

'Miracle' baby elephant cheats death in birth

March 10 2010, by Madeleine Coorey



File photo of a young male elephant calf born at Sydney's Taronga Zoo. A baby elephant believed to have died during labour was born alive at an Australian zoo on Wednesday, amazing its keepers and defying expert opinion that such an outcome would take a "miracle".

A baby elephant believed to have died during a nine-day labour was born alive at an Australian zoo on Wednesday, amazing its keepers and defying expert opinion that such an outcome would take a "miracle".

Sydney's Taronga Zoo said Monday that the calf had died in the [womb](#) after becoming trapped in a position from which they believed there was no chance of a successful birth.

But the male elephant was delivered showing signs of life early

Wednesday morning and by afternoon was attempting to suckle from its mother and take tentative steps around its pen.

Zoo director Cameron Kerr said that advice from Berlin-based elephant reproduction expert Thomas Hildebrandt was that such an outcome after a protracted labour has never been seen before.

"He said the birth will completely re-write the elephant birth text books," Kerr said.

On Monday, Hildebrandt told the media that an ultrasound and the failure to detect a heartbeat had led experts to believe the calf was dead.

"Should the calf be born alive, it would be a miracle," he said at the time.

Experts now believe the calf survived the nine-day labour in a coma, and this could explain why they had thought the calf was dead.

"That unconscious state would explain the complete absence of any vital signs during all the checks and examinations we conducted during the labour," said senior veterinarian Dr Larry Vogelneustadt.

The zoo said the next 24 hours were critical in keeping the almost 100 kilogram (220 pound) calf alive, particularly given that only 50 percent of first-time elephant mums have successful deliveries.

"Porntip is already showing signs of being an excellent mother, trying to help him suckle although he hasn't quite managed to suckle yet," Vogelneustadt said.

"She's in good health and has been getting to know her calf, gently touching the young animal with her trunk."

The zoo said other [elephants](#) in the herd were excited and curious about the new addition, reaching out to him with their trunks.

"The calf has already had some contact with the other elephants in the herd, touching trunks with the older females and also the zoo's first calf, Luk Chai, an eight-month old male," Vogelnest said.

Luk Chai, the first baby elephant ever born in Australia, was delivered at Taronga in July 2009. He was naturally conceived.

The new male calf is the second elephant conceived by artificial insemination in the country, after the birth of a female, Mali, at Melbourne Zoo in January.

Taronga's Asian Elephants are part of a controversial programme to breed the endangered creatures which began after the animals arrived from Thailand in 2006. As few as 33,000 Asian elephants are thought to remain in Asia.

The [zoo](#) said they expected a lot of interest in the newborn after news of its death prompted an outpouring of sympathy letters and cards from the public.

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