

S.A. zoo elephants part of study

By Vincent T. Davis

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VIEW: Larger | Hide

3 of 4

PREV

NEXT



October 16, 2012 -- Nydia Gray, left, and Michael Huff work with San Antonio zoo elephant Boo to affix a GPS device that will assess animal well-being while in captivity. Photo: Robin Jerstad, For The Express-News



There's no truth to the rumor that Lucky and Boo, the Asian elephants who reside at the San Antonio Zoo, are going steady, even though they've been seen wearing matching ankle bracelets.

Instead, they wore the high-tech jewelry as part of a national elephant welfare study that collected data from a global positioning system tucked away in the unlikeliest of places — those elephant-size ankle bracelets.

Data collected from the GPS units Lucky and Boo wore for two weeks in October will help assess the well-being of elephants in captivity by measuring motion, body movements other than walking and ambient temperature. The three-year study is funded by an \$816,000 federal grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services. About 290 African and Asian elephants at 71 zoos accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums are participating in the study.

Steve McCusker, executive director of the zoo, says this is the first time that the association has studied elephants as a group.

“I’m anxious to see how the study works out and what it tells those of us involved in elephant management,” he says. “There might be some things we can do to augment behaviors or some socialization skills we haven’t thought of that maybe other institutions are doing; it’ll be a real peek in shared information, which is a good thing.”

McCusker says by comparing data from other zoos, officials here will know whether their elephants are more or less active and if they exhibit any unusual differences in social behavior.

Such knowledge will help institutions fine-tune their management style and determine if current practices are sufficient or need to be enhanced with new ideas.

Association of Zoos and Aquariums spokesman Steve Feldman says the study is designed to identify indicators of good animal welfare, practices that result in positive outcomes and what zoos need to do to ensure that elephants in captivity live long and healthy lives. Researchers will also share those best practices with other zoos so elephants worldwide can receive the best care possible.

“What we do in zoos is hope to inspire new generations of people to support elephant conservation,” Feldman says. “And make sure the elephants we do have receive the best care possible. That’s universal across accredited zoos and the study is just one way that we can really make that a reality.”

Lucky, 52, has been at the zoo since she was 2 years old. Boo, 58, arrived in April 2010.

Michael Huff, senior keeper for the mammals department, says that during the mock phase of the trial, the pair were trained to show their feet and learned to wear a piece of fire hose to get used to walking with the GPS unit. The first phase of the three-phase study consisted of drawing blood samples from the elephants every two weeks. The second involved videoing each elephant’s random activity for one hour a day, once a week, over a three-month period. During the final phase the elephants wore the 14- to 18-inch anklets every third day for 24 hours over a two-week period.

“The elephants have been super cooperative,” Huff says.

Both Lucky and Boo have been the subject of controversy in past years. Animal protection advocates have said the zoo’s outside exhibit area is too small and doesn’t have enough shade. They’ve also called for Lucky to be released to an elephant sanctuary.

Boo, formerly named Queenie, had a history of woes, documented by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, before arriving at the zoo.

In 2009, she fell and hurt her left front leg in Indianapolis while giving rides. In 2008, Queens N.Y., inspectors reported that she was exposed to the cold. A year earlier in Pueblo, Colo., there were write-ups of an abusive use of an ankus, or elephant hook, and urine scalds to her back legs. The zoo acquired her after a judge ordered her owner to either donate or sell Boo to the zoo.

McCusker says the elephants are managed in what’s known as protective contact, which means there is always a barrier between the animals and the staff, and that the elephants are not chained. He said the pair is able to behave more naturally under protective contact than they are under what’s known as free contact.

“They’ll put their foot up, you can look in their mouth, but it’s because they want to do it, not because you’re going to chain them up and make them do it,” McCusker says. “If they don’t want to do it they walk away and come back when they want to do it. It’s a much better way to do it.”

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