

Program: The Behavior of Elephants

Speaker: Bob Dale, PhD, Psychology Department, Butler University

Introduced by: Russell Judd **Attendance:**

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Guests: Larry Sievers, AlexSlizza, Kelly Slizza, Tanner Slizza, Finnegan Slizza, Todd Stockwell, Cathy Roy **Scribe:** Don Mink

Editor: Joe Abella

Dr. Dale has studied elephants for ten years at the Indianapolis Zoo. There are currently six calves at the zoo with adult males and females. The Zoo rotates two groups of elephants to give the public a continuous show. Elephants are becoming quite rare; wild Asian elephants may already be gone and African elephants may die out in fifty years because of poaching. Artificial insemination is used to breed elephants in captivity to manage diversity in the gene pool.

Dr. Dale developed the program on artificial insemination and it was first used successfully at the Indianapolis Zoo! There are only five males in the US that are reliable donors. Semen is collected in the wild by a special method and diversity is maintained. Sophie (50 years young) has three calves as does Kubwa (30 years young).

Elephants are characterized by ear shape, tusks, tail shape, and body shape. Elephants have a particular “stance and swing” footfall. Previous elephant studies have indicated that elephants cannot run or jump like other animals and have only one basic gait, an ambling walk. Observations at the Zoo, however, have shown that they also trot (Nyah trots), run (Amali runs), and move backwards at times rather than turning around. These movements have been studied in research projects such as the Hildebrand Gait Chart (1976).

Although elephants live in close proximity at the Zoo, research has shown that social activity is much like that in the wild. When an elephant calf lives in a herd, as opposed to only with Mom, other elephants in the herd help with monitoring and protecting the calf. These other elephants are usually young females, about 10 or 15 years old, who do not have a calf of their own. Nyah’s older sister, who is 6 years older than Nyah, plays this role. Tami, after 8 to 9 years of solitary life, relates well with calves, but only interacts with males, not with the other mature females. In the wild, males leave or get kicked out of the herd after fifteen years and return only to mate. Play mating activity between young Molly and Johnny is similar to mating in the wild although neither has ever observed breeding activity, suggesting that this behavior is in-born, not learned.

Elephants have a good memory. Like humans, elephants can get confused with the same task sequentially such as finding your car in the parking lot on a few successive days. Dr. Dale noted the saying: “Elephants and women never forget an injury (1908)”.



Dr. Bob Dale