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In Defense Of Animals Applauds Dramatic Policy Shift That Ends Most Cruel Training Of Elephants In Zoos

San Rafael, Calif. (August 22, 2011) – In Defense of Animals (IDA) is applauding a momentous change in policy by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) that would bring an end to the most cruel training practices in zoos. The zoo industry trade association announced that by September 1, 2014, keepers in AZA zoos would no longer be able to share the same unrestricted space with elephants, with some exceptions.

About half of AZA zoos with elephants currently employ a training method in which keepers use the bullhook, a steel-tipped weapon resembling a fireplace poker, to control elephants through the threat of painful punishment. Under the new policy, zoos will be required to use the “protected contact” method, which means keeper and elephant are separated by a protective barrier and only positive reinforcement training is utilized.

“In Defense of Animals has long pushed zoos to end the archaic, circus-style training that has been inhumane for elephants and lethal for keepers,” said IDA Elephant Campaign Director Catherine Doyle. “We are pleased that elephants soon will be better protected from abusive handling in zoos.”

The new policy allows for exceptions, including medical procedures and testing, though zoos using protected contact have successfully trained elephants for veterinary treatment, blood tests and routine care. Zoos also will be required to document all instances of aggression by elephants and to report annually on all injuries or fatalities related to elephants (no such record-keeping now exists).

Since 1990, 31 keepers have been injured or killed by elephants in zoos. The most recent incident took place in January, when an elephant killed a keeper at the Knoxville Zoo. Another keeper was gravely injured last year at the Toledo Zoo. IDA filed complaints with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) after each incident, calling for an end to unsafe training practices in zoos. No keepers have died in zoos that use “protected contact” management.

The AZA directive will not entirely resolve the problems suffered by elephants in zoos. “The new policy is a significant step forward,” said Doyle, “but many elephants in zoos are still held in inadequate and unnatural displays that shorten their lives by decades. So there is still much work to be done.”

For more information, please visit www.HelpElephants.com.