

# Elephants in US zoos? Without breeding, future is uncertain

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Mabhulane (Mabu), right, walks with his female companion in their open roaming area of the Fresno Chaffee Zoo in Fresno, Calif., Jan. 19, 2023. A community in the heart of California's farm belt has been drawn into a growing global debate over whether elephants should be in zoos. In recent years, some larger zoos have phased out elephant exhibits, but the Fresno Chaffee Zoo has gone in another direction, updating its Africa exhibit and collaborating with the Association of Zoos and Aquariums on breeding. Credit: AP Photo/Gary Kazanjian

Mabu saunters across a grassy field and raises his long, gray trunk to wrangle food from a hole carved inside a large boulder, captivating the attention of a girl propped up on her father's shoulders.

At this zoo in a central California farming community, the 32-year-old African elephant is key not only to drawing visitors but also to ensuring there are elephants for zoogoers to see in the years to come—a future some animal lovers want to avoid.

Over the past year, the Fresno Chaffee Zoo has been pulled into a growing global debate over the future of elephants in zoos. In recent years, some zoos have phased out elephant exhibits due to the complexity of the animals and their needs. Still, others, like Fresno's zoo, say they are committed to keeping elephants and are turning to breeding, arguing that a sustainable population of zoo elephants will help spur a commitment to wildlife conservation among future generations of visitors.

The zoo in Fresno, while beloved by local residents, has been targeted by animal activists in a report criticizing living conditions for the elephants and in legal actions trying to free them. Broadly, some elephant experts say urban zoos simply don't have the space that African elephants, who roam extensive distances in the wild to forage for hundreds of pounds of vegetation each day, need for a normal life.





Joe Foster and Nolan Inthavong are shown watching the subtle moves of Mabulane (Mabu) at the Fresno Chaffee Zoo in Fresno, Calif., Jan. 19, 2023. A community in the heart of California's farm belt has been drawn into a growing global debate over whether elephants should be in zoos. In recent years, some larger zoos have phased out elephant exhibits, but the Fresno Chaffee Zoo has gone in another direction, updating its Africa exhibit and collaborating with the Association of Zoos and Aquariums on breeding. Credit: AP Photo/Gary Kazanjian

The zoo opened a revamped and expanded multi-species [African Adventure](#) exhibit in 2015 to better accommodate elephants, lions and gazelles by giving them more space to roam. It's also been working with other zoos around the country on breeding more of the animals, which are endangered in the wild, in the United States.

Mabu came to the zoo from one in Arizona last year after Vus'Musi, another male elephant, showed little interest in breeding. Mabu has sired offspring at other zoos and there's hope he can do so again to grow the Fresno zoo's population.

"Lions, tigers and bears. People are coming to see charismatic megafauna—that's the term we use," said Jon Forrest Dohlin, chief executive officer of the Fresno Chaffee Zoo, comparing an elephant to a larger-than-life figure like pop star Justin Bieber. He said visitors who see animals in real life—instead of in a photo or on a screen—are more likely to support conservation efforts. "We're telling large stories, so it is something that is important for conservation writ large," he said.



Pawan and Love Deep are photographed at the entrance to the elephant exhibit at the Fresno Chaffee Zoo in Fresno, Calif., Jan. 19, 2023. A community in the

heart of California's farm belt has been drawn into a growing global debate over whether elephants should be in zoos. In recent years, some larger zoos have phased out elephant exhibits, but the Fresno Chaffee Zoo has gone in another direction, updating its Africa exhibit and collaborating with the Association of Zoos and Aquariums on breeding. Credit: AP Photo/Gary Kazanjian

In recent years, some larger zoos such as the [Toronto Zoo](#) and [San Francisco Zoo](#) have phased out their elephant programs, sending their aging animals to sanctuaries in the United States that have far more space. The Los Angeles Zoo is also discussing sending its Asian elephant, Billy, to a sanctuary.

In some cases, animal rights activists have started legal efforts aimed at removing elephants from zoos.

In New York, the Nonhuman Rights Project filed legal papers to try to free the Asian elephant Happy from the Bronx Zoo but lost in court. The group then filed similar papers to try to free Fresno's three African elephants—a mother-daughter pair and Vus'Musi—but a judge ruled against the group.

This month, the group filed a case in an appeals court and swapped in Mabu. Jake Davis, an attorney for the Nonhuman Rights Project, said the case isn't over—especially since the zoo sent Vus'Musi to a zoo in San Diego so it could bring in Mabu in a bid to boost breeding.





Mabulane (Mabu) is seen in his open roaming area of the Fresno Chaffee Zoo in Fresno, Calif., Jan. 19, 2023. A community in the heart of California's farm belt has been drawn into a growing global debate over whether elephants should be in zoos. In recent years, some larger zoos have phased out elephant exhibits, but the Fresno Chaffee Zoo has gone in another direction, updating its Africa exhibit and collaborating with the Association of Zoos and Aquariums on breeding. Credit: AP Photo/Gary Kazanjian

"He really is their golden ticket," Davis said. "Hopefully we can get him out."

Some elephant experts argue the more humans learn about elephants' intelligence and social networks the more compelling the argument to release them—or at the very least to stop breeding them in zoos. They

also note that poaching of elephants and habitat destruction in Africa continue despite conservation efforts by zoos and question the difference they're making in hosting visitors who are largely seeking recreation.

"It's wrong to be bringing more elephants into living 60 years, or whatever they live to, in a captive situation," said Joyce Poole, co-founder of the advocacy group Elephant Voices, adding that in the wild elephants make decisions about where to find food and water and meet with relatives, something they simply can't do in zoos. "It's like seeing a person in prison."



Gia Martinez, center, was elated about seeing the large male elephant, Mabuhlane (Mabu), near the open area where the zoo's three elephants roam in Fresno, Calif., Jan. 19, 2023. A community in the heart of California's farm belt has been drawn into a growing global debate over whether elephants should be in



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Credit: AP Photo/Gary Kazanjian

Elephants were brought to U.S. zoos for decades, but transfers of African elephants have become rare in recent years amid rising international concern over the numerous threats they face in the wild—which also prompted the International Union for Conservation of Nature to change the species from vulnerable to endangered in 2021. The [U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service](#) is also drafting new rules for elephant imports aimed at protecting African elephants, which have dwindled from 26 million in the 18th century to 415,000.

At a meeting last year, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora put the trade of African elephants on hold to hash out conditions for transfers to take place.

As a result, the future of elephants—which have relatively few offspring and a 22-month gestation period—in zoos hinges largely on breeding. The Association of Zoos and Aquariums, which has a program aimed at sustaining the zoo population, said about 160 African elephants currently live in U.S. zoos.





Jon Forrest Dohlin, the Chief Executive Officer and Fresno Chaffee Zoo Director, is shown near the open roaming area for two of the zoo's three elephants, Nolwazi and Amahle, in Fresno, Calif., Jan. 30, 2023. A community in the heart of California's farm belt has been drawn into a growing global debate over whether elephants should be in zoos. In recent years, some larger zoos have phased out elephant exhibits, but the Fresno Chaffee Zoo has gone in another direction, updating its Africa exhibit and collaborating with the Association of Zoos and Aquariums on breeding. Credit: AP Photo/Gary Kazanjian

Breeding plans are underway at various zoos through the association's [species survival plan](#) to ensure elephants have a sustainable future, said David Hagan, the plan's coordinator and chief zoological officer at Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens.

"From a population model standpoint, I think there is hope," he said.

In Fresno, the 12,000-pound Mabu delights visitors as he pulls food from puzzle-like devices wedged inside the boulder to keep him intellectually stimulated. Joe Foster, a 42-year-old nurse, leans on the fence outside the exhibit, entranced by his movements, while on a date.

"My heart grew three sizes just sitting and watching him eat today," he said.

Meanwhile, the zoo's female elephants—Nolwazi, 28, and her daughter Amahle, 13—greet each other by crossing trunks and tapping each other's mouths before getting training and health checks inside a cavernous building. A zookeeper, standing behind a barrier, gives directions to Amahle, and she follows, turning to each side and allowing her ears and feet to be checked in exchange for chunks of apple and zucchini.



Mabhulane (Mabu) is seen in his open roaming area of the Fresno Chaffee Zoo in Fresno, Calif., Jan. 19, 2023. A community in the heart of California's farm belt has been drawn into a growing global debate over whether elephants should be in zoos. In recent years, some larger zoos have phased out elephant exhibits, but the Fresno Chaffee Zoo has gone in another direction, updating its Africa exhibit and collaborating with the Association of Zoos and Aquariums on breeding. Credit: AP Photo/Gary Kazanjian





Zookeepers Royce Beneke, left, and Sara Rogers are shown during a training session for Amahle, one of three elephants at the Fresno Chaffee Zoo in Fresno, Calif., Jan. 19, 2023. A community in the heart of California's farm belt has been drawn into a growing global debate over whether elephants should be in zoos. In recent years, some larger zoos have phased out elephant exhibits, but the Fresno Chaffee Zoo has gone in another direction, updating its Africa exhibit and collaborating with the Association of Zoos and Aquariums on breeding. Credit: AP Photo/Gary Kazanjian



Zookeeper Sara Rogers is shown during a training session for Amahle, one of three elephants at the Fresno Chaffee Zoo in Fresno, Calif., Jan. 19, 2023. A community in the heart of California's farm belt has been drawn into a growing global debate over whether elephants should be in zoos. In recent years, some larger zoos have phased out elephant exhibits, but the Fresno Chaffee Zoo has gone in another direction, updating its Africa exhibit and collaborating with the Association of Zoos and Aquariums on breeding. Credit: AP Photo/Gary Kazanjian





The front entrance of the Fresno Chaffee Zoo is shown in Fresno, Calif., on Jan. 30, 2023. A community in the heart of California's farm belt has been drawn into a growing global debate over whether elephants should be in zoos. In recent years, some larger zoos have phased out elephant exhibits, but the Fresno Chaffee Zoo has gone in another direction, updating its Africa exhibit and collaborating with the Association of Zoos and Aquariums on breeding. Credit: AP Photo/Gary Kazanjian

Some zoos have sent aging elephants to wildlife sanctuaries, including a sprawling habitat about 130 miles (209 kilometers) north of Fresno in San Andreas, California. Started by advocates disheartened by the treatment of elephants in the entertainment industry, the [Performing Animal Welfare Society](#) has 80 acres (32 hectares) of grassy hillsides where elephants can roam—more than 20 times the roaming space of the



Fresno exhibit.

Ed Stewart, the society's co-founder, relishes being able to provide elephants with more space than an urban zoo but said that it's still not enough and ideally the sanctuary wouldn't exist.

"At some point, we're going to look back and think, we used to keep wild animals in cages—big cages, small cages, an enclosure, a habitat, whatever you want to call it," he said. "I think for the public, a light bulb is going to go on and they're going to say, 'What in the world are we doing it for?'" \_\_

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