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Elephant Experts From Around the World Oppose Proposed Import of 18 Elephants from Swaziland to Zoos in Texas, Nebraska and Kansas

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– Dr. Joyce Poole

Washington D.C., October 26, 2015 — More than 70 elephant experts from across the globe have joined together today to announce their outrage and opposition to the proposed import of 18 elephants from Swaziland by the Dallas Zoo in Texas; Henry Doorly Zoo in Omaha, Nebraska; and Sedgwick County Zoo in Wichita, Kansas. The zoos’ request for a permit to import these elephants has just been published in the U.S. Federal Register and is open to public comment.

“The capture and removal of wild elephants from their home ranges and social groups is appalling and archaic, and the threat to kill elephants unless permits are issued is beyond unethical,” stated Dr. Joyce Poole, Co-founder of ElephantVoices, a world expert on elephant social behavior and communication who has been studying and working to conserve elephants for 40 years.

Swaziland is a poor country that has long allowed a family-run organization, Big Game Parks, to manage wildlife in three of its protected areas, apparently without government oversight. Big Game Parks has threatened to cull the 18 elephants if permits are not issued, claiming the elephants are destroying the landscape in the parks and impacting the rhino population. In reality, the entire population of fewer than 35 elephants occupies only small fenced portions of the reserves and poses no considerable threat to other wildlife; no evidence has been presented to show significant habitat competition with rhinos. Big Game Parks stands to benefit financially from the transaction.

According to Keith Lindsay, a conservation biologist with the Amboseli Trust for Elephants in Kenya who has more than 37 years experience studying and conserving elephants in Africa, culling is an outdated management practice that has not been used in Southern Africa for two decades. He stated, "Today, non-lethal management alternatives exist, including potentially relocating the elephants to protected parks or sanctuaries in Africa. By engaging with Swaziland's Big Game Parks, the US zoos are endorsing and, even worse, financially rewarding outdated and irresponsible wildlife management practices."

"This is the second time in just over a decade that Swaziland's Big Game Parks has looked to captivity as a supposed solution for apparent mismanagement of its national parks," explained Adam M. Roberts, CEO of Born Free USA and the Born Free Foundation. "Exporting wild elephants to zoos in America remains inhumane and short-sighted. It is shameful that the three US zoos would exploit the unethical wildlife management practices in Swaziland for their own gain."

The experts' statement points out that Big Game Parks and the zoo partners have offered no evidence that they have explored options for relocation of the elephants to other parks or sanctuaries within Africa – even though it offers the promise of minimal harm and distress to the elephants, and the prospect of a natural life.

"Zoos have traditionally raided the wild to have wild animals for display," says David Hancocks, former director of four major zoos; two in the U.S. and two in Australia. "Those raiding days should be over, especially for species whose social and behavioral needs cannot be met in captivity, such as elephants and orcas. The present proposal is dressed up as a 'rescue' but in truth is merely a ploy to cover the fact that zoos collectively are unable to maintain a sustainable breeding population of elephants. They will have to return again and again to take more elephants from the wild and, inevitably, keep them in inadequate environments where they will live inadequate lives, and die before their time."

Roberts adds, "The shared responsibility of the Swaziland government and the global conservation community, if there truly is a need to move elephants out of the country, is to find a protected area in the wild in Africa where these animals can live naturally, and potentially bring ecotourism revenues to local communities in desperate need. Evidence shows that should these permits be granted, 18 African elephants will live a deprived and short life in zoos, and that is shameful."

"The three US zoos have presented the world with an indefensible and misleading choice: kill the elephants or subject them to a lifetime of unnatural captivity. The real answer is to keep them wild and protected in Africa," said Ed Stewart, president of the Performing Animal Welfare Society, which established the first U.S. elephant sanctuary.

"Elephants are highly intelligent, sensitive, and social individuals," stated Dr. Poole. "Nothing can justify tearing young elephants away from their mothers and social groups and incarcerating them for the rest of their lives. The most humane alternative for their care and survival is to remain on the continent of their birth in conditions of safety and greatest practical freedom."

"The abduction of baby elephants for export to zoos around the world is breaking the hearts of Africans and non-Africans alike. It's time for it to stop," concluded Dr. Paula Kahumbu, one of Africa's best-known wildlife conservationists and CEO of Kenya-based Wildlife Direct.