

Edmonton's elephant in the room: Everyone has Lucy's best interests in mind but, as the debate goes on, one lonely animal is left to face another cold, northern winter

Berkley Lamb

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Edmonton's elephant in the room

Everyone has Lucy's best interests in mind but, as the debate goes on, one lonely animal is left to face another cold, northern winter

By Berkley Lamb



*Lucy going through one of her daily checks with a handler at the Edmonton Valley Zoo.
(Photo by Berkley Lamb)*

She stands staring, as a small child presses his nose to the glass. His breath fogs it as he squeals excitedly. She kicks some dust around. That is her only movement for about 10 minutes. She dwarfs her fans, but her tiny eyes stare out blankly from behind long

eyelashes. She sways slightly from side to side in a sad rhythm – a telltale sign of an animal in distress.

Her home is about as long as a school bus, and is made largely of concrete. With its bars and walls, it resembles a prison. The concrete is decorated with paintings of trees: a faint echo of her natural habitat. There is a pen adjacent to it, where she “exercises,” with manmade items such as tires and pipes.

A heated mat lies close to the glass, meant to encourage her to stand close to her audience. Yet she stands on concrete floors near her keepers’ office – her main source of social interaction.

The irony is dense. Laughable almost. Throughout the elephant house, there are documented photos of elephants in the wild, in groups, feeding naturally ... and walking. Elephants are highly social animals. In their natural state, they are rarely alone.

Yet, this elephant’s adoring fans are meant to take solace from a little green sign in front of her glass stage: *Lucy is walked twice a day.*

The catch here is that Lucy is only walked when temperatures are warmer than -15 C. With long, cold Edmonton winters, Lucy may only get a handful of moments outside during the season.



A sign outside Lucy's snowy pen, which highlights where Asian elephants typically are from. (Photo by Berkley Lamb)

Lucy, the Asian elephant, has been a resident at the Edmonton Valley Zoo since 1977, when she arrived as a year-old orphan from Thailand. She has become the zoo's major attraction in recent years. Not in guest attendance, but in controversy. There has been much debate over whether Lucy's health is compromised in her current state, and whether she should be relocated to a warmer climate.

Well-known personalities such as retired game-show host Bob Barker and NHL player Georges Laraque have brought Lucy's plight to public attention. Several members of Parliament have declared their positions on Lucy's wellbeing. Lucy is cared for by trained animal professionals, and has been diagnosed with several health issues. There are several arguments to take into consideration with her situation, but one question remains: What's best for Lucy?

What does a happy animal in captivity look like? Is zoo-life as hospitable as most zoos would have their visitors believe? If Lucy weren't isolated, it might be. Her food is provided for and she will never go hungry. She is protected from predators, and she will never be harmed intentionally. She is given required medication. Yet, since the move of Samantha, the African elephant that was once her companion, Lucy has been left alone.

The Edmonton Valley Zoo argues that Lucy is well adapted to her new social setting, and that human socialization is enough for her. Even if that were true, Lucy's health has been compromised by her situation. She has had respiratory issues for several years, and has constantly been plagued with a chronic foot issues that often occurs with captive elephants. The Edmonton Valley Zoo has hired elephant specialists to deal with the conditions.

Many of Lucy's health problems are the result of her captivity. She is overweight from lack of exercise, due to it being too cold for her to go outside some days. Her foot conditions are caused by the cold, dry climate of Edmonton, which causes the skin on her feet to dry and crack. This can be very painful.

The irony is that her health has become the main argument for keeping her *in* Edmonton. Those opposed to moving Lucy argue that she is now in too weak a state to make the journey to the [Performing Animal Welfare Society](#) sanctuary in California. Laura Ruddock, a communications advisor for the city and spokeswoman for the Edmonton Valley Zoo, says Lucy receives top-notch medical attention.

"We are committed to continuing to care for Lucy; we believe she receives excellent attention at the Edmonton Valley Zoo and the caretakers alongside Lucy have formed a connection that has replaced the need for another elephant for Lucy to be more social.

“Lucy is a content elephant who unfortunately attained a respiratory problem, but being transported or placed with unfamiliar keepers would only further the problem, as Lucy is not fit for travel.”



Lucy going through one of her daily checks with a handler at the Edmonton Valley Zoo. (Photo by Berkley Lamb)

On the other hand, [Zoocheck Canada](#), a charity committed to the well being of captive animals, argues that Lucy needs to go to PAWS because Edmonton is an unsuitable environment for her.

At the California sanctuary, Lucy would be with other elephants in a healthier climate, says Julie Woodyer, Campaign Director for Zoocheck Canada and spokesperson for [SaveLucy.ca](#). In Edmonton, she adds, Lucy’s social and health requirements are not being met.

Female elephants need social interaction. In the wild, female elephants generally congregate together. Since Lucy's former companion, Samantha, an African elephant, was moved from the Edmonton Valley Zoo on a breeding lease, Lucy has been alone. As a result, many activists argue, Lucy's environment is no longer fit for her.

However, the Edmonton Valley Zoo suggests that Lucy's keepers provide sufficient social interaction for her.

"I don't care what any zookeeper tells you," Woodyer says. "A human is not an appropriate social group for elephants. Nor do the keepers stay with her 24/7. That is the reality of her life."

Woodyer also suggests, that when officials at the city of Edmonton made the choice to move Samantha, they were aware they were violating accepted zoo practice of keeping female elephants in groups of two, at least. It was since that move, that the zoo has conveniently been arguing that Lucy is too old to be moved, she says.

So Lucy's health and age have become the zoo's main arguments for keeping her in Edmonton. The city's website says that since Lucy is an older elephant, and suffers respiratory issues, she cannot be moved.

Elephants can live well into their '60s and '70s, Woodyer says. So 38-year-old Lucy is still fairly young. However, with her captivity-related illnesses, if Lucy were to stay in her current situation, she may not live to see 40.

Woodyer also attributes the decline in Lucy's health to her unnatural environment. During the winter months, the Edmonton Valley Zoo puts most of its primarily outdoor animals in indoor facilities. Being locked indoors during

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Edmonton's long winters, which can run from October to late April, is unhealthy for most

animals, Woodyer says. And it's not just the harsh winters that limit Lucy's exercise; there is also the cost of building an elephant barn, Woodyer says.

"Elephants have gradual decline due to excessive weight ... [and] foot problems, which are the leading cause of death in elephants – and she has both of those ... a perfect storm, which can lead Lucy to being just another statistic."

Many activist groups, such as SaveLucy.ca, are pushing to get an unbiased, outside source to review Lucy's situation – a request the city has denied several times.

"We need to bring in a team of independent experts, vets, behaviourists," Woodyer says. "And have that team of experts look at Lucy and diagnose whether or not she can be moved."

"There's a very strong community that wants to help Lucy, and a small group of people that are adamant to keep her here. Why [is the city] digging in their heels so much? They're digging in their heels because they don't want to be wrong."

The city argues that the long move to California would be too stressful for an animal of Lucy's age, size, and health, and she would not be able to survive the trip.

Woodyer, was key to the move of elephants Iringa, Toka and Thika from the Toronto Zoo to PAWS last year. She explains the process: With all animals, there are generally two moving options, truck or air. Moving animals by truck is always the first option, Woodyer says, because, to put a large animal on plane, it must be put in a harness and lifted by crane, generally a scary experience for the animal.

Conversely, animals travelling by road generally tend to be calm, so long as the truck is moving Woodyer says. The process is also well monitored by a panel of experts that must travel with the animal such as veterinarians, handlers, and trucking experts should anything go wrong with the vehicles.

“There’s a list of things that they must check for throughout the trip: how the animal is looking physically and how they are behaviorally” explains Woodyer, who says that the process of moving Lucy would not be as strenuous or stressful as the city says it would be.

When asked about whether the city would change it’s mind about Lucy’s situation based on public outcries, petitions, and organizations such as Zoocheck Canada and SaveLucy.ca, Ruddock says that the city’s decision will remain the same.

“I believe the city of Edmonton and the Edmonton Valley Zoo make decisions that are based on scientific knowledge. Since the factors have not changed in regards to Lucy’s health and situation, the best interest of Lucy should remain the same,” says Ruddock.

However, Woodyer remains rather hopeful, due to Edmonton having a new mayor since the last actions of Zoocheck Canada and SaveLucy.ca

“What I am inspired by is that you have a new mayor, and in addition to that, six new councilors who are a blank slate hopefully on this issue,” says Woodyer.

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So far, city council has not reviewed Lucy’s situation, and she is not considered a priority, Ward 5 councillor Michael Oshry said in a statement.

“So far, I currently have no position on her situation as I have not looked into the situation as of yet,” it read.

People need to voice their concerns for Lucy to city council, before her situation becomes worse says Ed Rem, a the member of Save-Lucy group, said via Facebook.

“People can bring attention to Lucy’s plight and make the difference in her situation. She does not have much time. Her age is when many zoo elephants succumb to their chronic illnesses. We want her to be able to enjoy her last days with other elephants and not be stuck in the confines of the Valley Zoo by herself. She deserves no less.”

However, it is undeniable that Lucy is not well, and the situation does boil down to: who will be right? No one in this case wants to be proved wrong, which would ultimately mean Lucy dies –succumbing to her illnesses in Edmonton, or en route to PAWS.

Woodyer says she is hopeful that Lucy will be moved.

“Which strategy is going to work?” asks Woodyer. “That’s the real question.”