

A roadmap for Bunka

The lone elephant at Yerevan zoo



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RSPCA, the largest animal welfare charity is **supportive of zoos**, yet they say...

"The problem with keeping elephants in zoos is that their needs cannot be adequately met in a captive zoo environment. Consequently, the welfare of elephants kept in zoos is severely compromised"

"Elephants do not belong in captivity"

The Independent Conservative Animal Welfare foundation* advising UK government on animal welfare has published a report endorsed by 25 leading specialists on the unique needs of elephants



Zoos do not provide adequate space

Elephant zoo enclosures are typically **60 - 100 times smaller** than the smallest wild territories. The entire Yerevan zoo is 35ha. The average elephant sanctuary is 1,000ha. In the wild, Asian males roam >80,000ha.



High mortality for zoo elephants

Zoo-born Asian and African elephants **live half as long** as wild-born with an average of just 17 years. Half of European zoo-born elephants die before they are five years old.



No herd companionship

Elephants flourish in extensive family units in the wild. Zoo elephant management systems offer **limited** opportunities for elephants to **bond** and **socialize**, causing them stress and depression.



Psychological stress & physical issues

Many elephants in captivity suffer from arthritis, abscesses and joint problems from standing on **hard surfaces** and **lacking exercise**. Those kept alone or without compatible companions, become desperately lonely and **frustrated** displaying stereotyping - a common indicator of severe psychological trauma.

Both physical and psychological trauma are the leading causes for lower life expectancy in zoos.



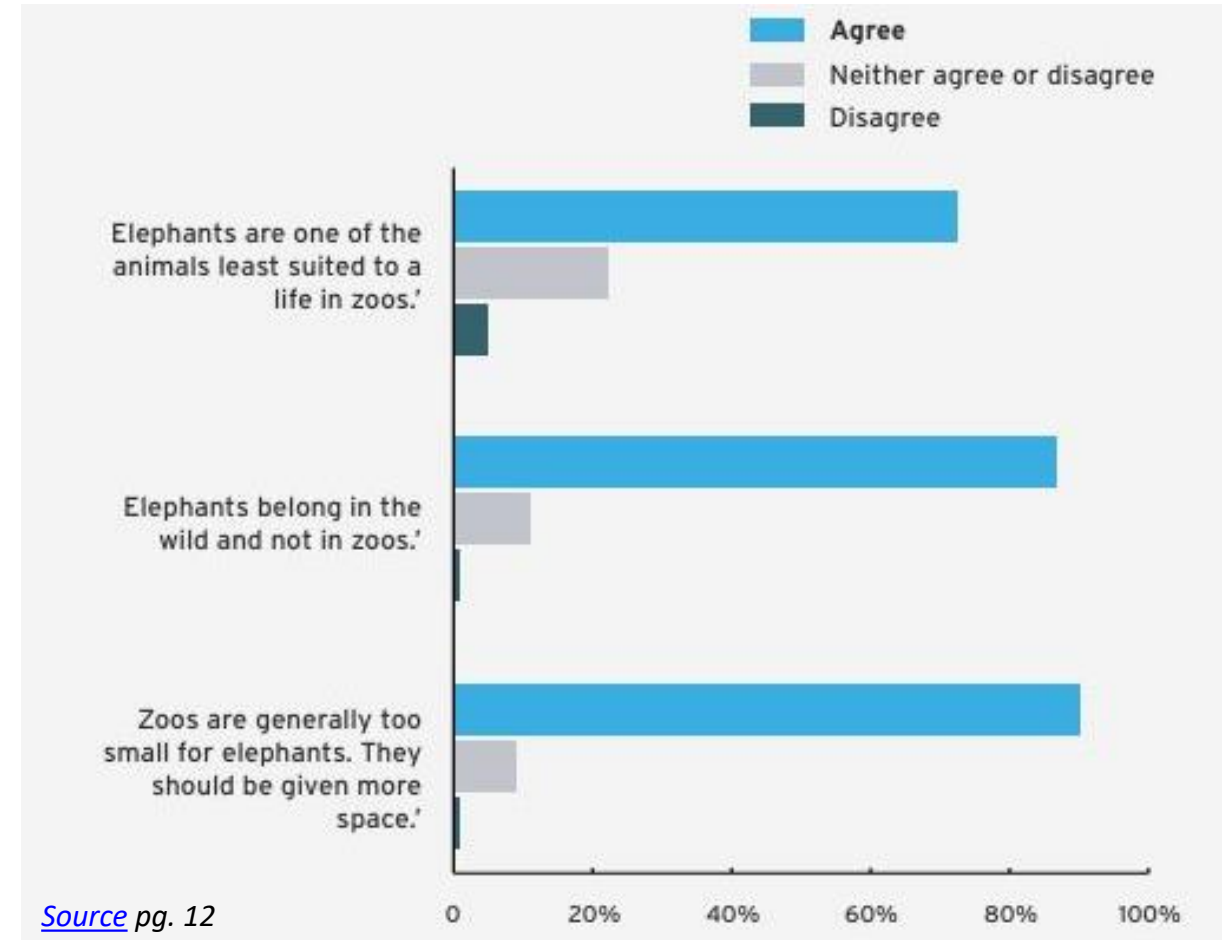
The challenge of males

Male elephants present a **particular and serious problem** for zoos because they have different needs during their lifetime. Captivity inevitably thwarts their natural instincts which combined with their hormonal cycles, leads to depression and aggression. It is impossible for them to live a natural life in a zoo environment, as reflected in their high early mortality rate.

Elephants present a unique challenge to zoos

- Elephants are **sentient, intelligent, socially complex** beings with the **capacity to suffer** and feel happiness. They are also the world's biggest land animals and can range over thousands of kilometers.
- An elephant's **natural environment** differs hugely from the conditions that can be provided in zoos.
- In a survey conducted in the UK in March 2022, 89% of **people agreed that elephants belonged in the wild** and not in zoos. 91% believed that elephants should be given more space than is provided.
- The sentiment is **echoed** by the public and campaigning organizations **across Europe**.
- This was recognized in the set up of a dedicated **elephant sanctuary in South France** to provide a suitable space for lone and captive elephants. Read more about Elephant Haven [here](#).

Public opinion poll about keeping elephants in zoos (2022 survey)



Bunka at Yerevan zoo

Despite best intentions, Bunka's current condition is very likely to lead to his early death



Care

Bunka is cared for by his keepers but elephants in captivity will always suffer.

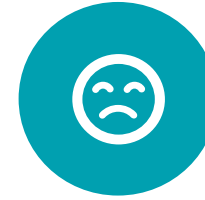
Sparse enrichments like placing a boomer (food) ball in his enclosure cannot imitate the richness of life in a wilder environment.



Environment

Asian elephants live in tropical climates. The **temperature variations** in Yerevan are not suited to their nature.

Extended time spent in **confined conditions** only exacerbates his distress and damages his wellbeing.



Wellbeing

Bunka has **lived alone**, without opportunities for socialization for most of his life. This has affected his psychological state producing stereotypic behavior and listlessness.

He has already had **foot abscesses, which are highly dangerous to their health**, as evidenced in the welfare report conducted in November 2022.

His condition **will deteriorate** as he develops into a mature bull.



Prospects

Even if the current enclosure is extended, it will be immaterial to his quality of life because it can't imitate his natural environment.

Importing another elephant will necessitate **twice the amount of space** with separate indoor/ outdoor areas and adequate fencing.

There is no guarantee the elephants will socialize and the **risks of forced introductions** could be fatal.₆

Options for Bunka's future



	Maintain current conditions	Adapt current enclosure	Bring another elephant	Move to a sanctuary
Timelines	-	Plan, build, landscape indoor & outdoor space, fortified fencing, EAZA approval >2yrs	Double enclosures must be built first . Permits, transport, EAZA approval >3.5yr	1 - 1.5 yrs
Cost	On going cost to cover growing needs and ailments of a bull elephant	Significant set up and cost to ensure safety & maintenance of enlarged space	At least double cost for separate indoor & outdoor facilities for 2 elephants	None to Yerevan Zoo. Transfer funded by supporting organizations & public donations
Welfare	Increasing frustration/aggression & captivity-related ailments	No known provision for Bunka while works underway	Significant specialist support to socialise 2 elephants. Compatibility not guaranteed	Best welfare choice for captive -born elephants
Local perception	Increasing awareness that captive elephants is wrong	Indifferent or temporarily positive	May be positive, but will heighten debate about the wrongs of captivity if this big gamble fails	Public awareness will generate positive publicity to the zoo
International reputation	Bunka is seen internationally as a suffering lone elephant at risk	Bunka will remain on the watchlist as a suffering lone elephant at risk	Scrutiny and condemnation if accident or injury occurs due to elephants being incompatible	Global recognition of Yerevan's progressive elephant welfare actions.

Why Sanctuary is the best option for captive born elephants



Elephant Sanctuary Brazil

✓ **“A life worth living”**

Most experts and increasingly more zoos agree only the wild allows populations to flourish. They also concede that facilities providing elephants with 100 hectares or more of diverse habitat gives captive elephants “a life worth living.”

✓ **In a suitable landscape**

It’s important for elephants to have different types of surfaces for walking, standing and exercising, fresh water for bathing, and a diverse source of vegetation for continuous foraging. These are essential elements for their health and wellbeing.

✓ **With more autonomy and choice**

Elephants create their own social structures and have strong companion preferences. In a protected environment, they can choose when and who to socialize with.

✓ **Protected and cared for the rest of their life**

Sanctuaries are protected large spaces with natural vegetation and specialist elephant care facilities to support them, as necessary.

Yerevan city will be part of the journey to give Bunka a better life

#1 Assemble a joint team

A coalition team of specialists to agree the terms of engagement with Yerevan Zoo. It will include Executive and Elephant management teams, vets, transport, media and admin specialists

#2 Agree the destination

Destination due diligence to be agreed with Yerevan city and to include a site visit for an Armenian representative of zoo

#3 Prepare the destination

Local site enhancements to accommodate Bunka ensuring protective contact

#4 Assemble transport team

Arranged authorize, specialist company for large animal transport and supporting team

#5 Approvals and permits

Team to obtain the necessary permits and conduct risk assessment for the move ((slide #10)

#6 Transport logistics

#7 Prepare Bunka

Acclimatise Bunka for travel. Process will take as long as Bunka needs

#8 Transport

Including celebrations of this historic event and positive press coverage

Bunka at sanctuary

Management protocol for relocating Bunka

Large animals are transported regularly by zoos and for rewilding purposes. Established protocols and a tailored risk assessment will ensure human and elephant safety

Transport protocol & risk assessment outline

Conditions for transport	Legal docs for all countries	Registration/ Microchipping	Species appropriate transfer	Vet sign off pre- transfer	
Welfare	Conditions met at destination	Vet presence throughout	Shortest Transport route planned	Safety measures	Stress minimisation
Regulations	Licenced transport requirements	Animal history and health	Transport regulations	Border crossing requirements	International transport standards
Team set up	Exec management team	Elephant management team	Vet team	Transport team	Security, Media, Admin Logistics
Equipment and site prep	Elephant measurements	Transport crate specs & design	Crane & other equipment	Destination site readiness requirements	
Route and logistics	Detailed travel plan & conditions	Transport vehicle - elephant	Transport vehicle - personnel		
Elephant management (pre-post – during transfer)	Crate access training	Medical access training & assessment	Food, water, cleaning during transfer	Stress minimisation during transfer	Off-loading
Adaptation & rehabilitation	Adaptation management	Diet change & footcare	Rehabilitation assessment	Future elephant management	
Risk management	Safety & Emergency	Veterinary intervention	Protocols for sedation	Risk assessment	

Zoos that have released their elephants

Have attracted tremendous accolades by world media and conservation organisations world-wide

Argentina

- Committed to releasing **all their elephants**, with 3 of 7 elephants already relocated to [Elephant Sanctuary Brazil](#)
- [Buenos Aires zoo](#) transitioning to becoming an eco park
- [Mendoza](#) zoo ordered by the city council to convert to eco park showcasing conservation of local fauna & flora. Exotic animals in the process of being moved to suitable destinations

EU

- [Elephant Haven](#) is a dedicated elephant sanctuary in Southern France for lone and retired European elephants. Set up in 2021, it currently hosts 2 elephants:
 - **Ústí nad Labem** in **Czech Republic** released their solo elephant with EAZA consultation
 - **Les Terres de Nataé** in **France** also released an elephant who couldn't be socialized
- [Aspinall foundation](#) is planning to transport 13 elephants from a safari park in the **UK** to Africa for the purposes of rewilding them.

US & Canada

- Since 1991, **32 North American zoos** have closed their elephant exhibits including: [San Francisco](#), Buffalo, Nashville, Riverbanks, Santa Barbara, Virginia, Woodland Park
- More recently, [Zoo Knoxville](#) and [Oakland zoo, California](#) relocated their lone elephants to a sanctuary
- Louisville zoo will soon relocate its 2 remaining elephants (watch [interview with the zoo director](#))
- [Puerto Rico](#) was ordered to release its elephant
- **3** further zoos expect to **phase out elephants** and will not invest in enclosures and more animals
- [Detroit zoo](#) released 2 elephants having recognized they cannot possibly provide the conditions they need. [Toronto zoo](#) also released 3 elephants to a US sanctuary in 2019

Pakistan

- In 2020 Pakistan's high court ordered Marghazar Zoo to release Kavaan, a lone 35yr old male elephant to a sanctuary in [Cambodia](#).
- The move was facilitated by an international coalition, fronted by the singer Cher to much international acclaim.
- Press coverage [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and all major news outlets



Zoos that have refused to release their elephants

Have attracted extensive world media attention to the detriment of their reputation

Edmonton zoo - Lucy

- An acrimonious, high-profile campaign was launched to release a lone elephant from highly unsuitable circumstances in Canada.
- An expert panel was assembled with 2 out of 3 experts advising in favour of the move. [The city](#) ignored the expert advice.
- Edmonton zoo named [Worse Zoo in the US in 2022](#) with the average Trip Advisor score of 3 out of 5.

Karachi zoo - Noor Jehan

- Four ailing elephants in inadequate conditions were identified by welfare NGOs. One elephant's condition deteriorated and displayed evidence of suffering.
- The zoo refused to allow independent medical care to be administered and Noor Jehan died in agony. Her painful demise was transmitted on [world media](#)

Bronx zoo - Happy

- Following lengthy litigation proceedings in the highest court of New York and extensive media coverage, the zoo declined to release Happy based on a legal technicality.
- The zoo has accepted they will [close their elephant exhibit](#) after the remaining elephants die.
- Going against the zoo, the [city council in debating a bill to remove all elephants](#) from Bronx zoo altogether

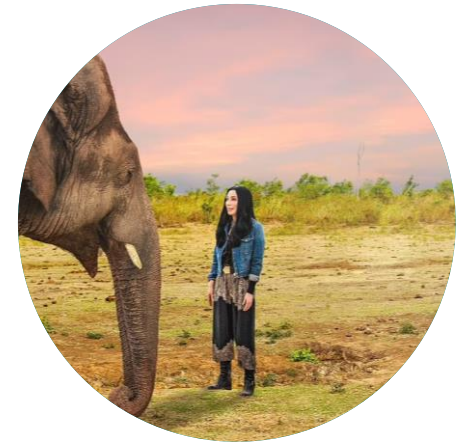
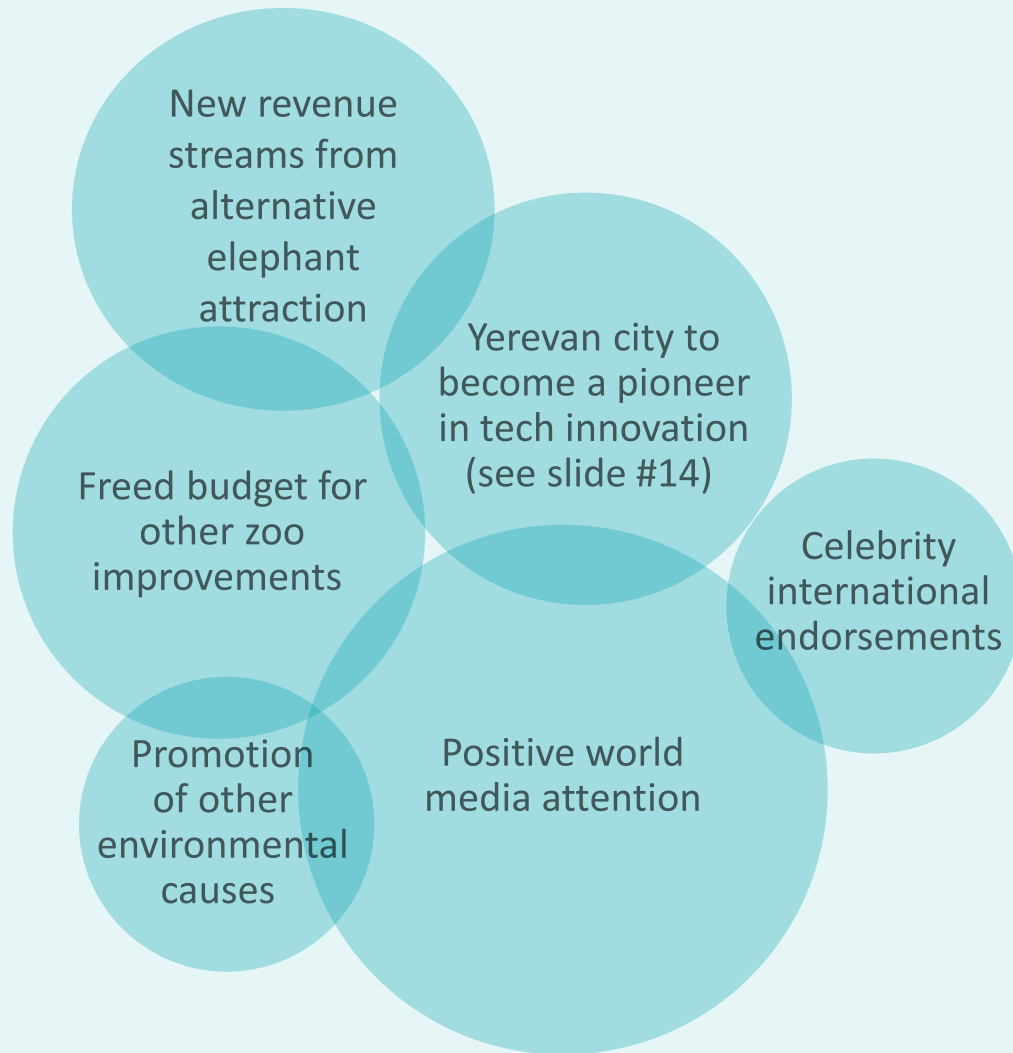
Los Angeles zoo – Billy

- Billy has lived in solitary confinement for 31 yrs and displays severe stereotypical distress and physical foot damage
- Following high profile litigation and much publicity, the zoo refused to release Billy.
- In 2022 the [city council has recommended Billy's move to a sanctuary](#)
- In 2023 LA Zoo rated as worse zoo for elephants with calls to boycott it



Benefits for Yerevan city

Bunka move to a sanctuary



References to Kavaan's success story in the news

1.5M
google hits

Zoos using alternative Virtual Reality installations

Zoos are aware of the ethical concerns and looking to attract younger generations by using technology to engage, delight and educate their audiences

- **Virtual Reality (VR) elephant exhibits** create unique immersive experiences that surprise audiences
- **Animatronics robotic elephants** are available to interact and create novel, engaging experiences
- **Yerevan is uniquely placed** to take advantage of this because VR innovation is already available in the city

At least 8 Zoos already use VR technology

Click for examples [in Australia, Canada, UK, Turkey and Germany](#)

[Robotic technology](#) used in zoos and in India to replace real elephants in religious ceremonies

A hologram zoo opened in [Australia](#) to great reviews. The technology is available to deploy anywhere

[Click below](#)



Yerevan city is ready

- The technology is already available in Yerevan

[ARLoopa](#) an Augmented/ Virtual reality development company have presence in the city and have already deployed relevant elephant projects.

They are very keen to demo and promote their technology to audiences nationally and internationally.

- Collaboration with Yerevan university

Given that Yerevan is already a hub for Augmented/ Virtual Reality studies, it would be particularly exciting to commission a final year university project or competition to create a display.

A positive and popular celebration of Armenian technological innovation and a display of progressive conservation



Next steps

- We welcome the opportunity to discuss our suggestions to city council members and other interested parties
 - We would be prepared to continue the dialogue in person in Yerevan, to address any specific areas of interest (including funding) and to discuss in greater detail a mutually agreeable solution for Bunka and the city
- Arrange a conversation with medical elephant specialists
 - We recognize the concerns raised regarding the elephant's safety during transport and want to propose a call with elephant specialists who have facilitated similar previous transports to outline the process and risk mitigations
- A formal invitation to potential destinations for Bunka
 - If Yerevan city would be prepared to consider the proposal, we would be able to organize a sanctuary visit to reassure all parties that our collective objective is Bunka's wellbeing

Thank you for your collaboration