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Hansa's short life - one of deprivation

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The death of baby elephant Hansa undoubtedly will be a time of mourning for the staff at Woodland Park Zoo and for many of its visitors. It should also be a time for reflection.

There is a defining line in every life, something that gives an insight into the heart and soul of the life lived. For me, Hansa's short life is characterized by her being beaten by keepers at Woodland Park Zoo when she was just a few months old. She is now being described as "beloved" by the zoo's CEO, Deborah Jensen, and they are calling her "a little princess." I am not convinced that the words accurately align with the zoo's actions.

When baby Hansa was being struck with the vile weapon known as an ankus -- the long-handled stick with a sharp pointed hook used in all circuses and many zoos including Woodland Park -- the zoo's deputy director, Bruce Bohmke, dismissed public concerns, claiming that punishments were "appropriate." Many elephant keepers maintain a traditional view that "discipline" and "control" are necessary.

Zoo managers and keepers who defend physical punishment claim it is justified because elephants in the wild discipline subordinate members of the herd with physical punishment and aggression. Perhaps that's why Bruce Upchurch, the zoo's mammal curator, endorsed the recent practice of chaining Woodland Park's elephants by their legs for 14 hours every night, of hitting them upon resistance and using a block and tackle to enforce crouching on command.

Joyce Poole, a research scientist who has studied elephants in the wild for several decades, says discipline is not natural in elephant society and is not something that an elephant can understand.

In a keynote presentation to the Elephant Managers Association annual conference in 2001 -- the same year Bohmke defended and approved baby Hansa being struck many times over many days with an ankus -- Poole expressed her frustration at the false belief that discipline was necessary or appropriate for elephants, specifically stating that they "do not discipline their young."

Poole said, "I have no idea how this myth was started, but I have never seen (wild) calves 'disciplined.' Protected, comforted, cooed over, reassured and rescued, yes, but punished,

no. Elephants are raised in an incredibly positive and loving environment. If a younger elephant, or in fact anyone in the family, has wronged another in some way, much comment and discussion follows. Sounds of the wronged individual being comforted are mixed with voices of reconciliation."

The history of elephants in zoos is full of mental and physical pain. Zoo elephants have traditionally endured difficult and lonely lives, shipped around indiscriminately, bored out of their minds, locked in cramped and sterile quarters, invariably chained for long periods and often beaten. Today, zoos routinely confine their elephants in spaces much too small, although Bohmke says that that "the space issue's kind of a red herring ... (it) doesn't mean much to me."

Well, space certainly means a great deal to elephants. Compared with most animals, including primates, ungulates, carnivores, reptiles and birds, elephants spend the vast majority of their time -- 20 hours of every 24 -- in movement. Their size and great physical vigor means they must have opportunity for sustained physical movement and, thus, very large and very complex spaces.

Following Hansa's premature death, Woodland Park Zoo is already planning to breed a replacement. Zoos claim that they must breed elephants to "save" them. In truth, zoos breed elephants principally because baby elephants guarantee huge attendance increases. If zoos truly wanted to save elephants they would be enthusiastically dedicating their passion, energy and resources to protecting wild elephant habitats.

Considering what Hansa's mother endured when she was shipped to Dickerson Park Zoo for mating -- a beating with ax handles allegedly lasting for an hour, and so severe that the USDA declared it abusive and fined the zoo for it -- I shudder when I read that the zoo is planning to produce more elephants.

The zoo birthing process itself is characteristically horrible, with the mother usually chained in place with her legs stretched apart, kept completely separate from her elephant companions. It is all so completely different from what happens in the wild, where an elephant will give birth surrounded by her female relatives, enthusiastically assisted and encouraged by them all, and where the baby is born into a world of great love and affection, welcomed by a family from whose members she will never be separated except by death.

It is revealing and distressing that the zoo says Hansa "usually" slept with her mother. In the wild, baby elephants are never more than a couple of feet away from their mother for many years. They do not sleep with mom only "usually." They are in almost permanent contact, always touching and, in elephant fashion, embracing one another 24 hours of every day.

A baby elephant who is sometimes forced to sleep alone, or who is disciplined with blows from an ankus, cannot be described, as Kelly Helmick, the zoo's director of animal health, put it, as "definitely a little spoiled." That sort of thinking is based upon a zoo

perspective. Hansa may have been "spoiled" by comparison with what happens to baby elephants in some other zoos. But compared with what she would have experienced in the wild, her short life was one of deprivation, tainted by discipline and abusive control, and marked by social and environmental inadequacy.

At this time of deep sadness I hope that Woodland Park Zoo will take time to reflect upon what has happened to date and contemplate what it could best do in the future. If there is deep love for elephants at the zoo, for example, it will send the badly abused elephant Bamboo to a sanctuary. The system of control under the Upchurch and Bohmke regime has changed Bamboo from one of the sweetest-natured, liveliest, brightest and most cooperative elephants I ever met to one suffering the stereotypical symptoms of a distressed being and branded as "dangerous."

I sincerely also hope that the zoo will not pursue its breeding program. Few baby elephants survive in zoos anyway: Only 17 from the last 37 zoo births. And they enter a world and a life that is inherently inadequate.

I have always maintained, even when I was director at Woodland Park from the mid-1970s through the mid-1980s, that zoos should aim to put themselves out of business. They certainly can put themselves out of the business of keeping their small groups of elephants in their small zoo exhibit spaces: a situation that I am convinced is cruel and unnecessary. Pursuit of this goal at Woodland Park would be a wonderful and fitting way to honor the short life of baby Hansa.

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