Picturing Elephants in Captivity

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REVIEW ARTICLES

Picturing Elephants in Captivity

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Elephant House. By Dick Blau and Nigel Rothfels. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015. Animalibus Series. 94 + ix pp. in color with photographs. Hardback. $29.95. ISBN 978-0-271-07085-8.)

The photo essay that comprises Elephant House *bears mournful testimony to the severely restricted lives of the world's largest terrestrial mammals at the Oregon Zoo, as well as similar "educational" institutions throughout the United States and the world. While purporting to remain neutral regarding the ethics of keeping pachyderms in captivity, ethno-photographer Dick Blau and author-historian Nigel Rothfels's provocative book could easily arouse angry or disconsolate reactions in many readers. Rather than focusing on the pachyderms themselves,* Elephant House *takes a more anthropocentric stance (through zookeepers' eyes), pinpointing the intertwined relationships between these magnificent animals and the humans who strive to keep them as mentally stimulated and healthy as possible, albeit in a hopelessly confined and unnatural environment.*

Key words: elephants, pachyderms, captivity, zookeepers, deprivation, Packy, husbandry, tuberculosis, foot problems

INTRODUCTION

Elephant House—the combined project of two Wisconsinites, photographer and filmmaker Dick Blau and cultural zoo historian Dr. Nigel Rothfels—takes an unapologetic, behind-the-scenes look at the private lives of a group of Asian elephants when they resided in their now-defunct quarters at the Oregon Zoo. This small facility existed for more than half a century until it was torn down and replaced by the much more expansive Elephant Lands, which opened in Portland in December 2015. Both the author and photographer divulge that they refrain from taking sides in the heated debate over captive elephants—preferring objectivity instead—and thus intentionally evade vital issues, such as the irreversible damage done to these sentient and extremely intelligent beings.

While a handful of the 65 moving photographs (including smaller portraits) featured in *Elephant House* portray the majestic animals in agreeable situations—dusting themselves,

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standing near a rocky wall, stretching on the ground, or staying next to their mothers, in the case of baby elephants—the vast majority of Blau's images convey an isolated and claustrophobic mood in a prison-like atmosphere. We accompany the incarcerated Asian elephants as they lumber between massive concrete walls and steel bars, an unfriendly realm that is normally hidden from the public eye. We witness their dull daily routines, including prophylactic treatments for their skin, maintenance of their feet, and repetitive training exercises with their keepers. The dim interiors of the Oregon Zoo's old facility and the visual dreariness of *Elephant House* are only marginally enhanced by the amicable bonds between these gargantuan animals and their caretakers, and the latter's constant efforts to responsibly tend to their nonhuman charges. Yet the bigger question still looms as large as the animals themselves: What kind of impoverished and unbearable lives do elephants experience in zoos, no matter how spacious and modern their enclosure may be or how devoted their dutiful keepers?

HARMS AS DEPRIVATIONS

For decades, nature-themed books and films have featured sumptuous photographic images of elephants roaming in Africa and Asia. These enable us to vicariously witness matrilineal herds guarding their precious young or charging bulls, ears extended sideways, kicking up a cloud of dust. In literature, there are novels such as Barbara Gowdy's *The White Bone* (1998), told from the viewpoint of female African elephants, or nonfiction books documenting close kinship ties, such as *Echo of the Elephants* by Cynthia Moss and Martyn Colbeck (1992). These works offer an intimate glimpse into the elephant's sensory perceptive world (*umwelt*), while satisfying some of our innate affinity with nonhuman species, or *biophilia*. Considering the ubiquity of books on this topic along with *National Geographic*–style documentaries, is it truly necessary to see inactive, lonely, painfully arthritic elephants in an urban zoo in order to appreciate and learn about their species? And what might a child glean from gazing at those demoralized, subjugated individuals whose entire existence is spent entombed within steel and concrete enclosures? Does observing them firsthand bear even the slightest resemblance to how a herd of free-living elephants interacts with their natural surroundings and their relatives?

These and many other philosophical questions are intrinsic to theories proposed by the late Tom Regan (1983) in his classic treatise *The Case for Animal Rights*. For example, in describing "harms as deprivations" (Regan, 1983, pp. 96–99), he elaborates on how a loss of freedom and opportunity, which may not necessarily be experienced as suffering by its subject, still constitutes a grave wrongdoing. He further condemns all forms of exploitation and abuse in *Empty Cages: Facing the Challenge of Animal Rights* (Regan, 2004). The philosopher was adamantly opposed to any kind of mistreatment, even when it was not interpreted as explicitly cruel, including grandiose, state-of-the-art zoos that appear to provide optimal conditions for animals. Regarding captivity and how zookeepers care for their nonhuman wards, he asserts that irrespective of how well the animals are treated, how large the enclosure is, or how progressive the facility might be, it is still a

violation of their inherent rights. "Being kind to animals is not enough. Avoiding cruelty is not enough. Housing animals in more comfortable, larger cages is not enough . . . the truth of animal rights requires empty cages, not larger cages" (Regan, 2004, p. 10). Regan (2004) reminds us that we occupy a world "brimming with animals who not only are our biological relatives, they are our psychological kin . . . what happens to these animals matters to them, whether anyone else cares about this or not" (p. 59).

In Lori Gruen's *The Ethics of Captivity* (2014), Catherine Doyle, director of science, research, and advocacy for the Performing Animal Welfare Society, wrote a persuasive chapter entitled "Captive Elephants," in which she cited studies conducted by animal welfare scientists Ros Clubb, Georgia Mason, Cynthia Moss, and others. She contends that for-profit institutions such as zoos and circuses are utterly incompatible with the needs of elephants because their bodily integrity, socialization needs, and space requirements are sorely neglected, and they undergo continual trauma and health problems (Doyle, 2014). Despite the claims that zoos make that they are contributing toward species conservation and pachyderm research, their life spans are shorter and mortality is higher than in their natural habitats, particularly for Asian elephants (Clubb et al., 2008, p. 1649). Doyle criticizes zoo breeding programs for making no effort to reintroduce elephants to their natural state; instead they shuffle the babies around to other facilities, causing added distress from separation. In short, she contends that "due to their complex physical, social, emotional, and psychological needs, elephants are one of the least suitable candidates for captivity. This raises unavoidable questions about whether it is ethical" (Doyle, 2014, p. 38).

Similarly, in *An Elephant in the Room: The Science and Well-Being of Elephants in Captivity*, Joyce Poole and Petter Granli's (2009) chapter concludes with "when it comes to elephants . . . zoos are woefully inadequate." As they remark,

> Zoo proponents and welfare activists alike have tended to focus on the proximate causes of suffering in captive elephants (e.g., foot problems, arthritis, reproductive health issues, obesity, hyper-aggression, stereotypic behavior). But unless we address the ultimate source of captive elephant suffering—the overall lack of biologically relevant mental stimulation and physical activity—we will never meet their behavioral and biological needs. (Poole & Granli, 2009, p. 3)

Unlike Rothfels and Blau (2005), who deliberately remove themselves from this controversy, some authors and photographers have taken sides by addressing the brutality and perpetual monotony that zoos routinely inflict on their victims. Britta Jaschinski's (1996) *Zoo* combines haunting black-and-white photographs with animal rights activism. Her book features dark, melancholy images of captive animals who seem to vanish into the haze of endless tedium and stereotypic behavior (such as pacing and head bobbing). Yet, despite their suffering and frustration, these animals, often only partly visible in her photographs, still retain their stoic dignity. Similarly, photojournalist Jo-Anne McArthur's (2017) *Captive* graphically exposes the appalling conditions of many zoos today, making explicit to the viewer the harsh realities of inactivity, misery, and boredom which constitute the everyday lives of innocent animals.

PACKY'S DEMISE

The cover photo of *Elephant House* depicts the celebrity Packy in the sunroom standing face to face with his keeper, Dimas, behind the thick bars of a training wall that permits "protected contact," a safer and more humane method of handling adult pachyderms. In the past, however, elephants were controlled—and oftentimes violently abused—by means of punishing handheld tools such as the bullhook, or ankus.

As Rothfels explains, Packy became world famous when he appeared on the cover of *Life* magazine in 1962, being the first elephant born in captivity in North America in 44 years. The colossal animal was greatly admired due to his longevity; Packy lived until the age of 54, the oldest male of his species in the United States. Yet, despite all the media hype he received from adoring fans and yearly celebrations on his birthday, Packy led a lonely, tormented life. Unfortunately, he was euthanized in February 2017 after many long periods of total isolation, due to recurring, contagious tuberculosis that did not respond to treatment. A fierce debate erupted as to whether euthanasia had been inevitable, and many Portland citizens were deeply saddened by his death.

Elephant House uses original graphics. The inside cover is a close-up of pachyderm skin with wrinkled texture. The title of the book on the title page is in huge, bold gray letters, with no capitals, and the words are framed by brackets, reminiscent of how animals in zoos are kept within tight enclosures. The headings of the various sections are also gray and bracketed and remind us of their entrapment. An odd technical drawback is the lack of captions, so the reader must constantly flip to the back of the book to find explanations. Small theatrical portraits introduce the facility's eight elephants, as if it were the program for a play or opera. Several elephants are offspring of others, and some are no longer alive. Four of these are the main "stars" of *Elephant House*, namely Packy and his son Rama, as well as Rose-Tu and her daughter Lily. Like his father, Rama, who was known for his paintings, also suffered from tuberculosis; he was euthanized at the age of 31 due to an old leg injury caused by falling into a moat.

A KEEPER'S MEMOIR

In the foreword to *Elephant House*, one veteran caretaker, Mike Keele, describes his close relationship with the elephants, especially one named Pet. Keele retired reluctantly in 2013 after 42 years at the Oregon Zoo, having climbed up the ladder from menial worker to assistant director, and becoming a renowned expert on elephant keeping. He even organized an international conference on chronic foot ailments in captive elephants, for they frequently develop life-threatening arthritis and infections from a sedentary existence spent on concrete and from standing in their own feces and urine. Keele's essay shows how extremely proud he was of the high reproductive successes, as well as the progressive design, of the old Oregon facility, contending that those were the best possible conditions during that particular era. As he comments:

> Several images in *Elephant House* capture moments between people and elephants that are both rewarding and challenging. . . . Over the years, the facility's footprint expanded

> twice; concrete and asphalt were replaced with natural substrate; concrete interior flooring was cushioned; dangerous moats were removed; and an elephant squeeze chute was installed. (Blau and Rothfels, 2015, p. viii–ix)

Yet despite this unflagging dedication and the impressive architectural renovations made by the Oregon facility and others like it, zookeepers frequently fail to satisfy the complex needs of these magnificent animals. A number of current and former zoo professionals would sharply disagree with his ebullient praise of these institutions. Jenny Gray, chief executive officer of Zoos Victoria (Australia) and a strong proponent of the value of zoos, admitted in *Zoo Ethics: The Challenges of Compassionate Conservation* (2017) that "the bulk of zoos in existence today still fall short of meeting the requirements of ethical operations. At best, 3% of zoos are striving . . . [to do so], with perhaps only a handful meeting all the requirements" (p. 208). Another critic is David Spratt, who was once employed in the science department of a prominent zoo. In "The Scientific Claims of Zoos," in Andrew Linzey's (2013) *The Global Guide to Animal Protection*, Spratt points out that

> the overriding conclusion that can be drawn from a close look at the scientific work carried out in zoos is that it has achieved and is achieving nothing of importance in relation to zoos' major claims of conserving the planet's animals for the benefit of future generations—or for the animals' own sake. (p. 67)

As Marc Bekoff (2013), professor emeritus of ecology and evolutionary biology at the University of Colorado, Boulder, articulated in *The Denver Post*:

> It's well documented that captive Asian elephants, despite being pampered, live far shorter lives than wild relatives. . . . Elephants have thick skins but tender hearts, and their spirits can be easily broken. . . . Zoos should continue to phase out their elephant exhibits and send these amazing animals to sanctuaries, where they can live out their lives with social and emotional stability. (p. 1)

DECONTEXTUALIZED ELEPHANTS

Blackfish, the documentary film that publicized the harrowing story of Tilikum the killer whale, and the mass media pandemonium generated by the death of the gorilla Harambe incited an upsurge of global awareness about how zoos and aquaria should be held accountable for exploitation and tragic events, to humans and animals alike. Regarding animals in popular culture, specifically contemporary art and the media, Steve Baker (2001) explores why "representation has become such an inescapable and compelling topic" reflecting its "significance in relation to the human experience of other animals" (pp. 190–191). He challenges "the dubious notion which is peddled rather too easily and too often, that the 'zoo animal' is in some sense not a real animal" (Baker, 2001, pp. 190–191).

Late art historian John Berger's (1980) "Why Look at Animals?" lamented how captive exotic animals are marginalized and turned into commodities for our voyeuristic gratification—while they themselves remain unresponsive:

> The zoo cannot but disappoint . . . nowhere in a zoo can a stranger encounter the look of an animal. At the most, the animal's gaze flickers and passes on. . . . They scan mechanically . . . nothing can any more occupy a *central* place in their attention. (p. 28)

Rothfels (2005) replies to Berger in "Why Look at Elephants?," in which he examines our fascination with them:

> Discussions about animals are always historical and cultural. Because of their size, because of the human emotional value which has been attached to them, because of their economic value . . . elephants pose the questions of the animal in often the largest and most dramatic terms. (p. 182)

In *Elephant House*, we are confronted with unsettling photographs of Asian elephants inside the barn that housed them for decades, with its grim atmosphere of monochromatic concrete and constricting devices such as the squeeze chute. Randy Malamud (1998) suggests that captivity creates "a cultural danger, a deadening of our sensibilities" (p. 5) and that zoos are "not a microcosm of the natural world but an antithesis to it" (p. 30). Malamud states that "the power dynamics of free human visitors outside the cages observing trapped, displaced, decontextualized animals inside cages reinforce ecologically oppressive symbolism about human supremacy and subaltern inferiority of other species" (as cited in Linzey, 2013, p. 63).

HEALTH PROBLEMS SPECIFIC TO CAPTIVITY

The opening photographs in *Elephant House* reveal how caretakers are faced with challenging medical problems that are a direct result of the elephants' captivity. In the office, there is a double-screened computer on a desk with a close-up photograph of an elephant's foot and a paper diagram of its anatomy hanging behind it (Blau & Rothfels, 2015, p. 20). This makes sense, as foot infections and arthritis are among the most common causes of death (often by euthanasia) in pachyderms, and vigilant attention is needed to prevent these maladies. After that, we read instructions scrawled on the bulletin boards—"Cream on Tusko's tail," "elephant weights," "full baths on bulls," "clean toe daily"—highlighting the pragmatic aspects of therapeutic and hygienic care. There is also a list of anti-inflammatory and analgesic veterinary medicines, handwritten reminders about treating tuberculosis and thrush, and notes about tether training and daily exercise (Blau & Rothfels, 2015, p. 21). The refrigerator is adorned with a charcoal drawing and a sticker of Packy (Blau & Rothfels, 2015, p. 22), and the small library displays binders with policies and safety regulations, along with books on training, tying knots, elephant husbandry, foot care, Packy's biography, and *Elephants and Ethics* (Blau & Rothfels, 2015, p. 23). We see a shelf with products for skin care and a mineral oil laxative (Blau & Rothfels, 2015, p. 24), and the following page has postcards and calendars of circus elephants performing stunts and a chart of progesterone levels (Blau & Rothfels, 2015, p. 25). Additional photos show the caretakers engaging the elephants in play, exercise, and training.

The images in *Elephant House* illustrate the keepers' willingness to put themselves at risk and their competence in everyday tasks. Nevertheless, their individuality is often obscured, and we see mainly their bodies, their work space, or their tools, as in the close-up photo of Jeb's hands folded above the stained pouch fastened to his waist (Blau & Rothfels, 2015, p. 31). People are almost invariably shot at angles so that their faces are either turned away or absent. For example, in the photograph of Shawn tending Rose-Tu, who is lying on the floor with baby Lily beside her (Blau & Rothfels, 2015, p. 35), the keeper's head is completely cropped out. Moreover, both elephants and caretakers are often viewed from behind, such as Rama exiting the squeeze chute (Blau & Rothfels, 2015, p. 40) or Keele in the keepers' service area (Blau & Rothfels, 2015, p. 41). On his website, Blau explains that he is "drawn to shooting people from the back. . . . It puts the viewer in the position of the subject of the picture and provides a kind of blank body for her to inhabit" (Blau, n.d., p. 1). The photographer is obviously inspired by people engaged in mundane scenes of work and leisure, as evidenced by his ethnographic books such as *Polka Happiness* and *Bright Balkan Morning* or his exhibit *Focus and Force: "*There is a moment I prize in the act of work . . . this confluence of mental acuity and bodily motion is one of our finest accomplishments. . . . You need time and practice—years of experience—to master the skills of a trade" (Blau, n.d., p. 1).

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE: 19TH CENTURY UNTIL TODAY

In an earlier work, Rothfels (2008) poignantly expresses human empathy and identification with pachyderms:

> When we look at a photograph of an elephant's eyes . . . we conceptualize the combination of age and wisdom we seem to find in the large gray mammal. When people claim that elephants never forget . . . when they argue that an elephant having lived at a zoo for most of its life deserves "retirement" in a sunny sanctuary, they are thinking about both the lives of elephants and their own lives. (pp. 48–49)

The cultural historian devotes a major portion of his absorbing, well-written essay to the evolution of zoos and menageries, elaborating on how radically things have changed over time. He does this mainly by contrasting the architectural and structural differences between the functional Oregon Zoo and the ornate 19th-century Berlin Zoo, which was designed solely to delight spectators and ignored the basic needs of the animals. For example, the Berlin Zoo featured an ostentatious, dazzling antelope "mosque" and exotic "temples" for ostriches and elephants. In sharp juxtaposition to this, *Elephant House* focuses not on the architecture but on the enduring relationships forged between the caregivers and the Asian elephants themselves. Rothfels (2009) foreshadowed the underlying message of *Elephant House* when he stated:

> The quality of an animal's life in the zoo depends more than anything else on its relationship with its keepers and not on whether the exhibit is framed by bars, glass or a moat; a convincing replication of a natural environment; an abundant educational

> apparatus; or the presence of a species survival plan. . . . I had always known that the keepers often, even typically, had deep emotional and physical connections with the animals they cared for every day. (p. 485)

Rothfels observes that while the interior structures in *Elephant House* seem intimidating and dismal, they were built to protect the animals and their keepers, not to cater to the public's aesthetic inclinations. Yet, despite the vastly improved conditions in zoos today and the close ties between the zookeepers and the elephants, it still remains indefensible to house these highly intelligent, long-lived animals, with their intricate social structure, in such restricted settings. The author and photographer purposely dodge this controversy but emphasize how the Oregon Zoo has invested enormous sums to improve the lives of its elephants. Rothfels is evidently impressed by the construction of the expansive Elephant Lands, at the cost of $57 million, which offers these animals much larger areas in which to roam and better foraging choices.

CONCLUSION

It is disturbing to view pachyderms and other intelligent megafauna in captivity, and readers may be alarmed by the bleak images in *Elephant House*. Researchers Poole and Moss (2008) describe elephants as "large, highly social, and intelligent animals" in need of "ample, environmentally complex space and a sufficient number of conspecifics for social contact and learning" (p. 93). They recommend that elephants be kept in captivity only in institutions with "sufficient space for adequate exercise and stimulation" which "allow the elephants to choose among social partners" (Poole & Moss, 2008, p. 93). Tragically, as humans continue to demolish the scarce natural corners of the planet, and poaching has not been eradicated, pachyderms are increasingly unlikely to survive in their natural state. Sanctuaries, rather than zoos, might offer the only humane means of protection against inevitable extinction. Hopefully, our strong affinity to elephants will give us the needed motivation to prevent them from vanishing altogether and to afford them the long, dignified lives they so richly deserve.

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This article is dedicated to the memory of two beloved Asian elephants, Packy and his son Rama, who could have led healthier and more fulfilling lives had only their conditions been different. My sincere appreciation goes to Andrew Linzey and others for their invaluable teachings on animal ethics, which shed light upon the insurmountable problems of keeping elephants in zoos.

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