

The Oregonian

The Elephant in the Room
Associate Editor Jonathan Nicholas
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Portland seems hugely proud of the new baby elephant at its zoo. What the city should feel is ashamed.

The new calf is not really an elephant. It's a caricature of an elephant, a shadow of an animal, a hapless beast that all too soon will be exhibiting every known sign of severe trauma.

The terrible truth is that the 300-pound infant over which we're being invited to ooh and aah is a compromised creature in a contemptible cage. Putting such an animal on public display is as appalling today as it was in the time of the Romans.

That was when zoos began, as the playthings of plutocrats. For centuries, potentates dispatched their armies hither and yon to pillage and plunder. Among the treasures hauled home were "exotic" creatures displayed to amuse the masses.

By the 1850s, this exhibitionist offshoot of imperialism had "evolved" into the municipal zoo, an institution that hurried to cover its freak show nakedness with the fig leaf of an educational mission. In 1906, it must have been that passion for pedagogy that led the Bronx Zoo to exhibit a pygmy in a cage alongside its apes.

It's still a rite of parental passage to take kids to the zoo, exposing them to displays of institutionalized trauma, inviting them to gaze with wondrous eyes upon obvious suffering and interpret it as normal.

Today, almost everyone in America over 40 has a searing image from childhood. It's of a big cat in a small cage, the tiger pacing back and forth, back and forth, post-traumatic stress disorder made manifest.

Today we have bigger cages, with caring keepers and native foliage and

wading pools and interactive toys designed for environmental enrichment. But the bars are just as sturdy, the confinement just as cruel.

Only once ever have I seen a happy tiger. She was in an Indian forest. The reason for her contentment was clear: She thought she was about to eat me.

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Nowhere is this more apparent – or more tragic – than in the American community of elephants. There is much about wild elephants, most especially the ways in which they communicate across many miles, that still we barely comprehend. But this much we do know. In their native habitat, elephants are profoundly social creatures. They raise their young within extended family structures that stretch across

decades. They bury their dead, mourn them, stand vigil over their graves.

Gay Bradshaw, founder of The Kerulos Center in Jacksonville, is an ecologist and psychologist, formerly at Oregon State University, now pioneering the field of trans-species psychology. In a series of widely published papers, and an upcoming book from Yale University Press, she suggests that the global elephant population is suffering chronic post-traumatic stress, a species-wide affliction spurred by decades of poaching and culling and habitat loss.

Much of this might sound like advanced anthropocentric conjecture, but recent research in psychology, ethology and neurobiology points to increasing numbers of elephants – in both captivity and the ever-more-abbreviated wild – exhibiting behaviors associated with acute psychological distress.

This is the world in which a zoo elephant such as Portland's Rose-Tu might try to trample her newborn calf, behavior utterly new to the species.

Portland has been in the zoo business since 1887. That was when a worker at City (now Washington) Park dug a bear pit and invited citizens to come by and ogle the grizzly. It's now almost 50 years that the zoo has been in the business of breeding elephants. That's long enough.

If the people of Oregon, with their zoo tickets and tax dollars, really want to serve elephants, they should contribute to the restoration and preservation of native habitat for these magnificent creatures. If citizens really care about wild creatures, after all, there's a simple solution.

Let them run free.