

# Position Statement

## Elephants in Australasian Zoos

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### 1. Introduction

The management goal of the Australasian Zoo and Aquarium Association (ZAA) elephant program is to ensure the health and welfare of elephants in the care of participating zoos, the safety of workers, and to meet genetic and demographic aims of the program. This being consistent with all species held in ZAA member zoos.

Elephants are intelligent and social animals and their welfare is largely dependent on the ability to meet their physiological and psychological needs. All ZAA member zoos that care for elephants have collectively agreed to provide elephants with a safe, socially appropriate, secure, comfortable and stimulating environment. This includes the provision of social stimuli, environmental enrichment, physical activity and conditioning programs that maximise the elephant's social, psychological and physical wellbeing. In addition ZAA members agree that the management programs, and facilities provided, will be selected to maximise elephant health and reproduction and minimise risk of injury to workers.

Elephant programs across the world have adopted a variety of elephant management approaches to care for and manage elephants. These can be described as:

- *Free Contact* (FC) defined as the direct handling of an elephant, when the keeper and the elephants share the same unrestricted space,
- *Protected Contact* (PC) defined as managing elephants through a primary containment barrier that the keeper does not cross; barriers combined with position of elephant provide for contact whilst keeper remains behind the containment barrier.

- *No Contact (NC)* defined as no direct contact with the elephant. For all procedures and treatments the elephants have to be immobilised. This management system is not endorsed for use in ZAA Zoos.

ZAA member zoos have for many years been managing elephants using a range of management approaches, depending upon the specific circumstances. As with any species it is recognised that individuals and groups have changing behavioural and physical needs. ZAA members agree that it is an essential process for any facility holding elephants to develop/review and adjust plans to accommodate such changes. It is also noted if an institution nominates specific procedures that require modification to the contact practice, it is recommended that institutions undertake specific risk assessments for each procedure to meet the safety and welfare requirements of staff and elephants.

## 2. Background

In 2006 an Elephant Steering Committee was established to assist with developing a cooperative and coordinated approach to the management of elephants in the ZAA membership. The committee consists of CEOs, Directors and animal managers from all ZAA member zoos that care for elephants. The Steering Committee is supported by an Elephant Taxonomic Advisory Group (TAG) consisting of elephant managers, keepers and curators. The program is also supported by the Veterinary Specialist Advisory Group that consists of zoo veterinarians. The Steering Committee and TAG meet at least three times per year to review and refine strategies that underpin elephant management, animal welfare and staff safety.

The ZAA Guidelines for Management of Elephants in Australasian Zoos<sup>1</sup>, ZAA Captive Management Plan for Asian Elephants (2014), and the Steering Committee have initiated, guided and supported many strategies and controls to maximise safety and welfare in all ZAA institutions that care for elephants. They include:

- (a) Documented animal management procedures that considers all aspects of social, psychological and physiological requirements of herd and individual  
Risk assessments and risk mitigation controls.
- (b) Detailed record keeping.
- (c) Competency based training of keepers.
- (d) Skill exchange and document sharing across regional institutions.
- (e) Incident reporting mechanisms – compulsory report of incidents, injuries and near misses.
- (f) Regional communication and support.
- (g) As part of the commitment to continual evaluation and evolution of elephant management utilised by ZAA elephant facilities, this position paper and approach has also considered the following:

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<sup>1</sup> ZAA Guidelines for Management of Elephants in Australasian Zoos, Zoo and Aquarium Association, 2013

- (h) The American Association of Zoos and Aquarium (AZA) board endorsed position ‘Maximising Occupational Safety of Elephant Care Professionals’<sup>2</sup> and Standards for Elephant Management and Care 2011<sup>3</sup>.
- (i) The TAG’s response to the above.
- (j) Content of European Association of Zoos and Aquaria (EAZA) elephant based newsletter ‘Towards a healthy and self-sustaining population of elephants’<sup>4</sup>.

### 3. Context

- 3.1 All ZAA organisations that care for elephants are committed to an ongoing program of reviews to prioritise safety of workers while maintaining the highest levels of animal health and welfare. This involves doing everything that is reasonably practicable to ensure the safety of staff and directing management practices to meet the welfare needs of all elephants.
- 3.2 The ZAA Board recognises that a variety of elephant management approaches are valid when ensuring the health and welfare of elephants within ZAA member zoos.
- 3.3 The Steering Committee recognises the following:
  - (a) Staff safety is essential in the management of any species in member zoos.
  - (b) It is expected that, in all circumstances, the elephant management practice selected by the zoo is well defined and documented, risk assessments are performed and all practicable opportunities to mitigate identified risks and meet animal welfare have been employed.

### 4. Recommendations

- 4.1 The ZAA Board and Steering Committee recommend that the ZAA members holding elephants select management programs and provide facilities that maximise elephant health, reproduction and well-being, and minimise risk of injury to workers. .
- 4.2 Recognising that ZAA members’ resources, individual elephants and elephant herd dynamics will change over time, the ZAA Board and Steering Committee recommend that those ZAA members holding elephants:
  - (a) Formally revise and update program safety, risk assessments and risk control measures. No less than annually.
  - (b) Continually update program planning.
  - (c) Formally update procedural and management documentation. No less than annually.

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<sup>2</sup> Maximising Occupational Safety of Elephant Care Professionals at AZA–accredited and AZA–certified Facilities, (American) Association of Zoos and Aquariums, 2011

<sup>3</sup> AZA Standards for Elephant Management and Care, (American) Association of Zoos and Aquariums, 2011

<sup>4</sup> EAZA News Issue 47, Towards a Healthy and Self-sustaining Population of Elephants in Europe, 2004

- (d) Provide ongoing opportunities for staff training.
  - (e) Review keeper competency training systems.
  - (f) Review the ability to modify elephant facilities should this be needed.
  - (g) Conduct continuous monitoring of behaviour and welfare of elephants, including but not limited to, review of practices overseas and independent professional review.
  - (h) Share experiences both throughout the region and overseas.
- 4.3 By Dec 2017, update ‘Guidelines for Management of Elephants in Australasian Zoos’ including:
- (a) Consideration of research and a tool to assess elephant behaviour to facilitate a consistent understanding and approach across ZAA institutions.
  - (b) Continued development of guidelines for the requirements of facilities and infrastructure pertaining to all recognised management practices.
- 4.4 Members of the Steering Committee to report safety with particular reference to the following during the annual workshop:
- (a) The current and future management practices that will be used at their institution to manage elephants, including an update on procedures and risk control measures.
  - (b) Any specific factors that have compromised staff safety and/or resulted in changes to the institution’s elephant management practices.

## 5. Approval

This position statement was approved by the Board of the Association on 02/08/2013.

### Revision Record

| Approved/ Amended/<br>Rescinded/Reviewed | Date      | Board / Executive Director /<br>Committee | Description   |
|--|-----------|---|---|
| Approved                                 | 2/12/2015 | Elephant Steering Committee               | Minor updates to wording and dates.                   |
| Approved                                 | 3/12/2015 | Board                                     | Updates (above) endorsed by the Board.                |
| Amended                                  | 28/7/2017 | Elephant Steering Committee               | Updates to management definitions and project timing. |

This document should be reviewed within 5 years of the date of approval or last review.