

# EAZA Position Statement on the Evolution of Elephant Management Systems at Member Zoos



**Approved by the EAZA Elephant Taxon Advisory Group 4 July 2019**

## **Introduction**

Elephants are a key part of many zoological garden collections, with significant populations of both Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*) and African elephant (*Loxodonta africana*) present within the EAZA network. These populations have been managed via EAZA Ex Situ Programmes (EEP, formerly European Endangered species Programmes) since 1991 for Asian elephant and 1993 for African elephant. The programmes inherited many animals from the era before collective population management, along with a number of issues that the EEPs have committed to address in the interests of the animals' welfare and the safety of zookeeping staff. One of the principal issues over the course of the last two decades has been the existence of two different elephant management systems: protected contact is a system in which animals and carers do not share the same unrestricted space, and all procedures requiring proximity to the animals are conducted through a protective barrier; free contact is a system in which animals and carers share the same unrestricted space for essential procedures. These two systems are mutually incompatible, and it is very challenging to move elephants from one management system to the other. In the light of this fact, the EAZA Elephant Taxon Advisory Group (TAG) acknowledges that to integrate the two populations to allow for the greatest possible genetic and demographic diversity, a decision must be made regarding the adoption of a single management system for both species of elephant in the care of EAZA institutions. This position statement outlines the results of the deliberation on this matter, and points to the future management of elephants within EAZA and the EEPs.

## **Executive Summary**

The Elephant Taxon Advisory Group, following intensive discussion over many years, has decided to adopt protected contact (PC) management of elephants as the sole management system for both species. The TAG recognizes the challenges that this poses, as described in this statement, and has therefore made it a requirement of all EAZA Members with elephants to adopt protected contact by 1 January 2030 at the latest. This date provides a realistic time frame for the implementation of the decision. The TAG will continue to support the use of free contact management in the interim, recognizing that Members of the Association have used the system over many years; this statement therefore does not condemn the use of free contact management, rather it recognizes that the two systems cannot provide a unified framework for the *ex situ* conservation of the species.

## **Elephant Management in EAZA Zoos**

Zoologists specialising in the care of elephants in zoos learned over the years that breeding success and overall animal welfare were significantly enhanced by the retention of social herd structures similar to those in the wild, which allow the animals to express a more complete range of natural behaviours. In the light of this finding, the TAG mandated in 2003 that newly built elephant facilities must provide for protected contact management, thereby reducing the level of control over individual animals afforded by free contact and empowering the animals to make more of their own choices. While free contact can provide for social herds, the introduction of zookeepers into enclosures for medical and foot care and to assist with birthing, provided lower levels of herd autonomy.

In addition, the TAG recognizes that despite good safety records in the majority of EAZA institutions employing free contact, the risk to the safety of zookeepers is higher than under a protected contact management system. Given the relative unpredictability and size of bulls, the TAG withdrew all recommendations for adult bulls to be managed in free contact in 2003. The ending of free contact entirely by 1 January 2030 completes this process and is aimed therefore at increasing the autonomy of animals in human care and reducing the risk to zookeepers.

Protected contact is not without its own challenges. Animals must be trained to approach specialised equipment that allows veterinarians and zookeepers to provide essential care, and also to care for new-born calves without intervention from staff. A considerably body of experience has now been built up within EAZA elephant holding institutions, and the TAG now feels confident that protected contact provides a good environment for the human care of elephants of both species within our institutions.

Given these factors, the predominance of protected contact in the EAZA network currently, and the need to integrate the populations of both species to allow for the maximum possible demographic and genetic variability, the TAG has decided to make protected contact management mandatory for all EAZA Member institutions by 1 January 2030. The TAG will further make available to all holders guidance on the correct implementation of protected contact management to ensure that the highest possible standards of care and safety are enacted across our network; this guidance, and training for institutions transitioning to protected contact, will be made available to Members and the wider zoo community from 2020.

The EAZA Elephant TAG takes no position on the management method of elephants other than for those elephants that are part of the EAZA Ex Situ Programmes; EAZA will also continue to support Members using free contact management in the period up to their conversion to protected contact.