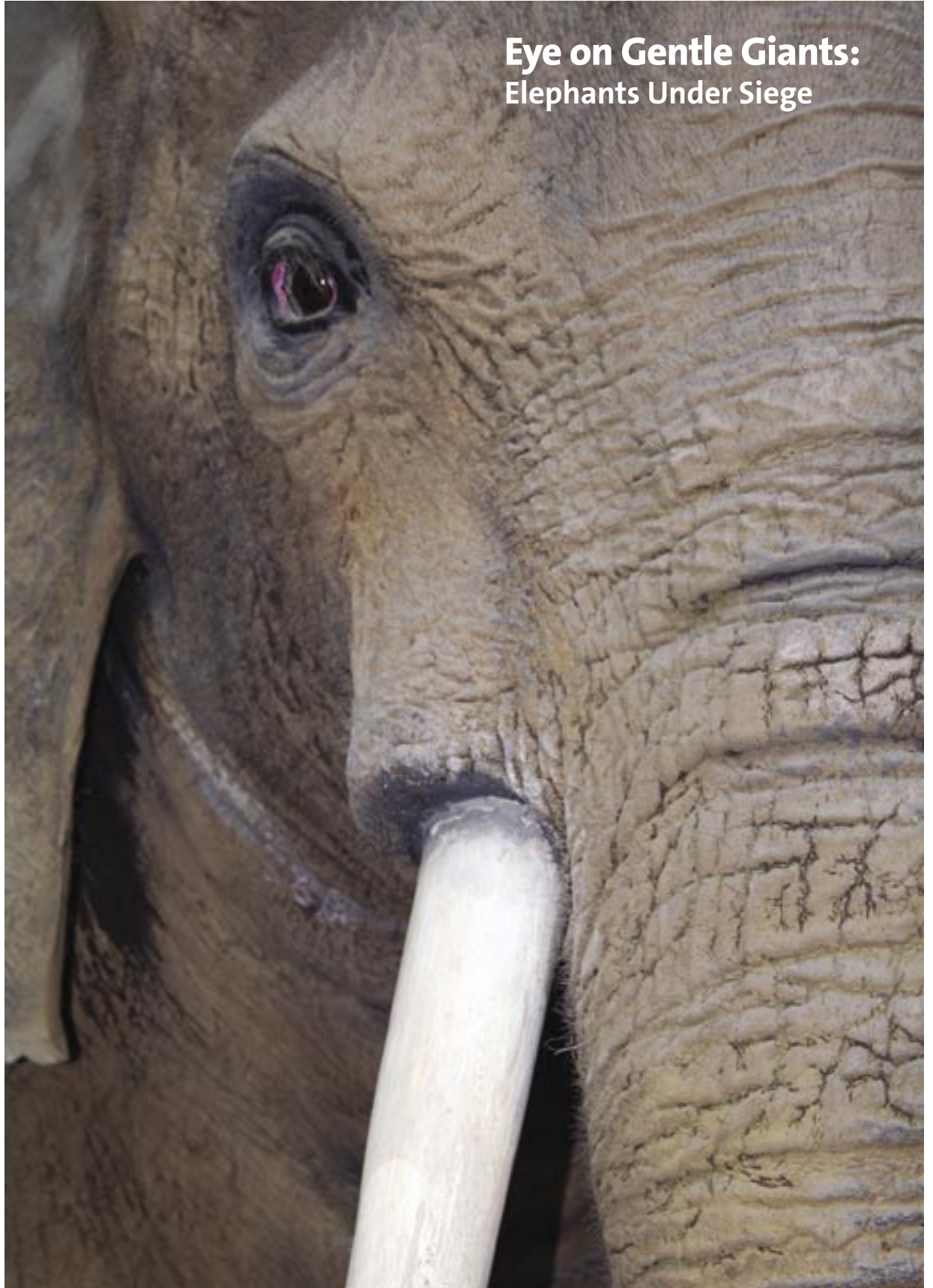


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## Eye on Gentle Giants: Elephants Under Siege





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# CONTENTS

## FEATURES

### 2 THE ETHICAL MANAGEMENT OF ELEPHANTS AND THE VALUE OF LONG-TERM FIELD RESEARCH

By Joyce H. Poole, Ph.D., and Petter Granli, Amboseli Elephant Research Project and ElephantVoices

Based on her many years of studying elephants in the wild, world renowned expert Dr. Poole explains why captivity fails to meet the special needs of elephants and why their exploitation must be stopped.

### 6 SHACKLED OR SHOT: GLOBAL THREATS TO ELEPHANTS AND CONSERVATION STRATEGIES TO SAVE THEM

By Adam M. Roberts, Vice President, Born Free USA

Although protected for a number of years, more needs to be done to conserve their habitats and build education programs that teach people how to live safely and cordially with elephants.

### 10 QUEST FOR DUMBO: ELEPHANT REPRODUCTION RESEARCH

By Crystal Schaeffer, M.A. Ed., AAVS Outreach Director

Desperate to increase the dwindling number of elephants in North America, the zoo industry is spurring a growing area of research.

### 12 CIRCUSES AND ELEPHANTS: THE TRUTH UNDER THE BIG TOP

By Emily Clermont, Public Policy Coordinator, Animal Protection Institute

Learn the sad reality of life for elephants in circuses.

### 15 ELEPHANTS: EARTH'S MOST MAGNIFICENT MAMMALS

By Cynthia Zipfel, AAVS Outreach Coordinator

We all love elephants, but did you know...

### 20 CARING FOR CAPTIVE ELEPHANTS: A MAMMOTH PARADIGM SHIFT

By Carol Buckley, Founding Director, The Elephant Sanctuary

A personal look at one sanctuary giving haven to elephants in need.

### 22 ELEPHANTS SPEAK OUT FOR CONSERVATION

By Kate Nattrass, Wildlife and Habitat Protection, International Fund for Animal Welfare

Cutting-edge technology listens in on elephant conversations.

### 24 WILD AT HEART: THE PLIGHT OF ASIAN WORKING ELEPHANTS

By Crystal Miller-Spiegel, MS, AAVS Senior Policy Analyst

Exploitation of elephants beyond zoos and circuses can be back-breaking work.

### 26 COST OF 'EDUCATION' TOO HIGH FOR ELEPHANTS

By Suzanne Roy, Program Director, and RaeLeann Smith, Communications and Elephant Campaign Coordinator, In Defense of Animals

Exploitation is cloaked in zoo education and conservation.

## COLUMNS

### 16 MEDIAWATCH

By Cynthia Zipfel, AAVS Outreach Coordinator

The media continues to look toward AAVS as a valuable resource regarding the issue of pet cloning.

### 18 NEWSNET

By Crystal Schaeffer, M.A. Ed., AAVS Outreach Director

£1 Million Funding for Alternatives in UK; Austria Works to Ban Experiments on Apes; Chickens Think about Their Futures; Umbilical Cord Blood Growing Source for Stem Cells; Computerized Brain in the Works.

### 29 MESSAGE TO OUR MEMBERS

The winter holidays are a great time of year for giving!

### 31 TRIBUTES

Special friends honored and remembered.

### 32 ARDF UPDATE

The Alternatives Research & Development Foundation is proud to announce the recipients of its 2005 Alternatives Research Grant Program.



# The Ethical Management of Elephants and the Value of Long-Term Field Research

By Joyce H. Poole, Ph.D.,  
and Petter Granli, Amboseli  
Elephant Research Project  
and ElephantVoices

Over the last decade or so, western society has witnessed an important shift in consciousness concerning the welfare of non-human animals. Much of the impetus for this swing in opinion has been driven by the results of scientific studies which have shown many species to be capable of experiencing not only pain and suffering but multifaceted emotions and reasoning within complex social and cognitive settings.

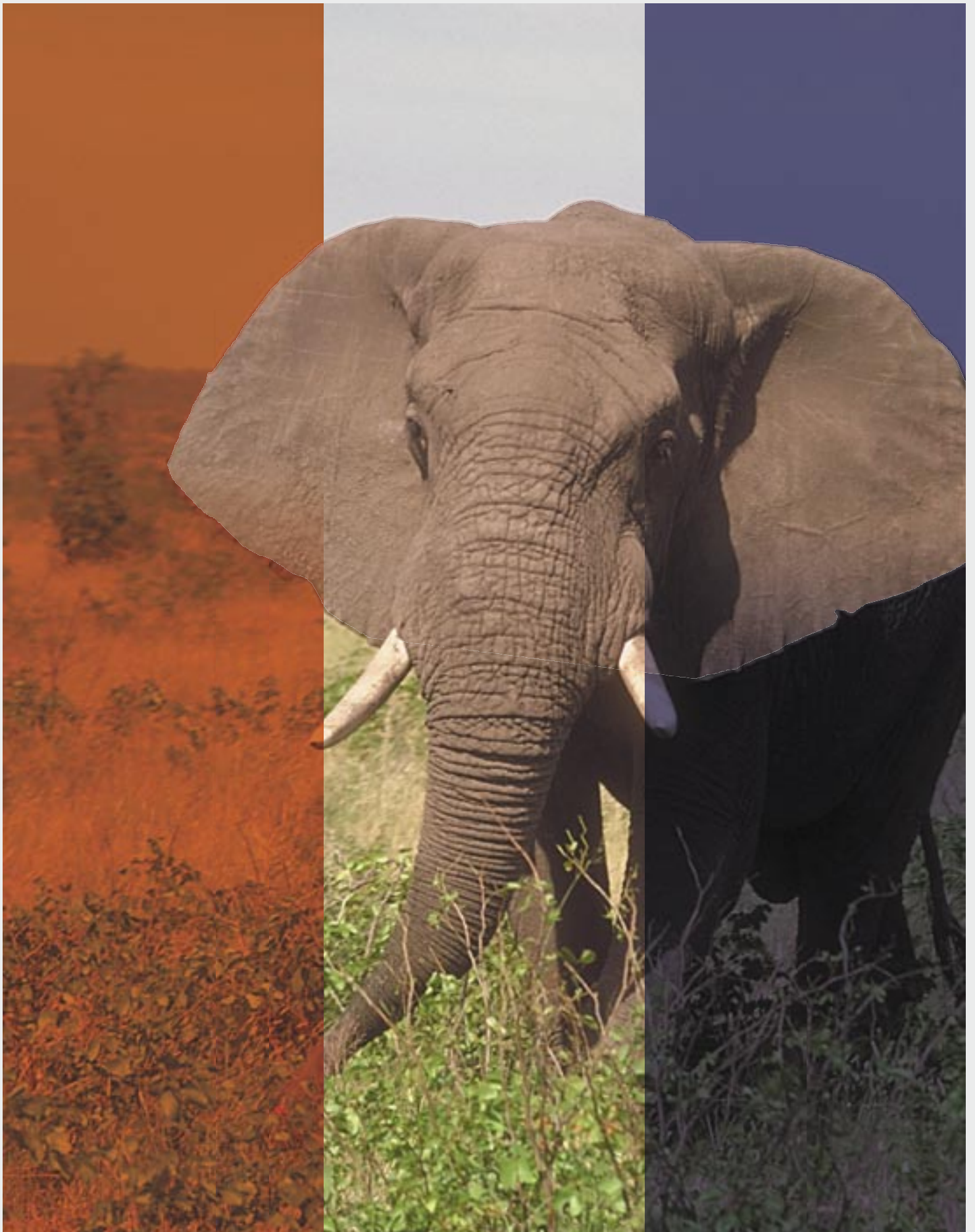
**T**hrough a wealth of scientific publications, popular essays, books, and documentary films, studies of elephant behavior have contributed substantially to this change in outlook, challenging the *status quo* with regard to elephant social, communicative, cognitive, and emotional abilities. Unusually long-lived, elephants display a high degree of social and emotional complexity. Their development includes social learning and behavioural innovation, both of which are evident in the use and modification of simple tools and in vocal imitation. Elephants have high neocortical development, possess good memory, and are skilful users of Machiavellian intelligence. Mirror self-recognition by elephants indicates self-awareness. Numerous observations suggest that elephants may have theory of mind and anticipatory planning abilities that may include imagining future events, such as pain to themselves and others and, possibly, their own deaths. In addition, elephants experience long-term

psychological effects of trauma. Taken together, these scientific discoveries require improvement in the way we care for elephants and demand that we err on the side of caution when the interests of elephants are being considered.

To a large extent, the change in attitude toward elephants is a direct consequence of the numerous scientific publications and documentary films produced by long-term field research exemplified by the Amboseli Elephant Research Project (AERP). Initiated by Cynthia Moss in 1972, the AERP strives to create, maintain, and make available an unparalleled body of knowledge on the African savanna elephant, *Loxodonta africana*. Based on the long-term study of the population of elephants inhabiting the Amboseli ecosystem in southern Kenya, the AERP data bank is a unique and priceless resource. In addition to the regular long-term monitoring of the 1,300 individually-known elephants that currently make up the Amboseli population, scientists from around the world have

undertaken a broad range of comprehensive studies on different aspects of elephant biology and behavior. Now in its thirty-fourth year, the published results of this large body of work form the essential basis for our current insight into what it means to be an elephant and is vital to our understanding of the ecology, population dynamics, social behavior, and cognition of all species of elephants everywhere. As a consequence of AERP's several hundred collective years of observations of individually-known elephants, its vast databanks, and widely published scientific research, biologists associated with the AERP are in a unique position to make important recommendations on a wide range of issues concerning the conservation, management, and welfare of both free-ranging and captive elephants.

As the scale and pace of environmental change in both African and Asian elephant range states multiply, intensive management of isolated wild and domestic elephant populations is increasing. Against the backdrop of a shift in consciousness, the





management of dwindling wild and captive populations of elephants is simultaneously coming under more and more scrutiny.

In the wild, practices such as culling, translocation, fertility regulation, and methods of human-elephant conflict mitigation are increasingly in the public eye. A recent proposal to re-institute culling in Kruger National Park, South Africa, required an international conference to review the evidence before such a drastic measure could be taken. In Kenya, a planned translocation of elephants from one national park to another has villagers concerned about the consequences of inadvertently splitting elephant families and the consequences if distressed elephants were to take 'revenge.'

Traditional approaches to captive elephant management, such as highly invasive reproductive and health

measures; lack of adequate space and social stimulation; unsuitable housing and climates; the practice of chaining, training, and disciplinary action; as well as free contact are coming under mounting pressure for change, with an escalating number of cases appearing in the media.

As welfare issues come increasingly to the fore, the Amboseli Elephant Research Project has experienced a rising number of requests to make recommendations, offer expert opinion and testimony, and appear in court in disputes related to the ethical treatment of elephants. To give but a few examples, author Poole has been called upon to testify in the Tuli Elephant Case, South Africa, 1999; to give numerous statements regarding the: ethics of using elephants in circuses, 2000; welfare of circus elephant, Arna, New South Wales, 2002; importation of 11 African Elephants from Swaziland; welfare of elephant Maggie, Alaska Zoo,

2004; welfare of elephants in Norwegian circuses, 2004; welfare of elephant Wankie, Lincoln Park Zoo, 2005; space requirements for elephants, 2005; practice of forced defecation in circuses, 2005; and to testify in the Chicago City Council hearing on Elephant Protection Ordinance, 2005. Her own participation in this increasing dialogue is but one voice in response to countless requests made of elephant field biologists around the globe.

By attempting to mimic wild environments, zoos have made major advances, and, for almost every species, wild biology is now the basis for exhibits. But for elephants, with more than 4,000 years of exploitation by humans, the starting point is too often merely what has gone before. Zoos have tended to treat elephants as if they are a domesticated species and, as a result, find themselves trying to justify or adapt management methods that are really

about maintaining the animal as a beast of burden in various guises. Because the human-elephant relationship is historically exploitative, tradition in this case is surely a most unreliable guide to elephant needs and interests.

In the recent movement to improve the approach that major zoo associations are taking in the management of captive elephants, as well as in a sustained effort to end altogether the practice of using elephants in circuses, the debate between individuals and coalitions both inside and outside zoos and circuses has often been acrimonious and heavily weighted with agendas and ideas that are more about people and organizations and their reluctance to change than they are about elephants. There is so much folklore, tradition, and received 'wisdom' around elephant management that cutting through it to an appreciation of what elephants really are as wild animals is next to impossible. Although we are experiencing a period of incredible change that is nothing short of a revolution, the current debates are

that all elephants, including males, should be allowed access to a social group, not kept in isolation. It recommends that males should remain in the company of their families until the age of natural dispersal, while closely related females should stay together for life. Elephant behavior shows us that during parturition females should remain unchained and in the company of close elephant companions, particularly if experienced females are present, and that infants and calves should not be removed from the care of their mothers and family members. It points clearly to the fact that the tradition of removing an elephant from its social group for the purpose of exchange with other zoos or circuses should cease. It emphasizes that all forms of physical discipline and punishment must be discontinued and that chaining should stop unless absolutely necessary for veterinary care. It is clear on the basis of all these criteria that circuses are not an appropriate environment for elephants and that most zoos will have to make substantial changes to meet elephants' most basic needs.

and must be carefully evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

With this state of affairs in mind, we believe that the time is ripe for a declaration of principles describing the nature of elephants, and what their interests, captive or wild, might be. We have, therefore, taken an initiative in this direction. Drawn from a consensus of leading field biologists, such a declaration will be difficult to challenge and will encourage a more balanced development of elephant welfare and management both in the wild and across the spectrum of captive situations in which elephants are held. The purpose of the statement will be to provide an Elephant Charter, or *Magna Charta*, based on elephant biology, which can be the touchstone for anyone needing to address elephant interests. It will state,

*"We hold these things to be true about elephants, as a result of our published scientific research. We believe these things must be taken into account as dwindling wild and captive elephant populations come under more and more intensive management. We believe that how we account for these things defines the validity of our approach to management and in particular to meeting the welfare needs of elephants."*

Such an Elephant Charter will place the onus of responsibility on zoos and others claiming to act in support of elephant welfare and conservation to take the facts of elephant biology and behavior (i.e. the things that define wild elephants as wild elephants rather than the things that define wild elephants as able domestic servants) into account and to openly demonstrate that they have done so.

What is the right way to treat beings such as elephants? If, in terms of anatomy, physiology, social behavior, and cognition, a continuum exists between humans and other animals, it follows that there should be some scale of ethical principles. Based on available evidence, we have reached the moment in time to move beyond old patterns in the treatment of elephants and lay down the principles by which new standards should be set. **AV**

*For more information on the Amboseli Elephant Research Project, please visit the Amboseli Trust for Elephants at [www.ElephantTrust.org](http://www.ElephantTrust.org) and [www.ElephantVoices.org](http://www.ElephantVoices.org).*

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## **In Kenya, a planned translocation of elephants from one national park to another has villagers concerned about the consequences of inadvertently splitting elephant families and the consequences if distressed elephants were to take 'revenge.'**

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composed of endless assertion and towering rhetoric but little clear resolution.

As each battle is fought, and won or lost, those field biologists who are in the storm find ourselves repeating the same viewpoints regarding the well-being of elephants. Our long-term behavioral research on wild elephants indicates that these large, highly social and intelligent animals require ample, environmentally complex space and a sufficient number of conspecifics for social contact and learning. It points to the fact that we should be moving toward a position in which only captive situations with space allowing individuals to choose among a wide selection of social partners, and to achieve adequate exercise and stimulation, are permitted to keep elephants. It indicates

Long-term behavioral study concludes that, in the wild, the distressing practice of abducting infant elephants from their families to send to circuses, zoos, or safari parks must stop. It indicates that culling of elephants ought to be avoided except where all other alternatives have been examined, and that if culling is deemed essential, it should include whole families; elephant infants and calves should not be spared for export to zoos, circuses, safari parks, and private reserves. The parallel practice of introducing traumatized youngsters to new areas without adult role models should cease. Alternative practices to culling such as translocation and birth control also have welfare implications, and these must be carefully assessed. Human-elephant conflict is the cause for increasing ethical dilemmas