

Part 2 – KOIN 6 Investigates "Elephant Breeding"

YouTube video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3qcRPLowdMk>

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Phil Pruitt

Elephants have a have a pretty dark history.

Jeff Gianola (in the news studio)

Inbreeding, artificial insemination attempts, the questionable past of doing whatever it takes to keep elephants at the Oregon Zoo. Now, elephants can be big business for zoos all across the country, not just here in Oregon. And that's true, though, for the Oregon Zoo, but at what cost to the elephants?

Jennifer Hoff

Our KOIN 6 investigator, Carla Castano, is really taking a hard look at that—what's being called a checkered past, through the eyes of a former zoo worker, Carla.

Carla Castano 00:00:31

Yeah, and that worker is Phil Pruitt. After 27 years on the job at the Oregon Zoo, Pruitt knows what he's talking about when it comes to handling elephants in captivity. It's tough work, and some zoos just aren't up to the task. So it's no wonder that since the 1990s, I found a dozen zoos across the country have closed their elephant exhibits, with another three planning to do the same. Those zoos that plan to stay open, like the Oregon Zoo, will always need elephants. And that takes breeding. Tonight, in our KOIN 6 investigation, the price these animals have paid to keep the Oregon Zoo thriving.

Phil Pruitt 00:01:11

The animals were not always treated with as much kindness as one could offer.

Carla Castano

Phil Pruitt retired from the Oregon Zoo three years ago. He started as an elephant keeper.

Phil Pruitt

Rose was God's most perfect elephant. I'm almost, almost misty at thinking about working with Rose.

Carla Castano 00:01:32

He also worked as a rover, doing whatever he was needed to do with the zoo. Also, as an Africa keeper and as a night keeper, moving the elephants and feeding them.

Phil Pruitt

I'm still getting chills about when on the night shift, the night keeper would come down. And on some occasions in the wintertime, you would have three bulls in the back four rooms.

Carla Castano

Pruitt says not all elephants are easy to handle.

Phil Pruitt 00:01:58

Adult male elephants are a force of nature.

Carla Castano

Animals, he tells me, the Oregon Zoo wants to desperately breed.

Bob Lee

We're dedicated to growing our matriarchal herds.

Carla Castano

I dug through documents detailing a history of artificial insemination efforts, inbreeding and cross-breeding subspecies. According to this document from 2011, the Oregon Zoo had plans to breed Chandra and Tusko. While both are Asian elephants, I found out Chendra's a subspecies or taxon that's different than Tusko. The [American Association of Zoos and Aquariums](#), which accredits zoos across the country, posted this article on their website in 2010. It clearly states the Bornean elephant is a separate taxon. The AZA also calls Borneo's like Chandra the "world's most endangered elephant." Despite that information, they still recommend they breed every four years, as this 2011 Oregon Zoo document reveals.

Phil Pruitt 00:02:59

Tusko is a huge animal in every respect, including his manhood. And I think it verges on animal abuse to put such a large male in with such a small female.

Carla Castano

The Oregon Zoo touts Chendra as the only Borneo Pygmy elephant living in the U.S. Their website lists Tusko at 13,300 pounds. They also describe Chendra as just over 4,500 pounds. There's nearly a 9,000 pound difference. That's more than how much Tusko's other breeding

partner Rose-Tu weighs. I tried to get answers from the Oregon Zoo and AZA, but neither responded to my emails.

I contacted Dr. Robert Hilsenroth, the Executive Director of the [American Association of Zoo Veterinarians](#), who. Who tells me breeding Chandra in Tusko is a bad idea.

Dr. Robert Hilsenroth 00:03:58

It would be detrimental, and it wouldn't contribute to the sustainability of our elephant population.

Carla Castano

The AZA keeps a list of all the 750 or so elephants ever known in the U.S. and parts of Canada. It's called a stud book, and after several hours reviewing it, I found a pattern of inbreeding at the Oregon Zoo. It was some 30 years ago, and most of the offspring died shortly after birth.

Dr. Robert Hilsenroth

There is a much higher risk of genetic defects and some of these are fatal defects...some of them they can live with...some of them are just cosmetic.

Carla Castano 00:04:36

Each elephant in the studbook is given a number. Then there are a set of two other numbers in the center of each listing. You can cross reference those digits back to the parents and trace the elephant's lineage. It's a little like cracking a code. [ZooCheck](#), a non-profit animal group, says it's meant to be that way.

Julie Woodyer – Campaigns Director, ZooCheck

I don't think they want the average person, and particularly not an investigative reporter, to be able to easily digest the information. You know, it's something that the industry themselves like to be able to interpret for you.

Carla Castano 00:05:14

The stud book reveals an incestuous family tree at the Oregon Zoo. Five births over five years from inbreeding daughter with father and brother with sister.

Thonglaw was bred with both his daughters, Me-Tu and Hanako; both of the offspring males born in 1973. One was unnamed and died immediately. The other was called "Stretch." I couldn't track him. It only lists a transfer to Florida. I checked zoos and circuses all over with no luck. The official word from the Oregon Zoo spokesman, "I have no information on Stretch."

Phil Pruitt

Names change.

Carla Castano

Yeah.

Phil Pruitt

Uh...(chuckles)...for one reason or another.

Carla Castano

Pruitt started after the inbreeding stopped. He told me those inside the Oregon Zoo elephant circle knew about it.

Phil Pruitt 00:06:06

They just kind of inwardly, you know, in-house admitted that it's a bad idea, but we don't do that anymore.

Carla Castano

I also discovered Packy was inbred with his sister Hanako, resulting in the 1976 birth of an unnamed calf who died less than a month later. Then again in 1978, a female calf named Sumac was born, but died just a month later.

The zoo was successful in its inbreeding efforts with Packy and his other sister, Me-Tu. Kung-Chorn was born in 1978 and transferred to Dickerson Park Zoo a couple months before turning two. He is still alive.

The Oregon Zoo would not agree to an interview specifically on the subject of inbreeding, but sent an email which reads in part, "Inbreeding is not something that would be likely to happen in the wild, nor is it something that would happen at the zoo today."

Pruitt tells me the zoo was determined to try to grow the elephant herd the entire time he worked there.

To Phil Pruitt: Did artificial insemination ever take place at the Oregon Zoo?

Phil Pruitt

Yes, but no conception ever took place.

Carla Castano 00:07:15

The zoo spokesman sent an email response saying ..."they don't have much information on artificial insemination attempts." Adding "To be clear, this is not to say the zoo is opposed to AI, just that it hasn't been attempted here for many years."

Phil Pruitt

Not currently, perhaps, but it was the Holy Grail.

Carla Castano 00:07:36

According to the AZA's Species Survival Plan given to the Oregon Zoo, it appears artificial insemination will start up again.

The chart lists Tusko as "available as AI donor."

For Samundra, it says, to "train for AI once age appropriate."

I pushed the zoo for more answers about their artificial insemination efforts. They added "On the recommendation of AZA Species Survival Plan, some of Tusko's semen was sent to other zoos, and semen from all the males has been collected to assist in research projects."

Phil Pruitt

I was involved in some of that semen collection-

Carla Castano

Pruitt tells me it's a graphic process that's not easy on the elephants.

Phil Pruitt

You would stimulate him electrically.

Carla Castano 00:08:20

Medical records for Packy from 1999 reveal repeated attempts to collect semen from him, many unsuccessful, as he suffers from an ulcer on his head and several foot problems, including lesions.

At one point, the staff even tried to take a collection when Packy was, quote, "unwilling to move." This, as the zoo tells me, all 28 of the births there have been "natural," including the five from inbreeding. After almost three decades at the Oregon Zoo, Pruitt says he realized there's a big problem with keeping elephants in captivity. Even with the new exhibit upgrades.

To Phil Pruitt: Did it seem like they were suffering?

Phil Pruitt

God, yeah.

Jennifer Hoff 00:09:02

So why do zoos keep pushing so hard to breed elephants? Well, according to the AZA zoo, populations of both Asian and African elephant species are not currently viable without importation.

Jeff Gianola

What does that mean? Well, without taking elephants from the wild, zoos will eventually run out of elephants. Carla's investigation into the elephants at the Oregon Zoo continues next Tuesday at 6"00. She looks into why the zoo continues using bull hooks on the animals after being cited by federal authorities for abusing one of those elephants with a bull hook.

00:09:40

[Part 1: Coping in Captivity](#)

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

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