



# What to Do With Traumatized Elephant Stirs Up Dallas

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Donna McWilliam/Associated Press

Jenny, a troubled elephant at the Dallas Zoo, being cooled by Reanna Streater and fed treats by Gavin Eastep. The zoo wants to send her to Mexico.

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DALLAS — Jenny has had a hard life, even by elephant standards. She was orphaned at a tender age, stolen from Africa, shipped to America and sold to a circus, where a trainer notorious for his cruelty beat her to coerce her to perform.

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Angela Hunt

A protest group in Dallas wants to send Jenny to a sanctuary in Tennessee rather than to a wildlife park in Puebla, Mexico.

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Angela Hunt

The Africam Safari Park in Puebla plans a new enclosure of five acres for

When the Dallas Zoo took her in 22 years ago, she was a mess. For years, she suffered from depression and something like post-traumatic stress disorder, mutilating herself with her tusks, snapping steel cables, slamming her head into walls and requiring heavy medication.

Now, Jenny has become the focus of a boisterous debate about what to do with an aging elephant with a troubled mind. In May, after her latest companion died of heart failure, the zoo quietly made arrangements to send her to the Africam Safari Park in Puebla, Mexico, where she would be placed in a new five-acre exhibit with another female elephant.

But that decision sparked a firestorm in Dallas. Local protesters, world-renowned elephant experts and national animal rights groups are crusading to have her sent to a 2,700-acre sanctuary in Tennessee where 17 other traumatized elephants are kept in seclusion.

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Asian elephants.

“Jenny is a special-needs elephant,” said Margaret Morin, a Dallas nurse who leads Concerned Citizens for Jenny.

“She’s unique; she’s afflicted with crippling depression. The elephant sanctuary is the right choice.”

Beyond the debate about what to do with Jenny lies a national struggle between zoos and animal rights groups who, frankly, would rather see a world without elephant exhibits. The fight pits a loose coalition of elephant experts and animal rights advocates against the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, a powerful private group based in Maryland that accredits zoos in North America.

Animal rights advocates have long argued that elephants in most zoos lack enough space and, as a consequence, suffer from foot ailments, arthritis and psychological problems.

For its part, the zoo association has clung to its traditions, saying the size of an enclosure matters less than the care elephants receive from zookeepers. It has also tried to keep the 300 elephants in its network of more than 78 zoos from being sent to sanctuaries, where the zoos could no longer use them for breeding.

All of a sudden, Jenny is at the center of this conflict.

The citizens’ group that Ms. Morin leads was formed this summer to hold protests in Dallas against sending Jenny to Mexico. Elephant experts across the country and national animal rights groups have also weighed in, urging that she be sent to the sanctuary. The City Council and The Dallas Morning News have been inundated with letters.

The uproar has put the Dallas Zoo on the defensive. The director, Gregg Hudson, had said in June that sending Jenny to Mexico was a done deal, but now zoo officials are backpedaling.

Mayor Thomas C. Leppert, who could cancel the plan, has artfully ridden the fence. “There is really not a position to take yet,” Mr. Leppert said.

But a spokesman for the zoo, Sean Greene, said Africam Safari Park remained the zoo director’s top choice. Founded in 1972, the Mexican animal park uses the same hands-off, gentle handling techniques that the Dallas Zoo adopted in 1996, after one of Jenny’s worst periods. Indeed, keepers from Dallas helped train the Africam staff several years ago.

The Mexican zoo also plans to acquire another African elephant, to live with Jenny, as well as a bull elephant in the future.

But some Dallas residents say the zoo’s arguments do not hold up. The Elephant Sanctuary in Hohenwald, Tenn., has 300 acres just for African elephants, and Jenny, who is 32, would be the fourth to arrive, said the founder, Carol Buckley. No one except the staff visits the animals, who range freely.

“Why would we want her last years to be in a drive-through zoo in Mexico when she could have 300 acres in the lush Tennessee countryside?” said Councilwoman Angela Hunt, who has visited both destinations.

Experts in the field say zoo directors are cliquish and tend to move animals to other zoos in their association rather than considering the benefits of a sanctuary, which many zoo officials see as part of an anti-zoo movement. The association can also make or break a zoo director’s career

“If we stripped everything away and say what is in the best interest of Jenny, the

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sanctuary would win hands down,” said Les Schobert, a retired curator of animals at the Los Angeles Zoo. “But then you have to add in all the politics.”

Amy Camacho, general director of Africam, said the transfer seemed to make sense. Her park, which was recently accredited, was seeking African elephants to strengthen its collection, and the Dallas Zoo had a troubled elephant.

Mike Keele, a curator at the Oregon Zoo who is also chairman of the zoo association’s elephant “species survival program,” signed off on the deal. “I like keeping these elephants within the A.Z.A. where they meet our standards,” Mr. Keele said. “Space is just a catchphrase. It’s what you do with that space.”

Nonsense, say animal rights advocates. No zoo or drive-through safari park can match the peace of the Tennessee countryside.

On a recent sunny afternoon, Jenny stripped branches tossed to her by one of her keepers, Gavin Eastep, who said that Jenny’s mental health had improved in recent years.

“Most of the time she’s pretty calm, pretty relaxed,” Mr. Eastep said.

On a bench facing the steel-cable enclosure, David and Heidi McGuire sat with their two children and marveled at Jenny’s size and the graceful swing of her slow gate. “I would rather her stay in the United States,” Heidi McGuire said. “You just never know what’s going to happen to them down in Mexico.”

Mr. McGuire, a grocer, said, “I hope they are going to get someone to replace her.”

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