

Part 1 – KOIN 6 Investigates "Coping in Captivity"

YouTube video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uX7zzBo2BYk>

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Produced by Carla Castano

Jeff Gianola

Elephants are a beloved part of the Oregon Zoo, seen by over a million of you every year. But what you don't see is how elephants are coping in captivity.

Jennifer Hoff

31-year-old Rama was euthanized last month because of an old leg injury. So that got us asking the question just how are these animals treated?

Jeff Gianola

KOIN 6 investigative reporter Carla Castagno spent days pouring over hundreds of medical documents. What she found calls into question not if the Oregon Zoo can maintain its most famous attraction, but rather if it should.

Carla Castagno 00:00:34

Construction is well underway on elephant land, set to open this fall. I took a tour of the Oregon Zoo as it works to expand its elephant exhibit. Not just to give those already here more room, but to increase the number of elephants.

To Bob Lee: Moving forward, is that the plan to increase the breeding process for elephants here?

Bob Lee

Absolutely. The Oregon Zoo has been dedicated to growing matriarchal herds for decades now.

Carla Castagno 00:00:59

Dr. Blair Csuti worked at the Oregon Zoo from 1997 to 2005 as its conservation program coordinator. Dr. Csuti tells me elephants in captivity just don't have the space needed for a healthy life.

Dr. Csuti

Lack of exercise and being chained up most of the day, sixteen hours a day in a small stall where they basically stand on their own excrement. That's not conducive to foot health.

Carla Castagno

Animal experts say elephants need room to roam. At the Oregon Zoo, 7 elephants currently have 1.5 acres of land. But when the new exhibit is finished, there will be 4.5 acres of walking space. For comparison, I contacted the curator of Oakland Zoo, Jeff Kinzley. Kinzley tells me his zoo has 4 elephants on 6.5 acres of land. In general, Kinzley says if animals are confined, stereotypical behaviors such as head bobbing or swaying happen.

Jeff Kinzley

We don't have any abnormal issues, you know that you do start to see from, you know, the over swaying and you know, the constant stereo, you know, the stereotypy that you might see in elephants that are, you know, more confined.

Carla Castagno 00:02:16

53-year-old Packy was the first elephant born at the Oregon Zoo and the first born in a U.S. zoo. He's a star attraction who gets plenty of attention.

This video shot in 2013 by the Animal advocate group [Friends of Zoo Elephants](#), shows Packy bobbing his head. That year they also videotaped Packy and Rama swaying. After pouring through thousands of pages of medical documents, I found notes from 2002 about Rama showing stereotypical behaviors. The clinical notes indicate those behaviors caused foot problems for Rama. They confirmed lameness, an abrasion and lesions. Writing "Rama's stereotypical head-rocking behavior is most likely the cause. Each time Rama swings his head from side to side, he pivots on his front feet."

(00:03:08) Both Kinzley and Dr. Csuti, who edited the book *The Elephant's Foot*, stressed the importance of movement, saying elephants need to walk at least five miles a day. But Bob Lee with the Oregon Zoo says there is a plan.

To Bob Lee: Now there are two yards out here. Is that a concern? As far as these male elephants, are...are they going to have enough time out here or are they going to be in isolation too much?

Bob Lee 00:03:32

We're going to rotate them. I mean, the male elephants would come in and out of the herd.

Carla Castagno

Dr. Csuti argues that the upgrade to the exhibit should have included not 2, but 3 yards.

Dr. Csuti

So that limits the amount of hours that a male especially will have access to an area to walk around.

Carla Castagno

Stereotypical behaviors can also be the result of other issues. Kinzley says any elephant in captivity will also behave this way if they are chained for a long time. This 2013 photo taken by friends of Zoo elephants shows Packy with what some call a chain mark on his front foot. (Photo shows a clear white line across the top of Packy's ankle indicative of a regular chain mark)

Bob Lee 00:04:08

No, the elephants are never chained.

Carla Castagno

I asked the Oregon Zoo to explain that mark. Their response, "We don't know the origin of that marking. It has been there for as long as anyone can remember."

So I dug deeper into Packy's medical history for answers. Here's some of what I found:

November 2013 - Anemia during tuberculosis treatment.

November 2013 - Ulcer fracture on feet.

December 2013 - A mistake in the medication given to Packy.

April 2014 - Abscess lesion on same foot.

May 2014 - A 500-pound drop in weight in a single month after refusing food.

May 2014 – "Zoo officials wrote we are now at day six of anorexia and are getting increasingly concerned about this trend."

(00:04:56) On my tour, we could only see Packy from several feet away. Multnomah County health officials confirmed that's due to his contagious tuberculosis.

To Bob Lee: Does he have any other medical problems besides TB?

Bob Lee

No, no. Packy's actually, other than being geriatric and starting to slow down, he doesn't have other medical issues.

Carla Castagno

He does have foot problems, though, and I had heard an ulcer on his head.

Bob Lee 00:05:19

An ulcer on his head...okay so in the record, you'll see talk about an ulceration on his head. That's from an old surgical site that was probably 20 years old. Packy only lays down on his left side, so he continually puts pressure on that every night.

Carla Castagno

I wanted to dig deeper into these health issues, So I contacted Dr. Tony Frohoff, the elephant scientist for the nonprofit group [In Defense of Animals](#). She provided me with hundreds of medical documents on the elephants.

They span from 1999 to the spring of 2005. I found of the 7 elephants listed as living at the Oregon Zoo during that time frame, there were several foot problems reported. Things like lesions, abscesses and fractures, sometimes even lameness. And all documented over and over again in these stacks of paper. Dr. Csuti worked to address those problems during his time at the Oregon Zoo. He says his recommendations were mostly ignored.

Dr. Csuti 00:06:18

The very first thing I was assigned to do was to organize and host a conference on foot conditions in captive elephants because the zoo has a history, had a history, has a history of having to put down elephants because of foot infections, and arthritis.

Carla Castagno

I asked Bob Lee if foot problems are still an issue at the Oregon Zoo.

Bob Lee

With the current elephants?

Carla Castano

Yes.

Bob Lee

Yeah...we have the vets. They come down...they document everything when they're looking at any issues with the elephants...um, we regularly look at them, work on them, give them the care and treatment that they need.

Carla Castagno 00:06:54

But during my tour, the foot problems became apparent on the elephant Shine. Despite the zoo's treatment efforts.

Bob Lee

She had a, an abscess that started.

Carla Castagno

The fix? The new exhibit will include feeders throughout the yards and hills to promote exercise. They also brought in 190 dump trucks full of sand to cover the ground. Too little, too late for an elephant like Rama, who was euthanized in late March. But some help for the elephants still coping in captivity.

Jeff Gianola (back in the news studio)

Another note here. Carla went through medical records, and 5 of the 7 elephants currently living at the zoo do have foot problems.

Jennifer Hoff

If you'd like to look at the health records we have on Packy and Rama, you can. We have that information on KOIN.com but the story doesn't end here. Carla takes a close look at the sometimes-dark history of elephant breeding at the Oregon Zoo, a history that includes inbreeding. That's this Thursday night at 6 o'clock.

00:07:52

[Part 2: Elephant Breeding](#)

[Part 3: A Dangerous Practice?](#)

[Part 4: Broken Bond Promise?](#)