



Position Statement on Reintroduction of Elephants from Zoos

EAZA Elephant TAG, 14 July 2021

This position statement provides view of the Elephant Taxon Advisory Group (TAG) of the European Association of Zoos and Aquaria (EAZA) on the reintroduction of elephants from zoos, as considered within the general EAZA framework for conservation translocations (including reintroductions).

Conservation Translocations: EAZA framework

EAZA has adopted the IUCN Guidelines for Reintroductions and Other Conservation Translocations (2013), and uses the following definition as in accordance with these guidelines:

“A conservation translocation is the intentional movement and release of a living organism where the primary objective is a conservation benefit; this will usually comprise improving the conservation status of the focal species locally or globally, and/or restoring natural ecosystem functions or processes. This includes Population Restoration (Reinforcement and Reintroduction) and Conservation Introduction (Assisted colonization and Ecological replacement).”

Conservation translocations that are part of rewilding projects are covered by this definition.

There are a number of general principles that must apply to all Conservation Translocations where animals move from EAZA Members into the wild that are outlined in the [EAZA Population Management Manual](#) (chapter 4.3.1, pg. 109). The general principles include:

- Documentation describing that the Conservation Translocation is in accordance with the IUCN guidelines mentioned above.
- Species conservation needs must determine if a Conservation Translocation is the most appropriate conservation intervention.
- Involvement of and cooperation with *in situ* partners and local authorities.
- Considering the appropriateness of releasing (the individual) animals into the selected destination.

Lack of space for placing animals, commercial gain, PR or marketing and communication are not considered to be acceptable arguments for the release of animals from EAZA Members.

Conservation Translocations: Elephants

The EAZA Elephant TAG is responsible for overseeing the population management programmes for African savannah elephants (*Loxodonta africana*) and Asian elephants (*Elephas maximus*) in European and West Asian zoos, the African elephant EAZA Ex situ Programme (EEP) and Asian elephant EEP.

Reaching increasingly demographically and genetically self-sustaining populations of behaviourally competent elephants have been the goals for both programmes since their establishment in the early 90s. Significant progress towards these goals has been achieved, as described in further detail in [Zooquaria 110](#) (pg. 12-13). The publications of the new [EAZA Best Practice Guidelines for Elephants](#) in 2020 provide clear and renewed guidance on the best management and care of elephants in EAZA zoos, including on population management, social management, behavioural competency of individuals animals and their welfare.

As is the case for all EAZA Ex situ Programmes, the roles and goals for the two elephant EEPs are assessed considering direct conservation, indirect conservation and non-conservation roles. EAZAs process is based on the IUCN Species Survival Commission Guidelines on the Use of Ex situ Management for Species Conservation (2014) and described in full in the earlier mentioned EAZA Population Management Manual.

Wild populations of African and Asian elephants are in dire straits. Following population declines over several decades due to poaching for ivory and loss of habitat, both African elephants species were assessed earlier this year as having an increased risk of extinction; the African forest elephant (*Loxodonta cyclotis*) is listed as Critically Endangered and the African savanna elephant (*Loxodonta africana*) as Endangered on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. The Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*) had already been listed as Endangered and continues to have a downward population trend.

Despite this alarming situation, the EAZA Elephant TAG is not presently aware of any holistic assessment by conservationists pointing to the need for reintroductions of African savannah elephant or Asian elephants from zoos abroad to help prevent local or global species extinction. EAZA would seek close cooperation with *in situ* experts like for example the appropriate IUCN Specialist Groups for elephants before considering to reintroduce elephants into the wild. Both EEP populations are managed as 'insurance' populations so that these can be used as a 'source' population to supply animals for reintroductions in case of a future need. As with any reintroduction project the needs of the wild population as well as the source population would require careful consideration, including avoiding depletion of the source population.

Prior to considering supporting the reintroduction of elephants from EAZA zoos, the Elephant TAG emphasises the importance of a carefully considered veterinary risk assessment, to minimise the risk of introducing pathogens from zoo animals to the wild population. A proper genetic analysis of the population would also need to be considered considering taxonomy and genetic diversity of the elephants to be released.

The vast majority of elephants in zoos have lived most if not all of their lives in human care and have not been exposed to conditions in wild habitats. Hence the selection of elephants for any future reintroductions would also need careful consideration to ensure the elephants have the best chances of success once translocated to semi-wild or wild habitats in range countries.

Considering all the aspects and challenges mentioned above, the EAZA Elephant TAG stresses the need for and importance of cooperation across EAZA member institutions, and with *in situ* partners and local authorities, as the best way towards achieving success.

The EAZA Elephant TAG hopes the populations in the wild can thrive without the need for conservation translocations involving our Members. Equally, we would be proud to be involved in such work if there is a need and the conditions as described in this statement are in place. Until such a time, the EAZA Elephant TAG recommends all stakeholders to contribute financially or in kind to existing field conservation (*in situ*) initiatives supporting elephants in Africa and Asia, and to maximize public engagement with zoo visitors in Europe linked to the species and its protection.