

Elephants Have An Achilles' Heel, And It's Their Feet

Zoo Confinement Aggravates Ticklish Pedicure Issue; A Keeper's Gentle Touch

By BARRY NEWMAN

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PITTSBURGH -- The Animal and Plant Inspection Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture is seeking advice from the public on what to do about problem feet in elephants.

The deadline for sending in ideas is Dec. 11. Hundreds have already arrived. Such as: "Elephants' feet are being destroyed by their confined environment." "They should be able to walk on grass, not concrete." "Some elephants never need their toenails trimmed and some elephants need them continuously trimmed."

Or, as Willie Theison, head elephant keeper here at the Pittsburgh Zoo, suggests: "If you wash the barn, you have to dry the floor. Otherwise, you get athlete's foot in elephants."

VIDEO: AN ELEPHANT PEDICURE



Barry Newman

Watch video of elephant keeper Willie Theison giving Natasha the elephant a pedicure.

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Federal warmblooded-animal rules aren't, a spokesman notes, "elephant specific" as yet. But zoo elephants have died this year from complications of sore feet in Oregon, Milwaukee, Los Angeles, and at the National Zoo in Washington. Some activists say zoos, by nature, are the cause. They prodded the government -- which has taken no stand on this -- to publish a notice in the Federal Register in August calling for public views on potential elephant-foot action under federal animal-protection laws.



Willie Theison

The zoo industry, like many others, prefers to self-police. To head off the feds, it is setting a major pachyderm shift in motion.

In May, the American Zoo and Aquarium Association finalized new elephant standards for its 78 members. They require bigger barns and more room to roam. Rather than shoulder the cost, six zoos in recent years have decided to phase out their elephant exhibits: Philadelphia, Detroit, Santa Barbara, Chicago, San Francisco and the Bronx.

At least 30 are improving their elephant digs in a big way. The price in Los Angeles is \$40 million; at the National Zoo, \$60 million.

"We've asked institutions to search their souls and make a commitment to elephants," says Kristin Vehrs, the zoo association's director. Barbara Baker, the Pittsburgh Zoo's head, says, "Zoos are at a critical point with elephants. They have to decide."

Of 600 elephants in U.S. zoos and circuses, many are old, and hunting young ones in Africa or Asia is unthinkable. So the zoo reshuffle aims to move more elephants out of cramped confines into fewer but bigger ones where they can sociably make more elephants. The ticklish issue is the fate of their feet.

It has become a life and death matter, not only for elephants, but for humans like Mr. Theison, a species of zoo keeper for whom elephant foot-care is worth risking everything.

Inside the barn's sliding gates one morning, he was doing the nails -- very carefully -- of a 28-year-old African elephant named Natasha, who weighs 9,000 pounds. Mr. Theison, 47 and 195 pounds, plunked a metal stool onto the cement floor saying, "Tash! Foot!" in a firm voice. Tash placed her left front foot on the stool. Bending over it with a double-handled rasp, Mr. Theison gently filed each nail down to a nicely rounded edge.

An elephant foot looks stumpy, but, as one expert has written, it is "a masterful piece of evolutionary development." Elephants, in fact, walk on tiptoe, with soft, wedgie soles for support. In zoos, though, elephants stand around a lot. They get fat. Their nails grow. When a fat, long-nailed elephant takes a step on concrete, its nails can crack. Water or waste seeping into the cracks can infect the toes. If the infection reaches bone, the elephant is done for.

Mr. Theison tapped Tash's foot, and Tash stepped off the stool. He said, "Back. Back!" Tash turned around, placed a back foot on the stool, and let Mr. Theison shave away a callus on the sole.

"If you clip a cuticle, she'll wince," Mr. Theison said, looking up from his work. "If you do it often -- well, I wouldn't go to that pedicurist again, either." He tapped Tash's foot, said, "Thank you," and Tash wandered out into the elephant yard.

Twenty years ago, in Atlanta, Mr. Theison briefly had charge of an elephant whose feet were so diseased that the only comfort he could offer was an epsom-salts soak. "That was

neglect," he says. "If an elephant Tash's age has foot problems, then that elephant's in the care of somebody who doesn't know about elephants."

But on foot-care know-how, aficionados hotly disagree. The call for a federal elephant-foot regulation first came from a California group called In Defense of Animals (also active on fur coats and foie gras). It claimed in a petition that elephants live to 70 and can jog 50 miles in a day, but that in zoos they hardly move at all and therefore get bad feet and die young.

In this view, zoos simply kill elephants. Some experts tend to agree. "A zoo really isn't conducive to the health of elephants, and the feet are a large part of it," says Blair Csuti, an Oregon zoologist who organized the first North American conference on elephant foot-care in 1998. "You just have to accept this as a chronic condition because you're not going to cure it."

Zoos retort that wild elephants actually get old in their 40s and 50s, and that they happily stay put as long as they aren't traveling in search of something to eat. They say the zoo association's new standards will give confined elephants the space they need.

Yet few zoos deny that what elephants need most is a regular run. Exercise is healthy, and rough ground -- in zoos as in the wild -- acts as nature's nail file. Working in the early '90s at a Miami zoo with public elephant rides, Mr. Theison never saw a sick foot.

The pivotal issue, for humans, is how to control captive elephants on the run without getting stepped on. The fact is, accidents happen. Mostly, they happen to keepers. Two died in 2001, in England and the Czech Republic. One died in Vienna last year. Another was killed at an elephant sanctuary in Tennessee in July.



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Elephant keepers at the Pittsburgh Zoo maintain their charges' feet with daily jogs around the grounds.

The answer at many zoos has been to put elephants behind bars. They stand still while keepers steer clear, clipping nails through window-size hatches in steel cages. To Mr. Theison, this "protected contact" doesn't just impede elephant exercise; it spoils the fun.

He was drawn to elephants because "you can share their space." The training style he prefers -- "free contact" -- traditionally was built on intimidation and pain. It relied on chains, ropes and bull hooks. Mr. Theison is one keeper who disowns that in favor of "relationship building."

Elephants are "good-natured and easygoing," he says. "By hanging out with them, we make everything a pleasurable experience." *Everything* includes the occasional pedicure

and, more important, a brisk run before the gates open every morning down the public footpaths between the African Savannah and the Asian Forest, and back uphill to the barn again.

"I would never give that up," Mr. Theison says in his firmest elephant-handler's voice. And he says it despite one harrowing experience in Pittsburgh.

On Nov. 18, 2002, while Mr. Theison was away in Germany, Mike Gatti, a 46-year-old keeper, took an elephant called Moja out for their usual amble. Something spooked Moja, no one knows what. She tried to flee but was hemmed in. Coaxing her back, Mr. Gatti slipped. Moja tusked him, and crushed him to death.

"It changes your perspective," says Mr. Theison. But Moja, he adds, "returned to the barn, and she's been fine ever since."

Moja included, the Pittsburgh Zoo has six elephants today and has committed itself to the future of elephants and their feet. Hugely exceeding the zoo association's space code, it has purchased a hunting lodge on 724 acres and plans to open it next fall as a \$7 million breeding ground. Eventually, it will house 20 to 30 African elephants, the country's biggest collection by far.

Whatever foot-care regime the government may devise once the public has had its say, there will be running room for elephants in Pittsburgh. Rules permitting, Willie Theison will be running with them -- as he was one still-dark Thursday morning, shouting, "Move up! Move up!" while his jogging partners paused to rip some branches off a tree, and disappeared beyond the zebra yard.

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