

To Auckland Council
Subject Auckland Zoo Asian elephant programme
From Jonathan Wilcken, Director, Auckland Zoo
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**Regional
Facilities
Auckland**
An Auckland Council Organisation

1.0 Summary

Elephants are zoos' most powerful wildlife ambassadors. They enable zoos to engage visitors strongly and emotionally with wildlife and to promote the care and conservation of the environment. Zoos also contribute significantly to the protection and conservation of wild elephants.

Elephants at Auckland Zoo attract very significant public interest and support among the community: 84% of Aucklanders want the zoo to retain elephants¹.

Since the death of elephant, *Kashin*, in 2009, the Zoo has held only a single elephant, *Burma*. *Burma* could live for another 40 years and needs company for quality of life. This leaves the zoo with two options:

- acquire additional elephants, or
- send *Burma* to an overseas zoo leaving the Zoo with no elephants

This paper recommends that Council support the zoo in the acquisition of two juvenile elephants.

Such an option would enable the Zoo to provide appropriately for Burma's welfare, while continuing key environmental education and conservation programmes.

There is the potential to acquire suitable animals from Sri Lanka's Pinnawalla elephant orphanage. Whilst zoos don't purchase elephants, the associated transport and quarantine costs are estimated at \$3.2M.

The Zoo's existing facilities are sufficient to house the resulting group of three female elephants.

The Zoo's elephant proposals have attracted some criticism from animal activists, largely based on inaccurate or on outdated information. Auckland Zoo's elephant programme meets or exceeds all international standards, and has achieved the endorsement of international experts.

2.0 Recommendations

It is recommended that Council:

- A. Approve a proposal to the Auckland Council Annual Plan for the allocation of \$3.2 million for the acquisition of two elephants for Auckland Zoo.

3.0 Background

3.1 Elephants in zoos

¹ Ben Parson and Associates, 2010. *Potential expansion of Auckland Zoo and its elephant herd: Research report.*

A key role of a modern zoo is in environmental education. Zoos provide an increasingly urbanised society a means to experience wildlife, to build an interest in, an understanding of, and a care for the environment. Research confirms the success of zoos in this work. A recent multi-institution visitor impact study showed that zoos significantly enhance public understanding of wildlife and the conservation of wild places².

Given that a growing percentage of New Zealanders (currently 87%) lives in urban environments at some disconnect from the natural world, such a role is increasingly important in New Zealand, particularly in Auckland.

Elephants are zoos' most powerful wildlife ambassadors. They enable zoos to engage visitors strongly and emotionally with wildlife.

The ability of elephants to inspire the community was clear in August 2009 when the death of one of Auckland Zoo's two Asian elephants, *Kashin*, prompted an unprecedented response. Over 18,500 people visited the zoo to take part in a programme of remembrance, the largest number of visitors in a single day in the Zoo's history. Condolences were received from around the country.

Through promoting such strong emotional engagement, elephants inspire greater care for wildlife and the environment. Surveys consistently find that experiencing elephants features as the most telling of zoo memories. A recent Harris Interactive poll in the U.S. found that the public overwhelmingly (95% of those surveyed) felt that seeing elephants in real life helped people appreciate them and learn more about them.

3.2 Zoos conserving Asian elephants

Asian elephants are classified as Endangered³ in the wild, being threatened with extinction. Leading zoos that hold elephants, such as Auckland Zoo, also help protect Asian elephants in the wild.

Where the presence of elephants raises community support for their conservation, zoos have increasingly been able to raise critical funds for a range of conservation efforts. These include research programmes, elephant habitat restoration, and community-based initiatives in range countries, all directed at protecting wild populations of elephants.

Support for such conservation projects in the wild has become an increasingly important part of the activities of a modern zoo. Worldwide, zoos spend over US\$350 million every year funding projects that protect and conserve species in the wild. This places zoos as among the largest contributors to wildlife conservation in the world, third only to the global organisations *The Nature Conservancy* and the *World Wildlife Fund (WWF)*⁴. For example, the world's zoos currently provide the majority of funding for the International Elephant Foundation, a key conservation organisation that supports elephant conservation projects worldwide. Through local fundraising efforts, Auckland Zoo helps fund the protection of wild elephant populations in Indonesia and Thailand.

In addition, zoos are community-based organisations with significant community engagement skills. These skills are particularly important for helping to conserve species such as Asian elephants where local communities are competing for resources with the species. For example, in Sri Lanka alone, the resulting conflict results an average in the deaths of 150 elephants and 50-70 people each year.

² Falk *et al.* 2007. Why Zoos and Aquariums Matter: Assessing the impact of a visit to a zoo or aquarium.

³ IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, 2008

⁴ Conde *et al.* 2011, *An Emerging Role for Zoos to Conserve Biodiversity*, *Science* Vol 331.

A number of leading zoos are now important partners in community-based programs in countries such as Thailand, India, Indonesia and Vietnam. These programs aim to help local communities develop practical solutions to the problems of living with Asian elephants in the wild.

3.3 Elephants at Auckland Zoo

Auckland Zoo currently attracts 650,000 visitors each year, and is New Zealand's largest zoological collection. Asian elephants have been part of the Zoo's animal collection for 80 years and continue to be immensely popular among zoo visitors.

There is significant public interest and support among the community for elephants at Auckland Zoo. An independent poll conducted in December 2010⁵, commissioned by Auckland Council, found that 84% of Aucklanders felt that the zoo should continue to have elephants, while only 6% felt it should not.

Auckland Zoo's current elephant programme is also recognised as among the best in the world. Renowned for research into sensory perception and reproduction in elephants, Professor L.E.L. Rasmussen said in 2005, "*Having visited about a third of the captive elephant facilities in the western world and a number of forest camps in India, Thailand and Myanmar, I can honestly state that Auckland ranks in the upper tier of elephant programs in the world.*"

More recently (January, 2011), one of the world's foremost elephant management experts, Alan Roodcroft, assessed Auckland Zoo's elephant programme. Mr Roodcroft has been used in the past as an expert witness on elephant welfare for the RSPCA (Australia), the International Fund for Animal Welfare and the International Humane Society. Mr Roodcroft stated "*I found the elephant program at Auckland Zoo to be of an impressive standard and I rank it very highly [internationally]*".

3.4 Current situation at Auckland Zoo

Since the death of elephant *Kashin*, the Zoo's remaining elephant, *Burma*, is now the only Asian elephant left in New Zealand.

Asian elephants are intelligent, social animals and should not be kept on their own. *Burma* is 26 years old and could live for another 40 years, and the zoo is concerned for *Burma's* welfare as long as she remains without elephant companions. She has now been on her own for 19 months, and her continued isolation is not in her best interests. Given long lead times in elephant planning, her future needs urgent consideration. Two options are open to the zoo:

- acquire additional elephants, or
- send *Burma* to an overseas zoo leaving the Zoo with no elephants

3.5 Implications of phasing out elephants

Auckland Zoo offers the only opportunity for the New Zealand public to experience Asian elephants. On the whole, New Zealanders support and value Auckland Zoo's elephant programme⁴ and its demise would be associated with public disappointment.

Winding up the Zoo's elephant programme would involve sending *Burma* to another zoo or sanctuary to join an existing herd of elephants.

Expert advice suggests that such a move would not be in her best interests. *Burma* is a middle-aged elephant who has lived almost all of her life at Auckland Zoo. Her chance of successfully integrating into an already established herd at another zoo is less than her chance of establishing a role for herself at the head of a small group of younger elephants at Auckland Zoo. An established herd elsewhere will have a strong,

⁵ Ben Parson and Associates, 2010. Potential expansion of Auckland Zoo and its elephant herd: Research report.

pre-existing matriarchal structure, without a ready place for a middle-aged new arrival with no history within the group. Young elephants brought to a new environment, however, more readily integrate.

Further, the programme's end would result in the loss of the Zoo's expertise in this area, erosion of the Zoo's ability to engage with the community and the loss of the Zoo's elephant conservation efforts.

The Zoo would lose a significant and highly popular exhibit. Without substantial investment in the re-development of this area to replace this exhibit, there would be a diminished value of the Zoo.

3.6 Acquiring elephants

Asian elephants are protected by international treaty, the *Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species*, to which the Government of New Zealand is a signatory. Zoo involvement with the species is mediated through an international species management programme for the species, coordinated through the Zoo and Aquarium Association (Australasia) and under the auspices of the World Association for Zoos and Aquariums. As a participant in this programme, Auckland Zoo has gained sanction to import additional elephants.

Auckland Zoo's existing facilities are sufficient to house three female elephants. Acquisition of two young female elephants would enable Auckland Zoo to continue to manage and display elephants for the immediate future.

Acquisition of elephants is logistically challenging. Auckland Zoo began the work of seeking suitable companion elephants for the younger elephant, *Burma*, in the months preceding the older elephant, *Kashin's*, death.

Initial research focused on Asian elephant breeding programs in Australia, Europe and North America. However, the likely time-frame for acquisition from these programs was too long (5 – 10 years) to provide a timely welfare response for Burma.

In September 2009, the Sri Lanka's Hon. Consul to New Zealand contacted the zoo and offered to help explore the option of acquiring elephants from an elephant orphanage in Sri Lanka.

Auckland Zoo hosted a visit by Hon. Consul to make a preliminary assessment of the zoo's facilities, expertise and plans for Asian elephants. Subsequently, Auckland Zoo has:

- Liaised regularly with Sri Lanka's Hon. Consul to New Zealand
- Assisted officials within Biosecurity New Zealand on the development of import health standards required to enable an elephant import
- Initiated discussions with veterinary staff at the Pinnawalla elephant orphanage regarding existing disease testing and prevention regimes
- Liaised with representatives of the Niue government to investigate the potential availability of off-shore quarantine facilities on the island
- Sent an Auckland Zoo staff member to Sri Lanka to assess opportunities for on-going support for elephant management and conservation in that country
- Hosted Sri Lanka's High Commissioner to Australia and the (then) Mayor of Auckland City Council for discussions on acquiring elephants
- Assisted the Sri Lanka's Hon. Consul with drafting a report to the Sri Lankan government on Auckland Zoo's elephant program and elephant needs

- Scoped the requirements of provision of substantive and on-going support for elephant management and conservation programmes in Sri Lanka
- Briefed and formally requested the support of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet in August 2010

3.7 Financial implications

Regional Facilities Auckland commissioned a full financial analysis from consultants, Ernst and Young, to explore the financial implications of options to acquire additional elephants at the zoo, or to wind up the Zoo's elephant programme. These are outlined under separate cover in Attachment 1.

3.8 Long term planning for elephants at Auckland Zoo

Asian elephants are endangered in the wild, and responsible zoos have committed to ensure zoo populations of elephants are bred and managed sustainably. As a result, there has been significant collaborative planning to establish international cooperative breeding programmes. Auckland Zoo is a member of the key global and regional organisations under which such international breeding programmes are coordinated. Auckland Zoo participates in the Australasian regional programme for Asian elephants.

Should Auckland Zoo acquire two young Asian elephants, the Zoo's international obligations as part of the breeding programme would include ensuring breeding opportunities for those elephants. If breeding is successful, the Zoo will then need to consider issues associated with the management of a larger family group.

Under the former Auckland City Council, the long-term future of the zoo's elephant programme was considered, including proposals to expand the zoo site to accommodate a larger elephant family as a full participant in international breeding efforts.

However, the timeframe for any decision on additional facilities is an extended one. At the earliest, it is now unlikely that new elephants would arrive at the zoo before September 2012; subsequently, the first elephant birth would not be expected before the end of 2015. Baby elephants remain dependant for several years, and there would be no need for any additional elephant housing until 2019.

By this date, the existing elephant facilities will be over 25 years old, and in need of substantial upgrading.

3.9 Critics of elephants in zoos

In earlier times, zoos often managed elephants poorly, tending to keep too few and providing insufficient space. As a result, elephants in zoos attracted substantial, and often justified, criticism.

However, over the past 15 – 20 years, international standards of elephant management have dramatically improved. Many leading zoos of the world now manage breeding herds of elephants in large immersive exhibits.

As a result, zoos have achieved significant advances. New Asian elephant family groups have been established successfully in a number of zoos. Recent examples include Taronga and Melbourne zoos in Australia. In such cases, successful breeding has tended to follow. Five subsequent baby elephants in as many years attests to the success of the Australian zoos. Overall, more than 250 baby elephants have been born in zoos and wildlife parks around the world over the last five years.

A few zoos have decided to stop keeping elephants over the past decade, primarily because they were unable to provide sufficient space or resources for their care. However, many more zoos have determined to further develop their elephant

programmes and facilities. Indeed, all of the institutions independently recognised as the world's top zoos⁶ currently have elephant programmes.

Regardless of these changes, some animal activists remain critical of zoos that hold elephants. Such criticism primarily relies upon information on the past management of elephants in zoos. For example, the most recent such study often cited by critics was published in 2008 but included data from European zoos from 1960 - 2005. The vast majority of these data are from well over 20 years ago, and from circumstances of no relevance to modern elephant management techniques practiced in leading zoos such as Auckland Zoo.

However, the views of animal activists appear to reflect an ideological objection to elephants in zoos, often accompanied by a wider ideology of discomfort with wildlife in zoos. Such views do not constitute an objective assessment of animal welfare and they do not reflect general community attitudes.

3.10 Critics of Auckland Zoo's proposals

In November 2010, a group of international based animal activists wrote to the Mayor and Councillors of the Auckland Council urging Council not to support the zoo's plans to acquire companion elephants for *Burma*⁷. However, none of the signatories have assessed the zoo's elephant programme or the welfare of *Burma*.

In all aspects (except the provision of appropriate elephant company), Auckland Zoo's elephant programme meets or exceeds all zoo animal welfare best practice standards outlined by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and all international standards for elephant management and welfare.

Earlier this year, an internationally recognised expert in elephant management and welfare, Alan Roodcroft, assessed Auckland Zoo's programme. Mr Roodcroft has reported that Auckland Zoo, "with its expertise, experience, current facilities and commitment to elephant conservation" would be "an ideal location to re-home surplus animals from Sri Lanka."

The full assessment of Auckland Zoo's elephant programme and the welfare of the Zoo's remaining elephant, *Burma*, is outlined in the attached report (Attachment 2).

4.0 Conclusion

The elephants at Auckland Zoo contribute significantly to the zoo's environmental education programme and the zoo's ability to galvanise community support for wildlife conservation action. Specifically, the zoo's elephant programme provides key opportunities to attract interest in, and raise funds in support of, elephant conservation programmes in the wild. Elephants are endangered in the wild, and Auckland Zoo currently supports programmes to protect remaining wild populations. The Zoo is looking to expand New Zealand's efforts to protect this species.

The continuation of Auckland Zoo's elephant programme is strongly supported by the Auckland Community.

Critical to this is approval for the acquisition of additional elephants.

⁶ As identified by Forbes magazine in 2007

⁷ Animal activists (including some of the same signatories on the Auckland letter) have conducted similar letter-writing campaigns in other major cities of the world, including in the U.S., Europe and Australia. In all instances, these campaigns have been to no effect.

