoo Commission (the five-member oversight panel appointed by the mayor), told the L.A. city council that the survival of elephants depended on the donations of zoo-goers. “Once we no longer exhibit an animal, we can no longer support conservation efforts in the wild,” she said.

It was partly on the basis of this argument that the city council approved construction of the Pachyderm Forest and later its expansion to six manicured acres. However, the true scope of Lewis’s ambitions could only be seen in the renderings of the elephant barn: The building had 11 stalls, which the zoo evidently hoped Billy would populate himself, giving it one of the largest zoo-elephant populations in North America. A call had already gone out to find him a mate, and staff had begun training him to stand on his hind legs so he would know what to do when she arrived. What’s more, Billy was being prepped for sperm collection, which is generally accomplished by inserting one’s arm into the elephant’s anus and massaging his prostate until he ejaculates. If that doesn’t work, a rubber elephant vagina can be used, but these can be cumbersome.



Construction on the Pachyderm Forest began in 2006. The following year the late actor Robert Culp and a Brentwood real estate agent named Aaron Leider sued the City of Los Angeles and John Lewis to halt construction, arguing that even if it were significantly larger than Billy's existing pen and made to look like paradise, the Pachyderm Forest's six acres would never be adequate for a bull elephant. "It's like raising a human child in a regular-size closet, then you move him to a walk-in closet and hail it as some kind of a wonderful change," said Culp and Leider's attorney, David Casselman.

A 61-year-old with white, receding hair and a rapid-fire way of speaking, Casselman works in Tarzana but frequently flies to Cambodia, where he's established his own elephant sanctuary. It was clear from the start that Casselman hoped to use the lawsuit to expose what he considered the mendacity of the zoo industry, of which there was no clearer evidence in his mind than the \$42 million price tag of the Pachyderm Forest. "Do you have any idea what that amount of money could do for the elephants of Cambodia?" he said to me. "I personally bought a million acres there for a quarter of a million dollars. They could have bought a hundred square miles of land that would have protected them in perpetuity." As for the \$30,000 the zoo donates each year to Cambodia, he scoffed. "The AZA has done nothing to help the elephants of Cambodia that I'm aware of. It's all just a grandiose scheme to imprison animals and use them to raise money in the name of conservation."

Casselman filed suit under an obscure taxpayer statute that allows citizens to sue their government if it has engaged in waste or fraud. By reframing Billy as a piece of city property and using the industry's own elephant mortality rates against it, he could argue that if Billy were placed in the Pachyderm Forest, he would perish prematurely, thereby wasting taxpayer money. The city tried to have the lawsuit dismissed, but the court agreed to hear it, which Casselman regarded as a fortuitous sign, if not a victory unto itself. No one had used this legal strategy before, and the interest it generated in the animal rights community was immense. "I'm getting calls from all over the country," Casselman told me when I met him. "People are watching."

Despite the lawsuit, the Pachyderm Forest opened in December 2010. The exhibit, which had been renamed Elephants of Asia, had a giant red-and-orange Thai-themed barn, two ponds, a waterfall, a mud wallow, and additional features not visible to visitors. The rock formation behind the waterfall was actually a hollow booth with little windows for the staff to fill with vegetables, and the depth of the smaller pond was adjustable so that, in the event a baby were born, it could splash around without drowning.

The zoo had even managed to procure a pair of females. However, the shortage is so profound, the only ones available were two circus refugees named Tina and Jewel, both of whom were past childbearing age and suffered from gum disease. They wouldn't be able to share Billy's space, either; the zoo feared that in his near-constant state of sexual arousal, he might inadvertently kill them. And so he and the pair were cordoned off from one another by a series of fences and hydraulic gates through which Billy could touch them only with his trunk.

Lewis and I went to see Elephants of Asia one morning not long after it opened. The trial was still ahead, but he was confident the zoo would prevail. "I know they're wrong," he said of his opponents. It galled Lewis how they claimed that elephants live an average of 70 years in the wild and only 40 in zoos. "The reality is, elephants in the wild and zoos live an average of 40 years," he said. Lewis's statement is based on the position of the AZA, which allows that elephants do live to 70 in an ideal world, but since the world is not ideal, one must factor in the 35,000 elephants reportedly killed by poachers each year, which lowers the



combined life expectancy to about 40. “You and I can live to 115, but probably we’re going to live until about 80,” he said. “And they weren’t explaining that context.”

The Chimpanzees of Mahale Mountains exhibit opened in 1998, replacing a concrete enclosure. Photographs by Maarten De Boer.

Because Lewis does not give interviews alone, we were accompanied by the zoo’s then-marketing director, Jason Jacobs, who drove us along in a little cart that had been painted in zebra stripes. Every so often he would peer at us in the rearview mirror with a look of weariness. Jacobs could not grasp why the media had focused on Billy when there were so many other animals at the zoo whose stories sometimes bordered on the miraculous. “The Los Angeles Zoo has successfully raised condors, bringing them back from the brink of extinction, but nobody ever talks about that,” he said, adding that one of the orangutan’s air sacs had been surgically removed in a groundbreaking operation.

The Los Angeles Zoo also has among the largest collections of chimpanzees in the country and is only 1 of 14 zoos in North America to house François’ langurs, an endangered leaf-eating monkey. In some cases the most interesting thing about the animals is how they came to be at the zoo. Many of the reptiles were confiscated from a Malaysian smuggling ring, and customs agents at LAX once donated a baby pangolin, a Congolese anteater prized for its delicate meat. This one was too young to eat when captured, so hunters sold it to some tourists who tried to bring it back to Sherman Oaks in a basket. “And then there was Alfred the blind sea lion,” Jacobs said. “He washed ashore with head trauma, and we decided to take him in, and now he’s sired offspring.”





When we pulled up to Elephants of Asia, Tina and Jewel were sunning themselves in the yard. Across the way was a pavilion where people could learn how much the creatures eat and defecate and similar details. “After rainstorms elephants move toward the rainy spots, looking for tender new grasses,” one of the signs read. Other signs explained how you could text money to help resolve the human-elephant conflicts in Cambodia. “People can actually make donations right there to that fieldwork,” Lewis said.

Billy was in the barn in his elephant restraint device. Up close he was massive, with speckled, leathery skin and tiny eyes. Behind him there were rows of empty stalls. Two had padded floors on which a baby might someday be born. Lewis appeared resigned to the fact that a fertile female would not be arriving in the foreseeable future. The AZA has instituted new guidelines, he explained, stipulating that groups of bonded elephants should not be split up. “Our hope is if there is a pair of females somewhere and one dies...” Lewis said. If that didn’t work, the zoo was prepared to house a bachelor herd. “One of the things that all the zoos are dealing with now is that if we’re going to breed elephants, 50 percent are going to be bulls,” he said, noting that three of the larger stalls had been sized and reinforced for male elephants. In the meantime the zoo was continuing to attempt to collect Billy’s sperm. “This is where it all happens,” Lewis said, referring to the elephant restraint device. But things had not happened as planned. Though Billy tolerated the prostate massage, thus far he had refused to ejaculate. “We may have to call in experts,” Lewis said.

By that Lewis no doubt meant Thomas Hildebrandt, who was trying to get the African sperm past customs agents in Europe and America. He was also monitoring the menstrual cycle of female zoo elephants on both continents to determine which should receive it. The process would be costly and complicated, involving three-meter catheters, light-emitting endoscopes, video monitors, and a staff of at least eight. It has proved unreliable as well. A female at the Woodland Park Zoo in Seattle has reportedly been inseminated more than 100 times to no avail. And since the first procedure took place in 2000, nearly half of the 50 babies conceived through artificial insemination have died—14 of them in utero or at birth. Eight never made it to their fifth birthdays.

In June 2012, the lawsuit finally went to trial, and the zoo had done all it could to cast doubt on the legitimacy of PAWS. Jason Jacobs noted that the facility was not accredited by the AZA, that it didn’t allow visitors without appointments, and that it didn’t have 24-hour veterinary service like the zoo. “Sanctuaries are for animals who don’t have options,” he told *L.A. Weekly*, as if PAWS were a halfway house for unwanted elephants. Zoo supporters went so far as to suggest that the facility was so large, people who wanted to visit Billy might not be able to see him through the foliage. The campaign appeared to have its intended effect. According to pollsters hired by the zoo, the majority of those surveyed believed that “closing the habitat and shipping Billy to a distant location would deprive local schoolchildren and their families of the opportunity to learn about the threat of extinction facing Asian elephants today.”

But now the zoo would be forced to make sound legal arguments against the expert witnesses assembled by Casselman. There was Joyce Poole, who would be flying in from Norway; Lori Marino, a professor of neuropsychology at Emory University; renowned zoo designer David Hancocks from Australia; and veterinarians appalled by Billy’s condition. The zoo couldn’t discredit all that expertise, so instead it tried to discredit the relevance of their testimony. To this end the city attorney representing the zoo sought to bifurcate the universe of elephants into two distinct groups: those that live in the wild and those that live in zoos. This would enable the zoo to argue that while the plaintiffs’ witnesses may be knowledgeable about wild elephants, they knew little about zoo elephants, of which there was only one true expert: the zoo industry itself. As Lewis explained, “We have experience caring for animals in the zoo, and that can be very different from the way animals care for themselves in the wild.”

The legal strategy was undermined by the zoo’s own witnesses, most of them zoo staff. For instance,   t of captive elephants are prone to arthritis and other ailments related to the soil in their enclosures being too

compacted by their great weight. During the course of the dispute, Lewis had assured the city that the zoo went to tremendous lengths to protect Billy's feet by rototilling the soil every few days to keep it from hardening. The zoo's witnesses, however, testified that the new enclosure had never once been rototilled. They also testified that the Elephants of Asia exhibit was not all that Lewis had claimed it would be to the city council. Of the six acres he promised, only two were accessible to Billy, partly because the enclosure had been subdivided to keep him away from the females and partly because the vegetation throughout his pen had been electrified to prevent him from devouring it.

The most noteworthy revelation pertained to the zoo's animal behavior department, on whose opinions Lewis had based his claims that Billy's rocking motion was not a sign of distress. During the trial it was revealed that the department head, Cathleen Cox, specialized in primates. Cox testified that she had no firsthand experience with pachyderms and had never even read a book about one; Billy was the only elephant she'd ever known. As for Billy's keeper, Vicky Guarnett, she maintained she knew in her heart that he was happy.

The judge was unconvinced. His decision began with the line "All is not well at the Elephants of Asia exhibit at the Los Angeles Zoo," and it grew worse from there as he recounted the misleading statements made by the zoo and commented on the ignorance of its staff, which he described as suffering from an "anthropomorphic fantasy that the elephants are happy...in captivity." As appalled as the judge was by the goings-on at the zoo, however, he did not see that it met the legal definition of cruelty or negligence. And so Elephants of Asia was not shut down, and Billy was not sent to the sanctuary. The zoo was simply ordered to rototill the soil in Billy's enclosure and exercise him more.

If Lewis found the revelations embarrassing, he gave no indication in public. "It's the zoo version of, 'Do you still beat your wife?'" he told the *Los Angeles Times* when the trial ended. A few days later the zoo posted a coloring book drawing of an elephant on its Web site, stating, "Asian elephants are an endangered species threatened by habitat loss and fragmentation," and that for every colored-in elephant sent in, the zoo would donate \$1 to conservation programs in Sri Lanka and Cambodia.

Casselman and the zoo appealed the judge's ruling, but the lawsuit has since been eclipsed by other events. In August 2012, a month after the trial ended, the Vienna Schönbrunn Zoo held a press conference to announce that one of its females had been impregnated with the defrosted sperm of an elephant named Steve, who resides at the Phinda private game reserve in South Africa. The director of the zoo held up an ultrasound of the fetus, whose trunk and large ears were unmistakable. A year later the baby was born, and in May 2014, a second was born in England, also from Steve's sperm, and two more females have since been inseminated.

When I spoke to Hildebrandt afterward, he seemed both elated and sad. He knew the elephants that he helped bring into the world would not be normal in the true sense of the word. "Elephants in zoos will never have behavior like they do in the wild," he said. "That's for sure." As he saw it, though, the only answer to this problem was to breed more of them. If he could do that, he might at least create larger groups that approximate the normal herd structure in the wild. This, in turn, might make the elephants less neurotic and possibly even more fertile. "The most important element in the life of an animal is offspring," he said, "and having elephants with babies will be ten times better than what we have now." There was no time to dispute the ethics. "All we can hope for is that the zoos improve," Hildebrandt said, adding that he thinks they are.



The African elephant sperm he's collected is now being stored in cryobanks in Europe. As of early summer, he had not been able to get it through the red tape of U.S. Customs, nor had he found a way to freeze the sperm of Asian elephants. But success on both fronts is surely imminent, and the zoos of North America are readying themselves for it. In the last three years alone Oklahoma City spent \$13 million on a new enclosure that hopes to house 5, and the Denver Zoo spent \$55 million, where 12 could live. This year Wichita's Sedgwick Zoo announced it was breaking ground on a \$10 million exhibit wherein visitors will be able to boat alongside the elephants. And next year the Oregon Zoo plans to open an exhibit that is expected to cost nearly \$60 million, with room for a dozen.

So far no zoo seems to be going the route Casselman and Doyle have strongly recommended to the L.A. Zoo: Casselman had hoped to persuade it to replace Billy with an animatronic elephant. He envisioned children climbing atop it so as to better appreciate its massiveness and the complexity of its trunk, while Doyle envisioned interactive consoles and giant screens projecting live feeds from a national park in Kenya. It is more than likely that Billy will live out the rest of his days at Elephants of Asia, where he continues rocking back and forth before tens of thousands of visitors each year. But if and when he produces enough viable sperm, Doyle sees a new legal battle over who will control it. "After all," she says, "doesn't it technically belong to the taxpayers of Los Angeles?"

Tamar Brott is a writer based in Oakland. Her story about dog trainer Vladislav Roytapel appeared in the May 2009 issue.

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FREE



BILLY

40 YEARS OLD | MALE | ASIAN | WILD
LOS ANGELES ZOO (LOS ANGELES, CA)

Billy is a wild-born male Asian elephant who has spent all but one year of his life in captivity. Born roaming freely with his familial herd in Malaysia around 1985, Billy was captured less than a year after his birth. In 1989 he was imported to the United

States and brought to the Los Angeles Zoo. For the majority of the time Billy has been confined at the zoo, he has been held alone in a barren enclosure. Captivity in such an impoverished environment causes brain damage by subjecting elephants to extreme psychological stress. For decades, Billy has been observed engaging in stereotypic behavior, most frequently intense head bobbing, which is a coping mechanism for dealing with stress.

TAKE ACTION >

BILLY'S STORY

Billy is a wild-born male Asian elephant who has spent all but one year of his life in captivity. Born roaming freely with his familial herd in Malaysia around 1985, Billy was captured less than a year after his birth. In 1989 he was imported to the United States and brought to the Los Angeles Zoo.

A 1989 training **video** shows Billy being repeatedly jabbed and led around by a bullhook, a weapon-like device that is used to control elephants through the infliction of pain. In the video, a zoo employee talks about chaining Billy and using the bullhook in various ways to exert control over him, such as touching Billy's hypersensitive body parts. In 1993, Billy was sent to Have Trunk Will Travel, most likely for training to submit to human commands. Have Trunk Will Travel was a notorious traveling entertainment operation that had been plagued by allegations of **extreme cruelty** to elephants. In 1994, Billy returned to the Los Angeles Zoo where he has remained ever since.

In 2012, a lawsuit was brought against the Los Angeles Zoo regarding its treatment of elephants, and the extent of the physical abuse Billy endured—in what the zoo referred to as “training”—was laid bare. After a trial, the presiding judge **wrote**: “The evidence shows that when Billy was much younger, trainers formerly with the Los Angeles Zoo trained him to lie down using a block and tackle. Trainers also used a bull hook, a stick with a nail, or other similar tool. When elephants that were trained or ‘broken’ with a bull hook are subsequently shown a bull hook or an object that looks like a bull hook, they (quite understandably) become afraid, and comply with requests by the trainer or keeper. [The Los Angeles Zoo director] confirmed that if an elephant has been hurt by a bull hook in the past, the elephant will react negatively if a keeper merely shows or displays a bull hook.”

The Los Angeles Zoo has just 3 acres of usable outdoor space for elephants, which is divided into 4 yards. For the majority of the time Billy has been confined at the zoo, he has been held alone in a barren enclosure. Captivity in such an impoverished environment causes brain damage by subjecting elephants to extreme psychological stress. For decades, Billy has been observed engaging in stereotypic behavior, most frequently intense head bobbing, which is a coping mechanism for dealing with stress.

Billy has been forced to participate in the **Association of Zoos and Aquariums’ captive breeding program**. Public records reveal that during a three year period, the zoo attempted to collect Billy’s semen at least 55 times. The semen collection procedure was a gross violation of Billy’s autonomy, in addition to being a great risk to his health and safety. It often involved placing Billy in an elephant restraint device, rendering him unable to freely move, and having a human insert their arm into his anus and massage his prostate to stimulate ejaculation. **Despite years of semen collection attempts, Billy has never sired any offspring. The most recent AZA Asian Elephant Population Analysis and Breeding &**

Transfer Plan recommends that Billy continue to be used for breeding purposes.

In addition to enduring traumatic trainings, long-term isolation, and grotesque semen collection procedures, Billy has also suffered from inadequate foot care—for elephants held in small captive environments, foot care is incredibly important. Foot disease is a leading **cause** of death in captive elephants. Records from 2023 show that the zoo did not perform regular foot care on Billy for eight months while he was in **musth**, resulting in overgrown nails and a significant accumulation of dead tissue.

There has been a long campaign, spanning decades, calling for Billy's release to an elephant sanctuary where his complex physical and psychological needs can be met. Celebrities such as **Bob Barker**, **Lily Tomlin**, and **Cher** have championed his freedom. Over 800,000 people have signed a **petition** calling for his release to sanctuary. Several Los Angeles City Council members have introduced **multiple** motions over the years to **close** the zoo's elephant exhibit or **relocate** Billy to a sanctuary. The Los Angeles Times' Editorial Board **wrote** a powerful article advocating for Billy's transfer to a sanctuary.

Despite the public outcry regarding Billy's plight, zoo officials have steadfastly refused to grant him a measure of freedom that was stolen from him. They justify his captivity by claiming he plays an important role in conservation by serving as an ambassador for his species, but nothing could be further from the truth. Seeing an elephant suffering day in and day out, in an unnatural space and engaging in behaviors unseen in the wild, serves no legitimate purpose. If anything, Billy is an ambassador for why confining elephants in zoos is an archaic and shameful practice, one that future generations will rightly view with moral outrage. The judge in the 2012 lawsuit against the Los Angeles Zoo recognized as much, when he wrote: "Captivity is a terrible existence for any intelligent, self-aware species, which the undisputed evidence shows elephants are."

Billy is not living at the Los Angeles Zoo; he is deteriorating as zoo officials look on. For once, the zoo must prioritize Billy's interests before its own and relocate him to a sanctuary that can meet his complex needs.

TAKE ACTION TODAY

A future where no elephant has to endure the traumas of being torn from their families and natural habitats, bred against their will, and shipped from zoo to zoo is possible, and we need your help to make it a reality.

TAKE ACTION >

SUBMIT INFORMATION

Do you have a tip for us? The Free to be Elephants project relies on our supporters to keep us up-to-date with the latest news, updates and photos about elephants in their local facilities. Use this form to submit your info and help us expose the reality of elephant captivity across America.

Drop files here or
SELECT FILES

Accepted file types: jpg, png, gif, mov, mp4, avi, Max. file size: 50 MB, Max. files: 5.

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**End Elephants Billy & Tina's Torment At
The Los Angeles Zoo, Send Them To
Sanctuary, Not Another Zoo!**

**End Elephants Billy & Tina's Torment At
The Los Angeles Zoo, Send Them To
Sanctuary, Not Another Zoo!**

Supporters

18129



UPDATE: The Los Angeles Zoo recently announced its plan to send Billy and Tina to the Tulsa Zoo in Oklahoma, defying the years of advocacy by impassioned activists, renowned elephant experts and lawmakers to send them to a true sanctuary. Please sign this alert to keep the pressure on the zoo to honor the will of those who want these elephants to finally experience the peace and freedom they deserve. Speak up, call and write to the zoo with the message: not another zoo!

Elephants Tina and Billy are two decades apart in age, but two factors unite them: their many years of suffering at the Los Angeles Zoo and the obvious stress they endure as evidenced by their advanced zoochotic behavior. Act now to send these beleaguered elephants to a sanctuary where they can rest and heal from their years of anguish at the LA Zoo.

End Billy & Tina's Torment At The LA Zoo



Tina, born in the wild, was ripped from her home in Asia and now at 58 has spent all but one year of her life in captivity. Billy was snatched from his home in Malaysia at just 4 years old and has existed in a zombie-like state at the zoo for 35 years.

Tina's Story

At just 1 year old, Tina was separated from her mother and family and shipped across the world to be exploited in circuses in the U.S. For over 30 years, she was punished with bullhooks to perform tricks. In 2009, she and her circus mate, Jewel, were confiscated from their abusive trainer by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and sent to the San Diego Zoo. One year later, she and Jewel landed at the Los Angeles Zoo where Tina remains today.

Sadly, her longtime companion Jewel died in 2023, and not long after, another zoo inmate, Shaunzi, died, leaving Tina alone and grieving over now two losses. Despite her zoo-related ailments including joint disease and arthritis, her medical records indicate that Tina is doing well overall for her age. Therefore we can conclude that she is fit for transport to sanctuary. It is imperative that she goes soon before her health takes a downward turn and she dies like Shaunzi and Jewel before her.



Billy's Story

Billy has been alone for his entire 35 years at the LA Zoo. He was introduced to the three elderly females but spent little of his life in their company. Instead every day, for hours on end, Billy continually rocks, sways, or paces back and forth on his 1-acre yard.

The zoo's medical records indicate that his feet were left untreated for eight months while he was in musth, a periodic reproductive phase. As a result, the conditions of Billy's feet are described by a former elephant keeper as abysmal and clearly show he is living in pain. The lack of treatment has left him vulnerable to fatal foot disease. The zoo's inability to care for him is a prime indicator that he should be retired from the zoo.

Billy was also subjected to dozens of highly invasive procedures to extract sperm with no success. Billy has endured enough misery, it is time for him to be released from his hellish experience at the LA Zoo and given the gift of freedom and expert veterinary care he so richly deserves.

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Elephants Assaulted in the Wild to Increase Zoo Populations

End Elephant
Exploitation

[DONATE](#)



Elephants Assaulted in the Wild to Increase Zoo Populations

January 26, 2024 - Posted by Courtney Scott

TAG: ELEPHANTS, ZOOS

Elephants die faster than they can reproduce in zoos. In desperation to increase their population of elephants, zoos have resorted to stealing sperm from elephants in the wild.

Operation Frozen Jumbo 3 is underway in Kruger National Park, South Africa. It's a collaboration with zoo organizations around the world, expanding on a sperm extraction procedure dubbed "Sperminator."

Freezing sperm to inseminate female elephants has been fraught with failure in the wild and in captivity. Now this dreadfully cruel and inefficient process has been refined and is able to get more pregnancies from fewer invasive procedures. However, what is the cost of this success for the elephants?

Elephant semen



"Forcing captive and wild male elephants into involuntary sperm extraction, sometimes via chemical immobilization, and then coercively inseminating female elephants without their choice of partner, is rape. These violations, hidden behind the guise of conservation, are a trespass on personal autonomy and remove all choice and control over an individual's outcomes or mates."

— Les O'Brien, Elephant Consultant and former Zoo Elephant Keeper



It is a gruesome operation for the elephants. As reported in the Boston Globe: "First, the vet inserts a pump into the elephant's rectum and fills the intestines with an enormous quantity of water — to create space that makes an ultrasound exam possible. Next, he inserts an electric stimulation device into the animal's rectum to initiate orgasms to produce sperm."

After the unconscious elephant's tail, tusks, penis, and testes are measured, the vets collect the blood and DNA and finally inject him with the antidote to wake him. Many elephants have been subjected to this extraction in the wild and captivity with little success.

"Elephants, when protected in their natural home-range habitats, live active lives and fulfill crucial ecological roles as keystone species, ecosystem engineers, and seed dispersers – contributions obstructed by human interference and forced imprisonment. In their countries of origin, natural environments where elephants are well-protected have witnessed a rise in their wild numbers, free from artificial insemination (AI) and other human intervention."

— Les O'Brien, Elephant Consultant and former Zoo Elephant Keeper

At In Defense of Animals, we believe we should leave wild animals alone in the one place where they can genuinely live wild and free. Instead, zoos are tampering with nature, creating unnecessary trauma for these majestic elephants and populating zoos with more elephants who will live out deprived lives in captivity. Disturbingly, research needs to be done into how much this invasion into wild herds disrupts elephant societies.

"If captive zoo environments were truly the utopias advertised by zoos, the need for artificial insemination (AI) would be non-existent. Strikingly, behaviors such as infanticide, fratricide, the inability to reproduce, and stereotypies, to name but a few, observed exclusively in captive elephants, are absent with free-ranging elephants. AI exacerbates the suffering of elephants and will only add to the species decline, not save it."

— Les O'Brien, Elephant Consultant and former Zoo Elephant Keeper

You can help to free one captive elephant to a sanctuary, where he will never be forced to endure any more invasive sperm extraction procedures. Please take action now to **[free Billy from the Los Angeles Zoo](#)**.

[Donations to support our work](#) to free captive elephants are also needed and very much appreciated.



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Elephant Deaths at L.A. Zoo Renew Calls for Gentle Giants to Be Moved to Larger Sanctuaries

Home ranges for Asian elephants begin at a minimum of 2,471 acres, but the two left living at the city's zoo are confined to just a few acres — a circumstance activists believe to be deadly

JULIUS MILLER • FEB 2, 2024



A photo of Billy, one of the elephants at the Los Angeles Zoo.

(Photo by Glenn Koenig/Los Angeles Times via Getty Images)

Los Angeles Zoo currently stands as one of the most divisive institutions in the city, raising questions about its old sacraments.

It's no secret that under the Zoo's supervision, 16 elephants have died since it opened in 1966. Two of those came in the past year, with Shaunzi, a 53-year-old female Asian elephant being euthanized in January 2024 and Jewel, a 61-year-old female meeting the same fate just 12 months earlier, the [Los Angeles Times](#) previously reported.

L.A. Zoo tacked up Shaunzi's cause of death to "her age, past medical history" and her "inability to right herself with supportive efforts to raise her." However, their shrouded explanation veers away from the

expected: Shaunzi and other Asian elephants that have died may have suffered as a result of their constructed habitats.

Lights were placed around a photograph of a 53-year-old female Asian elephant named Shaunzi outside the Los Angeles Zoo, who was euthanized at the start of 2024.

(Francine Orr/ Los Angeles Times via Getty Images)

“I would say all of them [the elephants] died from that [a lack of space] because it accumulates over time,” Courtney Scott, Elephant Consultant for [In Defense of Animals](#), tells *Los Angeles* magazine.

“They have arthritis, they have joint disease, they have zoonotic behavior... there’s another study that shows they develop brain damage from lack of stimulation and space,” she adds.

The [study in question](#) comes from the Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation, an animal welfare organization in the United Kingdom. Not only does it reveal that “elephants in zoos stereotyped less, explored more, and showed more behavioral diversity in bigger enclosures than smaller ones,” but it also found that home ranges for Asian elephants begin at a minimum of 2,471 acres. Comparatively, Los Angeles Zoo’s elephant population currently [lives](#) in a 3.6 to 6.56-acre space.

“10 acres is considered large for a city zoo... The Houston Zoo has 12 elephants in three acres, so even if there was only one elephant, it’s unbelievably inadequate,” Scott says. “In captivity, they live about half as long on average.”

The IDA has recently honed in on Billy, an elephant that has been at L.A. Zoo since 1989. Zoo officials describe him and their other current resident, Tina, as “ambassadors for their endangered species” and say they must remain as “millions of Angelenos with the opportunity to establish meaningful, empathy-building connections with animals they might otherwise never see.”

Scott says the zoo continually utilizes such anthropomorphic language, or the attribution of human traits, emotions, or intentions to non-human beings. A similar example of such is Packy, a 54-year-old Asian elephant at the Oregon Zoo who was born into captivity and euthanized in 2017.

“They’ve constantly said that Packy was the ambassador and he was even the head of a parade, even though he wasn’t there,” Scott recalls. “Well, Pakky had no clue what that was, and he was just exploited for 55 years at the zoo.”

Many say to move Billy to a sanctuary, which, as per the aforementioned report, “are founded on a fundamental belief in the need for quality space — far bigger in size and more diverse in contact than any zoo enclosure.” However, L.A. Zoo clearly states on its site that “there is absolutely no reason for them to be sent to live in a sanctuary,” referencing their status as an “AZA-accredited facility.”

Marielle Williamson, left, joins other activists during a rally with In Defense of Animals, Elephant Guardians of Los Angeles and Los Angeles Animals for Animals at the Los Angeles Zoo on Sunday, Jan. 28, 2024 in Los Angeles, CA.

(Dania Maxwell / Los Angeles Times via Getty Images)

When protestors from the IDA and others calling for the transfer of Billy gathered outside the Zoo on Jan. 28, their presence was addressed in a similar, straightforward fashion: “The small number of activists campaigning to move Billy to another animal holding facility are basing their message on misinformation, untruths, and intentional mischaracterization of the L.A. Zoo elephant care program.”

Los Angeles magazine reached out to the L.A. Zoo to request further information on the alleged “misinformation, untruths, and intentional mischaracterizations” but never received a response.

The work done to free Billy would appear to span more than the “small number of activists” the Zoo claims. Historically, Cher, Lily Tomlin, Kim Bassinger and Bob Barker have advocated in favor of a sanctuary transfer.

“He is in pain both physically and psychologically. He spends 80% of his time rocking back and forth,” Cher told [PEOPLE](#) in 2019. “Billy is standing on hard packed dirt in a small, sterile environment. In the wild, he would be walking hundreds of miles a day on soft earth. In the zoo, Billy can’t choose what he eats at a Sanctuary he will have choices.”

Regardless, the case is still out on whether Billy will remain. A Los Angeles city committee previously [voted to send him to a sanctuary](#), but it’s yet to be approved by the L.A. City Council.

“I don't think I have time the rest of my life to get all the elephants out,” Scott joked. “But yeah, the time is coming for zoos to transition out of the old model.”

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NEWS/LOCAL

LA Zoo Takes Top Spot in List of Worst Zoos in North America for Elephants in 2023

by Gabriel Arizon, San Fernando Valley Sun/El Sol
January 17, 2024



In Defense of Animals holding a vigil Jan. 6 outside the Los Angeles Zoo to honor all the elephants who died at the zoo.
(Photo Courtesy of In Defense of Animals)

The international organization In Defense of Animals named the Los Angeles Zoo & Botanical Gardens the worst zoo in North America for elephants in 2023 due to its treatment of Billy – a 38-year-old Asian bull elephant.

In a list that includes the Houston Zoo, Denver Zoo, Oklahoma City Zoo and Oregon Zoo, the LA Zoo took the top spot owing to what the organization describes as years of zoo-related stress, loneliness and depression causing Billy's mental and physical health to decline. This is the eighth year the LA Zoo has made the organization's annual list.

Courtney Scott, elephant consultant for In Defense of Animals, said Billy exhibits some of the worst zoochotic behavior they've seen of any elephant in zoos. Zoochosis is a form of psychosis commonly observed in captive animals. It manifests as stereotypic activities that are monotonous actions with seemingly no goal or definitive objective. These actions can include head rolling, extreme licking, hair or feather pulling, striding and outline swimming.

Zoochosis appears more frequently in higher-intelligence animals, including monkeys, bears and orcas, but especially elephants.

"That is an indication that he [Billy] is under enormous stress, and he's suffering mentally and physically," Scott said. "He has the most need to get out of there before his body and his mind degenerate any further."

Scott brought up the two most recent deaths of Asian elephants in the care of the LA Zoo, 61-year-old Jewel in January 2023 and 53-year-old Shaunzi on Jan. 3, and said that unless Billy is taken to a sanctuary and begins to heal, he will likely share the same fate. Only one other elephant remains at the zoo, 57-year-old Tina.

Additionally, Scott pointed out that Billy is isolated most of the time because of musth – a naturally occurring, periodic condition in male elephants that typically lasts around two to three months characterized by heightened aggressive behavior and accompanied by a large rise in reproductive hormones. However, being isolated means that Billy has had no way to release all that energy and aggression. He's also been subject to numerous procedures to extract sperm for breeding elephants in other zoos, but those attempts failed.

"They're living with that frustration often for many months," Scott said. "Billy was in musth eight months last year, which is way longer than they would in the wild and it's because he's living in such deprived conditions."

Being in musth for that long meant zoo staff were not able to properly keep up with Billy's footcare. His daily pacing in his "puny-sized" exhibit over ground covered in urine and feces has created deep infections that could lead to fatal foot disease.

"The thing with elephants is that their bodies and their minds [have been] programmed for thousands of years to walk for miles," she continued. "It's literally what keeps them alive because if they don't move, they start degenerating. There's a lot of weight to put on their feet. They have to move to keep their muscles staying healthy and for their minds because they are intelligent. They need stimulation."

Scott said the LA Zoo has been resistant to move Billy to a sanctuary, despite the efforts of animal rights activists, attorneys and celebrities – including Cher, Lily Tomlin and Bob Barker. Even politicians have gotten involved. Former LA City Councilmember Paul Koretz introduced a motion to send Billy to a sanctuary, which was seconded by Councilmember Bob Blumenfield.

However, zoo leadership has downplayed the severity of Billy's zoochosis. In a 2012 lawsuit against the zoo, in which numerous staff were deposed, then LA Zoo Director John Lewis said that Billy's continuous head bobbing was a sign that he was anticipating food.

"Every wild elephant expert contradicted that and explained that it is not true, that it's a condition called ... zoochotic behavior," Scott said.

Currently, In Defense of Animals is focusing on closing elephant exhibits. Scott said that zoos are not a good place to keep any large exotic animal, adding that the ultimate goal is to see zoos transition to digital displays or even holograms.

The long-term goal of the organization is the closure of zoos or to have them transition to different models. Scott described one possible model – proposed by Michael Schmidt, who was a veterinarian at the Oregon Zoo – where zoos would collaborate to create large, sanctuary-like places that people could go to, but the animals would have the maximum amount of space and freedom that could be provided.

"There are all these innovative ideas out there ... so these things can be changed," Scott said. "I have been to zoos and seen animatronics [for a] huge moving dinosaur and kids were all over that thing. They loved it. So there are ways to still have a zoo but adopt different policies and different models that aren't inhumane."

The *San Fernando Valley Sun/el Sol* reached out to the LA Zoo, but they declined to comment.

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Los Angeles Zoo: Release Billy to Sanctuary!

Fight Animal Cruelty!

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Los Angeles Zoo: Release Billy to Sanctuary!

16 December 2016 - Posted by Caroline Saxon

Los Angeles Zoo: Release Billy to Sanctuary!

The Los Angeles Zoo confines three Asian elephants in a very small exhibit and operate an invasive captive breeding program. The two females, Tina and Jewel, who are in their fifties and on loan from the San Diego Zoo, live in one portion of the enclosure. On the

other side of the exhibit is the lone male elephant, Billy, abducted from his mother and family in Malaysia as an infant, and acquired by the Los Angeles Zoo in 1989. Billy is kept separate from the two females and lives in chronic isolation. Billy deserves a better life, and he needs our help.

In the wild, elephants live in complex communities and occupy hundreds of miles of natural habitat where they have room to roam and be a part of the complex social network of a herd. In contrast, Billy, Jewel, and Tina live on less than three acres, surrounded by metal bars and electric wires, with no access to the trees or foliage that surround the stark enclosure. Living space is further reduced by the segregation of Billy.

Billy's forced isolation directly conflicts with current research on the social bonds of male elephants in the wild. As infants until about the age of 14, males live within their tightly bonded, matriarchal family group. As adults, males live within a social community where lasting bonds with other male elephants are forged, as well as interaction with females on an intermittent basis. Accordingly, Billy has been and continues to be deprived of companionship, healthy movement, mental stimulation, and social learning opportunities.

In addition, Billy has been forced to endure a highly invasive procedure to collect his semen for the purpose of artificially inseminating females at other zoos to breed baby elephants. According to zoo documents, Billy underwent training for the actual semen collection process at least 55 times between January 20, 2011 and November 14, 2014.

Due to the disparity between Billy's wild homeland of Malaysia, and the artificial prison where he is currently forced to reside, the violent rupture of his attachment to his mother, and the destruction of his complex social network, Billy shows the classic signs of profound and chronic trauma.

To keep up with the latest on Billy, follow the Elephant Guardians of Los Angeles **[Facebook page](#)**.

[Click here to take action.](#)

Communication from Public

Name: Susan Lustig

Date Submitted: 05/14/2025 10:51 AM

Council File No: 25-0600

Comments for Public Posting: To reduce the funding for each Neighborhood Council, is penny wise, but very pound foolish. For many NC's, this will certainly mean that they will need to give up their offices. This would be a hardship for these volunteers. This is where most of their committee meetings are conducted. It is also a place where they have community meetings with the LAPD, the LAFD, with their City Council representatives and State representatives. Many communities just do not have a safe, public place where those meetings could be held. Reducing any funding to the Neighborhood Councils should be taken off the table.

Communication from Public

Name: Ani

Date Submitted: 05/12/2025 02:27 PM

Council File No: 25-0600

Comments for Public Posting: Please save our dogs. There is no room for budget cuts. It's inhumane, a failed system.

Communication from Public

Name:

Date Submitted: 05/12/2025 10:18 PM

Council File No: 25-0600

Comments for Public Posting: We Strongly oppose the budget plan to slow down the hiring of new officers in LAPD. Our community in Brentwood continues to see a rise in burglaries and armed robberies. Statistics from the first quarter show an increase in burglaries for the second year in a row!!! We know an increase in pollice presence and detectives reduces crime. Now is NOT the time to reduce the number of officers protecting our community.

Communication from Public

Name: Stephanie Lee

Date Submitted: 05/14/2025 11:43 AM

Council File No: 25-0600

Comments for Public Posting: I am Los Angeles born and raised. Barnsdall Park is deeply rooted in my childhood memories. Public resources were a treasure to my lower middle class family. My sister and I took our first art classes ever at Barnsdall. We loved the free-flowing creative vibe, exploring the Hollyhock House (the slats! the windows!), and the vibrant neighborhood of East Hollywood and Los Feliz (shout out to Woolworths, RIP). Without the Hollyhock House, I would not have known who Frank Lloyd Wright was. Barnsdall Park opened our hearts and minds to the artistic community of Los Angeles, in which my sister and I continue to engage as participants in the film and television industry. The City's proposed 2025-2026 budget cuts to the Department of Cultural Affairs would devastate community arts centers across LA including the beloved Barnsdall Art Park and Hollyhock House, Frank Lloyd Wright's architectural masterpiece. I am heartbroken by these proposed cuts which would include layoffs for arts workers across the City, including seven essential staff positions at Barnsdall Art Park. With three of Hollyhock House's four full-time positions slated to be cut, the house will have to suspend public tours. Hollyhock House is world-renowned as an architectural treasure and is on the same UNESCO list as Redwood and Yosemite National Parks. The City should not close access to such a source of cultural capital for Los Angeles. Additionally, programming at the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery and Barnsdall Gallery Theatre will be greatly reduced, and with three positions at Barnsdall Arts Center and Barnsdall Junior Arts Center slated to be cut, the low-cost fine art education class offerings (provided to thousands of local children like myself and adults annually for over 50 years) will be significantly diminished. The World Cup and the Olympics are both coming to LA. This is the time to protect our most valuable cultural treasures, not shut them down. I strongly urge you to vote against these proposed cuts to ensure the legacy of Barnsdall Art Park continues for Angelenos who need resources like these more than ever.

Communication from Public

Name:

Date Submitted: 05/14/2025 12:02 PM

Council File No: 25-0600

Comments for Public Posting: Please maintain all existing Associate Zoning Administrator positions and at least two Nuisance Abatement / Revocations positions within the Department of City Planning. The City of Los Angeles has an important tool with the Nuisance Abatement / Revocations program, in which the Zoning Administrator can revoke the land use or discretionary entitlements for properties that are a public safety hazard. The power to do this lies within the Department of City Planning and no other City Departments are authorized to perform this action. Furthermore, with the World Cup and the Olympics soon coming to Los Angeles, there will be hundreds of applications for wireless telecommunications cases. These are approved by Associate Zoning Administrators. In order to meet the demand in a timely manner and remain in compliance with federal regulations, the current number of Associate Zoning Administrators should be maintained. Failure to do so may incur financial penalties to the City and may allow proposed facilities to be deemed approved without discretionary review and without public process.