

## A History of Elephants in the Amersfoort Zoo, Holland

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DierenPark Amersfoort has kept elephants since the mid-fifties. According to the records we originally had two cows. The animals were kept in the traditional way elephants were managed at that time. In the night the elephants were chained and in the daytime they stayed outside. If it was too cold outside, the animals stayed inside with the chain for a longer period, sometimes for several weeks. Throughout the period, there was regular contact with the animals. Care of feet and soles were not at a high level.

The ideas about keeping elephants began to change in the late eighties with greater emphasis on having social groups and better welfare of animals. Two animals are not a herd and 12 to 16 hours with a chain around the leg is not a good example of animal welfare.

In 1990 the elephant enclosure in Amersfoort Zoo was upgraded and the group expanded with four animals. At that time we had two solitary Asian cows aged 24 and 46 years, and with the new additions we had six elephants. The new elephants came from the so-called Burma transport. In total 30 elephants arrived in that year (1990) in Europe. A year later a young bull named Sammy, arrived in Amersfoort. He was born in the Paris Zoo.

From that time the zookeepers worked very intensively with the animals. Shows such as working demonstrations and elephant rides started, more attention was given to feet and skin care and direct contact with the elephants was on a very high level. For example, the animal keepers worked between the elephants when they were cleaning the enclosure. The number of animal keepers was increased from two to four. There were many changes in the individuals in the team for various reasons such as keepers

moving to another zoo, family circumstances or because they did not fit the job.

This situation lasted until April 1999, when our first elephant calf Indra was born. She participated in the training program within six months of birth. The training consisted of a daily wash, placing a chain around a leg and foot-skin care. We discovered during that period that consistent and strict policy was very important. Some keepers needed to work on their way of work. Development of cooperation within the herd and the behaviour of Sammy caused new problems. Also at this time there were more and more accidents in zoos, including in Europe, which unfortunately were sometimes deadly. The bull gradually became a difficult elephant. He accepted only one keeper. For safety reasons keepers did not access his enclosure when he was there. As a result since 1999 the keepers only worked hands-off with the bull.

Plans for a new enclosure were mooted and led to much discussion. The management wanted safe and hands-off work conditions to be established in the new enclosure. That was not appreciated by the elephant keepers. Many discussions later, finally the decision was made after a fatal accident in the Netherlands that DierenPark Amersfoort will work on a hands-off basis with the elephants. The keepers and perhaps the elephants were not ready to work hands-off as they were used to a system of close contact. However, the hands-off decision was implemented because there were enough arguments to operate this way.

We consulted with Alan Roocroft, an international elephant behaviour advisor, who advised us on how to manage the elephants under the new approach of hands-off management. The biggest problem was Sammy the bull as he had



a mild inflammation in his nails, which required contact for management. Alan advised us as to what we had to change in Sammy's enclosure. He got a place separated from the cows, with a sand floor, as natural as possible. In June 2003 we started with protected-contact training. After nine training sessions of 15 minutes Sammy was able to present his foreleg on command, so the keepers could take care of his nails and skin. Sammy learned this based on an 'ask and give' reward system (protected contact system, now regularly used in European and American zoos). The keepers did not directly touch the animals anymore, but by rewarding Sammy he started to listen to commands. After eight months Sammy responded to all commands well, from a whole new group of elephant keepers.

The cows represented a totally different problem. They were not caught by their ear anymore to come inside. Especially in the first few weeks the zookeepers needed a lot of patience. The temptation was big for just grabbing the elephant by their ears. The ranking of the herd changed especially in the inner enclosure. The two middle cows had strong aggression toward each other, when they were inside. Outside we didn't see any aggression between them. The mother of the two youngest elephants moved to Burgers Zoo in Arnhem. Probably that was the reason for the aggression in the herd. She behaved very dominant to Sammy, the male of the herd. She was the matriarch, because she was the biggest and oldest cow. Her dominance made Sammy really uncertain. To reduce the aggression between the two middle cows, we placed an electrified wire between the cows in the inner enclosure. This brought the situation under control. Meanwhile

we started with 'protected-contact'. The cows were trained to present their feet, front and rear, for foot-skin care. To check the urine of the elephants weekly, we made a hole in the floor through which urine was collected. With the urine we were able to monitor the reproductive cycling of the elephants.

A new enclosure for the bull was built in 2005. The enclosure had a sand bottom, double boxes and treatment area for the feet. The enclosure for the bull was separate from that of the cows. This decision was taken as there were many reports from other zoos that bulls were restless when in the same enclosure with cows. There was also a separate, spacious outside enclosure for the bull. The outside enclosure of the bull was in contact with the enclosure of the cows. The zookeeper could choose with manual slides if the bull could reach the cows.

The first calf was born in the new indoor enclosure in 2004. Unfortunately the calf was kicked to death immediately after the birth by the grandmother. That was the reason to choose a totally new concept. The inside enclosure was increased to 600 m<sup>2</sup> from 150 m<sup>2</sup> and now the elephants can roam here more freely. The outside enclosure was increased to 3500 m<sup>2</sup> from 1500 m<sup>2</sup> with hills, trees and other objects increasing play possibilities. Every day the elephants were given fresh branches and the hay boxes were filled with fresh hay. For every bite the elephants needed to work. The animals were able to walk out of each other's line of sight. The elephant family was 24 hours together, inside and outside. There were no concrete floors and water was always available to them. There were plenty of opportunities for





swimming, mud-bathing, and digging. Our new enclosure, called 'Rijk der Reuzen', is one of the biggest elephant enclosures in Europe.

Three times we were able to bring fresh blood in to our herd from the breeding program of the European Association of Zoos and Aquaria (EAZA). At this moment we have a total of five elephants with two adult females, two calves and one bull. In order not to disturb the family, a 26-year old cow was moved. She was the only female who was not related to the other females and was obviously jealous of the family bond the other animals had. She was reunited with her mother and moved together to Copenhagen Zoo. The EAZA helped with the exchanges and cooperation between other zoos in the last ten years.

A few years ago I retired, before that I was responsible for the livestock of DierenPark Amersfoort. I think working with elephants is very special. I have worked hands-off with 15 different elephants since I was 16 years old. Nobody has to explain how special and fun it is. However, welfare, care and the way we look at the animals have changed. The main argument for all the changes is the safety of the zookeepers. There were creative solutions for all the changes. The rhino, the giraffe, the lion and the chimpanzee need also special care when there is a problem. Creativity is also needed with these animals and more. I have spoken with many people over the years. Everyone has their own opinion about hands-off and hands-on work. I have respect for all the opinions.

