

New measures to improve the welfare of captive elephants in UK

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Experts at The University of Nottingham have designed a new system of evaluating the welfare of the UK's captive elephants.

The new assessment tool will provide elephant keepers with a rapid, reliable and valid way to monitor the behavioural [welfare](#) of the [elephants](#) in their care and can be used provide evidence of improvements. This project also generated a scientific evidence base to inform a government review of the management guidelines for zoo elephants in the UK.

This work was led by Dr Lisa Yon in the School of Veterinary Medicine and Science (SVMS) and Co-Investigator Dr Lucy Asher from Newcastle University, and supported by Ellen Williams (now a PhD student at Nottingham Trent University) who was the project's Research Technician. The research was funded by the Department for

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra).

Dr Yon, a Lecturer in Zoo and Wildlife Medicine at the SVMS, is Head of the Behaviour Subgroup of the British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums' (BIAZA) Elephant Welfare Group.

She said: "It can be challenging to meet the behavioural and physical needs of elephants in captivity because of their size, social complexity and cognitive abilities. Public visitors to facilities holding elephants want to be reassured that the elephants' physical, social and emotional needs are being continuously monitored and addressed."

Measureable improvements

In 2008, Government funded research into the welfare of elephants in UK zoos highlighted a number of significant welfare concerns. The zoos were given ten years to provide evidence of improvements in the care of captive elephants.

Dr Yon said: "Defra ministers tasked BIAZA's Elephant Welfare Group (EWG) with driving forward vigorous and concerted action by zoos to improve the way that the welfare of elephants is assessed, with measurable improvements documented by 2021.

"In this project, we were asked to review existing UK guidelines for elephants in captivity and to develop a rapid, reliable, validated and user-friendly elephant welfare assessment tool for keepers in order to monitor the animals in their care. Elephant keepers were central to the design of this new welfare tool, and to the assessment of the government guidelines."

Working in collaboration with UK and Irish zoos, and with guidance from an Expert Advisory Panel, Dr Yon and her team made a detailed

and extensively evidence-based review of the Secretary of State Standards of Modern Zoo Practice (SSSMZP) guidelines on keeping elephants.

The new [assessment tool](#) they developed has been trialled successfully at five UK zoos and is based on observation of elephant behaviour, taking into account individual elephant history and health status. A new, user-friendly, handbook accompanies it.

The project team involved a range of expertise from academia, the [zoo](#) industry and welfare organisations, working under the guidance Dr Yon. All the work was conducted in consultation and collaboration with UK and Irish Zoos.

Provided by University of Nottingham

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