

# Elephant TAG/SSP Key Messages

The most important thing that we can do to positively influence visitors about elephants and elephant conservation is to be clear about the messages, communicate them positively and succinctly and to use staff to reinforce them personally.



San Diego Wild Animal Park

**Introduction:** The Elephant TAG/SSP Steering Committee has drafted these Elephant Key Messages for AZA institutions to incorporate into their on-site elephant graphics and/or presentations. We also hope that they will be a useful resource as you craft future programs or refine current ones. Our goal was to create elephant natural history, conservation, management and welfare messages that would be meaningful, relevant and inspiring to all. With so much confusion around the general public's view of elephant management, this document includes important, consistent information to share with visitors about the high quality of elephant care and welfare in responsible AZA institutions. *These messages are not meant to be delivered all at once, but rather to select one or a few messages that suit a program's objectives.*

## NATURAL HISTORY

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### MESSAGE 1

#### Elephants have special features that are unique in the animal world.

- Elephants are the largest land animals in the world.
- Their unique trunk acts as part nose, part hand to assist in breathing, detecting odors, manipulating objects, social interactions, eating, dust bathing, drawing-up water and releasing water into the mouth.
- Elephants have the longest gestation of any land animal of 21.5 months.
- Elephants have the largest brain of any land animals.
- Elephants are long lived. Studies have shown that life expectancy at birth in African elephants is 41 years for females and 24 years for males. Maximum lifespan for females is over 65 years, and for males it is close to 60 years. Elephants' developmental rate is similar to humans.



National Zoo



Oregon Zoo

- There are currently two recognized species of elephants, the Asian elephant and the African elephant. Recent genetic research indicates that the forest elephant, currently considered a subspecies of the African elephant, may actually be a separate and distinct species.

## NATURAL HISTORY

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### MESSAGE 2

#### Elephant groups are related.

- In general, older, experienced females lead elephant families (matriarchal herds). Female herd members are usually related, but occasionally non-related individuals join to form families.



Oregon Zoo

- Female family members often stay together for their entire lives.



Africa

- Young bulls leave the family groups as they mature. Though bulls are primarily solitary in adulthood, they do, at times, associate in bachelor groups and are in chemosensory and infrasonic communication with other elephants in their area. Adult bulls usually associate with matriarchal herds only for breeding purposes.

## NATURAL HISTORY

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### MESSAGE 3

**Elephants are intelligent animals that display complex behaviors.**



Oregon Zoo

- Elephants form close bonds and display a variety of complex social behaviors such as greeting ceremonies, group defense, submission, tactile contacts, vocal communication, scent communications, social play, courtship, mating, birthing, parenting, communal care, teaching, threat displays, charging, and fighting.



Africa

- Elephants produce and hear vocalizations below the range of human hearing (infrasonic). These low frequency calls can travel several miles and may be used to coordinate their movements. Females may also use these calls to announce their willingness to breed.

## NATURAL HISTORY

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### MESSAGE 4

**Elephants are a keystone species that influence the composition of their environment while often benefiting other species.**

- The activities of elephants often benefit other species. The African elephants' ability to locate underground water and dig pools helps provide many other species with water during droughts. African elephants may destroy trees and shrubs allowing for grasses to grow that other species eat. In the process, African elephants, and perhaps particularly the forest elephant, create an environment conducive to the regeneration of healthy forest ecosystems. Management of elephants in the wild means maintaining a balance between elephants and the ecosystem.
- Though much less numerous in the wild, Asian elephants also impact their environment and increasingly come into conflict with humans and agriculture.
- Saving habitat for elephants' means saving habitats for many other species as well.



Disney's Animal Kingdom

## MANAGEMENT OF ELEPHANTS IN THE CARE OF HUMANS

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### MESSAGE 5

#### Training enriches the lives of animals, including elephants.

- Responsible elephant management provides a quality-training program.
- Training provides both physical and mental stimulation that may enhance the animal's well being.
- Training facilitates routine management and care.
- Training may lower stress during medical assessment and treatment.



Rosamond Gifford Zoo at Burnet Park



Disney's Animal Kingdom

## MANAGEMENT OF ELEPHANTS IN THE CARE OF HUMANS

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### MESSAGE 6

#### **Elephant managers and keepers form close bonds with their elephants.**

- Every time keepers interact with elephants, they are sending a message to the watching visitors about their relationship with the elephants.
- Elephants and keepers often form strong bonds and caring relationships that can be a powerful tool in inspiring visitors to take action for elephant conservation.



National Zoo

## MANAGEMENT OF ELEPHANTS IN THE CARE OF HUMANS

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### **MESSAGE 7**

#### **Enrichment programs provide stimulation for elephants as part of their daily care.**

- Enrichment programs offer elephants choices that stimulate them both mentally and physically. Enrichment programs provide elephants with the opportunity to display species appropriate behaviors such as digging, dust bathing, playing, and scent exploration among others.
- Responsible elephant management provides a high-quality enrichment program as part of daily elephant care.



National Zoo

## MANAGEMENT OF ELEPHANTS IN THE CARE OF HUMANS

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### MESSAGE 8

Elephants require an environment that provides for social interaction with other elephants and a high-level of quality care.



Disney's Animal Kingdom

- The goal of responsible elephant management is to provide elephants with the best in quality care through the latest developments in management, nutrition, preventative health care, enrichment, training and research.

- Responsible elephant management provides appropriate social interactions with other elephants.



Oregon Zoo

## PEOPLE/WILDLIFE INTERACTIONS

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### MESSAGE 9

**A variety of public education programs and personal interactions can inspire elephant conservation action in visitors.**

- As ambassadors for their wild relatives, elephants in the care of humans provide an opportunity to help increase knowledge, change attitudes, make emotional connections and change behaviors in visitors that can positively impact elephant conservation.



Calgary Zoo

- Our actions matter! Everyone can take action to help elephants by:
  - ❖ Learning as much as possible about elephants and sharing this information with friends;
  - ❖ Choosing not to buy ivory, or other products from elephants;
  - ❖ Contributing to wildlife organizations that study elephants and protect their habitat;
  - ❖ Writing letters that influence decision-makers about elephant conservation;
  - ❖ Buying lumber from sustainable sources.

## PEOPLE/WILDLIFE INTERACTIONS

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### MESSAGE 10

**Elephants are under enormous pressure in the wild, which threatens their survival.**



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- Elephants are protected in the wild under CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species). According to USFWS (United States Fish and Wildlife Service), their conservation status is identified as endangered in Asia, and threatened in Africa.
- Elephant populations are declining in some areas, while locally overpopulated in others. The greatest threats to elephants in the wild are habitat destruction, the continued illegal trade in ivory and the increase/encroachment of human populations. One strategy to reconnect elephants' natural migratory routes links protected areas together by creating habitat corridors, allowing elephant populations to mix and potentially decrease human/elephant conflict.
- Elephant conservation is extremely complex and must take into account both human and animal needs. Negative elephant/human interactions include crop loss, human fatalities, and damage to houses and other constructions. Positive interactions include ecotourism, especially when the local community benefits from the tourist revenues. Seeing elephants in their natural environment may create inspirational experiences that foster positive attitudes towards elephants. Creative solutions to human/elephant conflicts must involve the local people and benefit them as well as elephants.

# PEOPLE/WILDLIFE INTERACTIONS

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## MESSAGE 11

**The more we know about elephants, the better able we are to conserve them.**

### Elephants in the Care of Humans

- Many research questions can be answered through scientific inquiry using elephants in the care of humans. Reproduction, memory, communication, visual acuity, nutritional requirements, pathology of disease and its treatment are a few topics that have been researched in captivity. Because elephants in the care of humans are both easily accessible and use to the close proximity of humans, they can provide scientists with an opportunity to explore field research questions even further.
- In recent years, elephant breeding has been more successful in both species because of increased efforts in natural reproduction and technical advances in assisted reproduction.



Data Collection at Disney's Animal Kingdom

### In the Wild

- Many research questions can be answered through scientific inquiry using wild populations of elephants. Communication, social structure, habitat impact and human/elephant conflict are a few topics that are currently being researched in the wild.



Wild Elephants with radio collar in Okavango/Upper Zambia Transfrontier Conservation Area

## **The AZA Elephant TAG/SSP Steering Committee and Advisors**

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