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*Open letter to:*

Dr. Anne Baker, Executive Director  
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**Dear Dr. Baker,**

I am writing to you regarding the unfortunate incident in which the seven-year-old juvenile male elephant, Louie, attacked Mr. Don RedFox. I wish to send my condolences to Mr. RedFox and his family. I hope that he is able to make a full recovery. I also wish to make a statement regarding the incident.

I have decades of experience studying the behavior and communication of wild African elephants and working for their conservation and welfare. Both my PhD research at Cambridge University and my post-doctoral research at Princeton University in the 1980s focused on aggressive behavior and signaling and assessment by male elephants. Since then I have documented the entire repertoire of African elephant postures and gestures, published in an [online database](#) on [www.elephantvoices.org](http://www.elephantvoices.org).

I have heard the viewpoints and read statements by zoo officials and zoo experts regarding the incident and I have had the possibility to view the video that was posted on the Toledo Blade website (<http://toledoblade.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20100721/NEWS16/100729906>).

Zoo officials and experts have suggested that Louie was “startled” and they have likened Louie’s behavior to that of the roughhousing or “sparring” behavior observed between wild male elephants. As an expert on elephant behavior, I must disagree; Louie’s behavior on the video shows a combination of apprehensive, submissive and aggressive behavior. Louie is not playful and neither is he sparring; Louie is interacting with Mr. RedFox with intent to harm.

I understand that public relations are a very important aspect of zoo communication. It is difficult to say whether the experts and officials speaking on behalf of the Toledo Zoo have misrepresented the situation on purpose, or whether they are lacking relevant expertise. It is important, however, that the public be given opposing viewpoints by other experts and that they be given the tools with which to make their own judgment about what happened. For this reason, I use specific terms to describe the aggressive and submissive elephant behavior that I observed in the video.

I include a link to our website where members of the public may search for these words on our elephant behavior database and view images and a description of the behavior (see aggressive postures at <http://www.elephantvoices.org/multimedia-resources/elephantvoices-gestures-database.html?catid=3>). This is what I observe and conclude:

Mr. RedFox approaches Louie. We are told that he carries carrots though it is not possible to identify what he has in his hands. Since elephants have an extraordinary ability to detect vibrations through the soles of their feet (they can pick up the footfalls of running zebras from over a mile away), Louie would have known that Mr. RedFox was approaching even if he had not heard him. In other words, it is unlikely that Louie was startled, as zoo experts have suggested. As soon as Louie turns to face Mr. RedFox his head is held high, his ears are spread and his trunk is curled under in a threatening posture (see the above online descriptions of aggressive behaviors – *Standing-Tall, Head-High, Ear-Spreading*; African elephants curl their trunks under in this way in two different situations – when they are apprehensive [see *Trunk-Curved-Under*] and when they are preparing to attack [see *Ramming*]). Then he steps toward Mr. RedFox and gives a slight *Head-Nod* in a further challenge to his trainer. Mr. RedFox responds by stepping back, and then continues to approach Louie. Louie backs and turns away (*Turn-Away*) from Mr. RedFox in a submissive posture, but then turns around to face Mr. RedFox again and lunges at him in a highly aggressive manner. He appears to make contact with Mr. RedFox and pushes him out of the stall (*Pushing*).

Mr. RedFox goes away and then reenters the stall with a bullhook. Louie first challenges him, but then *Turns-Away* away in a submissive manner. As Mr. RedFox approaches him with the bullhook, Louie appears to anticipate being hurt and he tries to tuck his back legs out of harms way (as seen on our database in an image under *Tusking*). Mr. RedFox uses the bullhook not to “touch” Louie, as zoo authorities have stated, but to “hook” him, and pull him around. Louie turns and immediately lunges at Mr. RedFox and pushes him into the corner and appears to bend down as if to tusk him (*Ramming*). Louie backs up, crouches down and then lunges forward bending down, *Tusking* and *Ramming* Mr. RedFox again. In the video that shows the last part of the incident from a different angle, Louie can be seen *Ear-Folding*, also a sign of aggression.

This is NOT the way that male elephants in the wild behave toward one another when they are *Sparring*. Rather, the incident has elements of how male elephants behave in an *Escalated-Contest* or when they are engaged in a *Duel*, when they attempt to kill one another, and it is similar to how a wild elephant behaves if he or she is trying to defend himself or herself against a human predator. This is certainly not play behavior (search under “Play” on the database to compare) and Louie shows no signs in this video of friendly behavior toward Mr. RedFox. Since the zoo uses free contact to control Louie, he has had years of experience at the end of a bullhook. My interpretation based on his behavior is that Louie is retaliating against a perceived threat.



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