

Telegraph magazine

Star Treatment

Shocked at the conditions endured by animals on film sets and in zoos, Pat Derby, a former trainer in Hollywood, set out to improve their lot. Thirty years on, her work for elephants in particular has transformed their lives. Martin Pearson visits her sanctuary in California

A nine-ton African elephant was silhouetted against a hazy horizon, partly hidden by billowing plumes of dust. It lumbered across the landscape towards a small woman dressed in a pink silk blouse, khakis and a crushed cowboy hat on top of her red pigtails, who nestled beneath its swaying trunk and cooed as if it were an overgrown pussycat.

This was Pat Derby, a 65-year-old English woman, originally from East Sussex, who has spent three decades dedicating herself to animals in general, and to elephants in particular. A Hollywood animal trainer before she became a wildlife activist, she has survived cancer and near bankruptcy, and now faces a bigger challenge.

We were in San Andreas, an hour and a half east of San Francisco, and the parched land that stretches for as far as the eye can see is owned by Derby's organization, the Performing Animal Welfare Society (PAWS), which is dedicated to the wellbeing of captive elephants.



Elephant woman: Pat Derby with her animals at the sanctuary just outside San Francisco

I was standing a couple of trunk-lengths away from Derby and her pride and joy, who goes by the name of 71 - so named because she

was the 71st of almost 100 elephants collected by an eccentric millionaire and who came into Derby's hands after the millionaire's divorce broke up his collection. 'I was born in love with elephants,' Derby explained.

Derby enjoyed an idyllic childhood in Seaford and moved to America when she was 12 after her father, a teacher, died. After leaving school she studied ballet, then drifted into Broadway before heading west, first to Las Vegas and then to Hollywood, where, while trying to make a career as an actress, she began helping out the animal trainers on set.

She became a highly respected trainer in her own right, and her credits include Lassie movies and television classics such as Gunsmoke and Flipper. Derby specialized in non-abusive training using positive reinforcement, unlike most Hollywood trainers at the time who relied on dominance and physical force.

'I went into that occupation with the feeling that if people earn their living off animals, they must love them a lot,' she said. 'But it was really horrifying to me when I saw how even little dogs who worked on films had to live.'

In 1976 she published a book, *The Lady and the Tiger*, which described in gruesome detail her years in the business and the shocking scenes she witnessed. After publication, her career came to a grinding halt. 'I had never perceived it as an exposé, but it was,' she said. 'I was persona non grata.'

Derby retired the animals she owned - she bought a resort among the redwoods of northern California and kept several animals there - and threw herself into full-time activism, education and fundraising, with the help of her partner of 31 years, Ed Stewart, Co-founder of PAWS.

The couple founded PAWS in 1984 to focus on raising public awareness of the plight of performing animals. First they set their sights on circuses. Unlike in the UK, American big tops, then and now routinely incorporate elephants into their shows. 'Ed was out all the time with a video camera,' Derby said. 'He stood there when the circus train pulled in and filmed what was happening right out in public.'

Hours of videotape documented the heavy-handed treatment and sub-standard conditions that many circus animals endured. The exposure helped garner support from congressmen and fuel political action.

In 2000, Derby testified in front of US Congress in support of a bill to regulate the treatment of captive elephants more tightly. But it faced fierce opposition from the circus industry, and eventually failed. 'I don't think we can ever legislate against cruelty,' Derby said. 'You have to kill the demand. If people refused to go to the circus or to see a movie with a live animal, then you wouldn't have to legislate.'

In zoos around the globe, elephants remain a popular draw. But in the past few years an alarming number of them have died due to illnesses exacerbated by confinement.

According to the animal welfare group Peta, 39 elephants, about one in 10 captive elephants, have died in American zoos since 2000. Most suffered fatal foot infections brought on by a lack of movement and cold, wet concrete floors. Arthritis is another common killer.

Europe fares little better. A 2002 report for the RSPCA, called Live Hard Die Young, found that Asian elephants in European zoos are half as heavy again as their wild counterparts with an average life expectancy of just 15 years, compared with up to 65 years in their wild state.



The elephants require much attention, despite the huge sanctuary in which they are free to roam. Food, medicine, board and lodging costs \$50,000 annually per elephant

One in four captive-born calves were stillborn, and almost one in 10 were rejected or killed by their mothers. Many captive elephants also display what is politely called 'stereotypic behavior', repetitive tics or swaying.

'We see all the time the results of poor diet, poor treatment, restraints on chains; we see all the joint problems, the mental problems,' Derby said.

The combination of physical and mental

duress sometimes provokes these ordinarily peaceful animals into acts of violence. Indeed, the US government once ranked the job of elephant-keeper as the most dangerous profession in the country.

In 2001 a veteran keeper was killed at London Zoo, which then moved its elephants out to Whipsnade Wildlife Park, leaving the capital void of elephants for the first time in 170 years.

'There is no benefit of captivity. None,' Derby said. 'It provides nothing to elephants. They're victims of confinement. I don't think elephants should be in captivity - ever. Including at my place.'

But return to the wild is not an option. After years in captivity these elderly and often sick elephants will never again possess the skills and instincts to be entirely self-sufficient. PAWS recreates their natural environment as best it can.

Derby currently provides refuge for 11 elephants, nine of them here at Ark 2000, the largest of three local sites run by PAWS, and one of just two elephant sanctuaries in America. The newcomers include Ruby, a much-troubled former circus elephant from Los Angeles Zoo, who arrived here earlier this summer.

Her departure was a controversial, drawn-out affair, involving celebrities, lawsuits, protest and political grandstanding. But Ruby seems to have landed on her impressively sturdy feet.

If PAWS can afford to take them, more elephants will soon be on the way. New national guidelines from the American Zoo Association require more space and better socialization. Some zoos plan to expand their elephant enclosures to meet the new standards, but several others simply don't have the resources; their elephants face eviction.

Six American institutions recently announced plans to phase out their elephant programs all together.

In Europe new industry guidelines mandate that elephants can't live healthily, never mind happily, in the cramped enclosures provided by most big city zoos. The 2002 RSPCA report laid out in stark terms that there is no future for elephants in zoos in Europe. The best that can be done is to make life tolerable for existing captive animals, and end importation and breeding programs.

The RSPCA is working with the British Government to expand laws

governing captive elephants, and there is serious discussion of banning the use of elephants altogether in circuses. Public opinion has turned: only one elephant remains in a British-based circus, a 54-year-old named Anne in the Bobby Roberts Super Circus.

Last month East Ayrshire Council banned Anne from performing, after pressure from animal rights advocates. 'The groups in Britain are 1,000 years ahead of the groups here,' Derby said. 'They're effective. They get things done.'

More than 300 elephants remain in American zoos, and although Derby might not have the money to take them all in, she certainly has enough acreage. The majority of her sanctuary occupies a 2,300-acre former cattle ranch, which she and Stewart took over in 2002 with the help of celebrity friends.

Kim Basinger chipped in, as did her then husband Alec Baldwin, who won \$250,000 for PAWS on *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*, and their long-time friend Bob Barker, the veteran host of the US version of *The Price is Right*.

The sanctuary is not a zoo, or a wildlife park, but something altogether different. The general public is never allowed through the wrought-iron gates trimmed with elephant motifs. The animals wander at will, often far from human gaze, over open brush bristling with trees for grazing and spattered with mud-holes in which to wallow.

Here, they are treated with respect, kindness and cruelty-free management methods. PAWS bans traditional elephant-keeping techniques, still used in most American zoos and circuses, which involve a sharp implement called a bull-hook and, when necessary, forceful domination using chains, pulleys and cattle prods. Derby's elephants amble through a leisurely schedule of feeding, bath time and medical check-ups enticed by an endless supply of treats, gentle words and patience.

The place exudes calm, but Derby and her team are frantically struggling to raise the millions of dollars needed to cope with a growing population. The relative freedom that PAWS provides doesn't come cheap or easy. The organization has an annual budget of \$2.5 million, yet room and board for just one elephant can cost \$50,000 or more per year.

'If they're sick or have medical problems, it costs a lot more,' Derby said. (PAWS goes through 70,000 ibuprofen tablets a year.) The Asian and the African elephants live apart, spending nights in heated, fortified barns that cost \$1 million each. The open spaces are enclosed by three miles of steel fencing, as thick as a lamppost and 10ft high, at close to \$1 million a mile.

PAWS is run by two dozen staff members, with a cadre of volunteers and cash raised exclusively from private donors, and is also home to hundreds of other animals, including big cats, bears, primates and exotic hoofed stock.

A few miles away at another PAWS sanctuary, I met two new arrivals who were sealed off in strict quarantine. Gypsy and Nicholas came here from a circus training facility in Illinois, which was ordered to give up its elephants by federal officials because of mistreatment.

Nicholas, in particular, presents a unique and potentially dangerous problem for PAWS: he is young, male and captive born. 'So he was deprived from birth,' Derby explained. 'My expectation when he came here was that we'd have the worst problems that we've ever encountered, times 100. All bulls are dangerous, in the wild and in captivity.'

Before Nicholas moves to Ark 2000 and its acres of space, he must take a test for tuberculosis, which is common among circus elephants. To find out how an elephant is taught to gargle, I donned a surgical mask and ventured into the quarantine barn.

From behind a protective barrier, Margaret Whittaker, a captive wildlife behavior specialist, was putting the enormous animal through his paces, coaxing rather than forcing him to perform each stage of this vital test; first, he took a saltwater solution down the trunk, then swilled it around for 30 seconds before finally spitting the liquid into a plastic bag.

She used food treats and a giant 'target' stick that looks like a 6ft-long cotton wool bud to guide the elephant. 'Those targets are simply a point of reference,' Whittaker said. 'First, he learns to put his head on a target, and then we can start using a second target to direct other body parts, be it the hip or foot. And then he gets a food reward and praise for doing each of those steps.'

When he arrived at PAWS a few months ago, many experts considered Nicholas erratic and unmanageable. Now Whittaker's deft movements and gentle praise have him shuffling around his enclosure with the grace of a ballet dancer.

He is not quite gargling yet, but he is close. 'Nicholas has made amazing progress,' Whittaker said. 'Before he came here he was thought to be a very aggressive elephant, but I didn't really believe that. I thought, "He's just a 14-year-old boy with lots of energy," and he's been a complete delight.'

This kind of 'protected contact' training is slowly being adopted by some zoos. It not only protects elephant keepers, but also, Whittaker says, creates a more respectful environment for the animal itself. 'If they want to get mad, if they want to swing their trunk, they can do that. They can say, "I've had enough, you've pushed me a little too far and I'm done." They're allowed to do that and I respect their right.'

In the wild, elephants live a nomadic existence, roaming habitats of 20,000 square miles or more, over varied terrain, in search of a diverse vegetarian diet and water for drinking and bathing. They also form lifelong bonds.

All females and many males live their entire lives in close-knit, hierarchically complex herds. Calves stay with their mothers for life. And in death, elephants, just like humans, indulge in days-long grieving rituals. Captivity disrupts this natural existence on every imaginable level, all too often terminally.

'Almost every captive elephant in this country has seen its herd slaughtered, and its mother killed,' Derby said. 'They're all neurotic. 71 is one of the least neurotic elephants in the country, because we raised her from a tiny baby, and gave her all that attention. But she's still deprived in many ways.'

Gay Bradshaw is a vocal critic of conventional methods of elephant keeping in the West. A fast-talking psychologist and ecologist, she has studied post-traumatic stress disorder in both wild and captive animals and, in a 2005 essay in *Nature*, came to some controversial conclusions.

'The symptoms that we're seeing in zoo elephants - stereotypic behavior, decreased longevity, infanticide, hyper-aggression - are the types of things that are observed in humans who have been subjected

to similar conditions,' Bradshaw writes. 'Elephants in captivity experience an array of stressors that undermine their wellbeing: difficult transportation, poor housing and living conditions, social isolation, and in circuses they are routinely beaten. These are all things that have severe psycho-physiological effects- commensurate with the incarceration of a human.'

Around the world, the shortcomings of captivity are becoming too severe to ignore. Over the few weeks that I visited PAWS, a zoo elephant went on a rampage in Romania before being mauled to death by security dogs. In a Berlin animal park, a crowd watched horrified as a mother elephant seemed to try to stamp on her newborn baby.

A six-year-old calf, Hansa, born at Seattle city zoo, died of a mysterious virus. And in Alaska, Maggie, a 24-year-old African elephant collapsed and became seriously ill - many felt that she was paying the price for years living in a near Arctic climate. But the most high-profile recent case - and the longest running - involved Ruby, a 46-year-old African elephant and one of the most famous residents of Los Angeles Zoo;- a creature with an especially tangled past.

Snatched from her herd back in Africa around the same time that Derby was making her mark as a trainer in Hollywood, Ruby landed at a safari park south of Los Angeles. There she gave birth to a male calf, but soon afterwards both mother and son were shipped to a traveling circus. They were trained to do tricks together, before being separated for good.

In 1987 Ruby was sent to Los Angeles Zoo, an institution with what its former curator Les Schobert calls 'a very sad history' of keeping elephants, while her son was sent to a breeding facility in Arkansas. Ruby formed a tight, trans-species 15-year bond with a fellow resident, an Asian named Gita, despite the fact that Asian and African elephants do not usually get along.

But in 2003 the zoo's administrators decided to move Ruby - to a Tennessee zoo, where, they said, she would act as an 'aunty' for a planned breeding program.

Protests erupted from animal activists who felt the Ruby and Gita should remain together, and the story helped put elephant rights on the map. 'Ruby became the first poster elephant,' Catherine Doyle, a long-time Ruby campaigner, told me on a blustery day outside the

gates of Los Angeles Zoo. 'It really touched people that these two long-time friends would be separated so casually and cruelly.'

With the backing of the Humane Society of the United States, Doyle filed a lawsuit alleging misuse of city funds and asking a judge to stop the move. But while the judge mulled over a restraining order, zoo workers loaded Ruby on to a trailer in the dead of night, and drove her 2,000 miles to Tennessee.

'They moved her out after I quit in disgust,' Schobert, who has now joined forces with animal rights groups, said. 'I always said that when I start to have trouble looking at myself in the mirror in the morning it's time to get out. And I was having trouble. Zoos have to rethink what they're doing with elephants. They are still clinging to the idea that they're going to be put out of business if they lose their elephants.'

In the following weeks there were worrying reports from Ruby's new home. She was swaying and rocking repetitively, a symptom of neurosis and loneliness. After knocking down one of her fellow elephants, she was separated from them. 'There was no interaction between her and any other elephant,' Schobert, who made a covert visit to Tennessee, said. 'There was no integration whatsoever. It was a very dysfunctional situation. I came away very disturbed.'

Tennessee officials called in a consultant, Alan Roocroft, a man once infamous in animal rights circles. Roocroft was the keeper in charge during an especially ugly incident at San Diego Wild Animal Park in 1988. Roocroft was accused of, and admitted, leading a team that chained an aggressive elephant named Dunda, and then beat her over the head with axe handles for several days.

Despite widespread outrage the district attorney declined to press charges, calling the act an 'accepted technique' among reputable animal facilities. Roocroft was cleared of any wrong-doing but, he says now, 'I have to live with that day in and day out with regret.'

Today he runs a successful consultancy working with zoos and elephants all over the world, and admits that the beatings triggered a personal transformation, which in turn began to change attitudes in the industry as a whole. Roocroft helped to pioneer a new way of working with elephants, in stark contrast to the domination techniques he had used as a young man. 'If you have an ounce of conscience, or remorse,' he explained, 'then it's not hard to make a change.'

By the time he arrived in Tennessee to see Ruby, Roocroft had become a leading advocate of positive reinforcement, training with praise, treats and a whistle instead of a bull-hook. He was immediately unhappy with Ruby's condition in her new home. 'I found an elephant that was out of place,' he said. 'My advice to them was to move her back to a place she knew where she probably felt more comfortable.'

In LA, public pressure finally produced a result. The city's mayor, Jim Hahn, announced that he was ordering Ruby's return, after a year and a half in unhappy exile. But it was not the sweet victory Doyle had hoped for. The relationship between the two elephants was permanently damaged. 'I got to see them one time back in LA,' she said. 'It wasn't good. For decades Gita suffered from terrible foot problems, and she was standing in a pool of her own blood. Ruby was in a back area and she was swaying back and forth like crazy.'

Within six months Gita was dead, after suffering a cardiac arrest. Ruby was alone again. Doyle and her colleagues switched tactics, insisting that Ruby, now 46 years old, deserved to retire in peace with her own kind. Derby's rescue centre was their first choice. 'I love the PAWS sanctuary,' Doyle said, adding that it is the only place she has ever seen a captive elephant run. 'Pat and Ed provide the highest quality care. There's a natural source of stimulation, from the environment to the social situation. They really set the standard.'

Inside one of PAWS two existing barns, buckets of corn, mango, papaya and bagels lined the walls. Derby and Stewart were tossing treats to Ruby and another African elephant, Lulu took up Stewart's offer of a warm hose bath, trumpeting, trotting and flapping her ears with enthusiasm. Ruby headed straight outside.

In just a few weeks she has formed a strong bond with Lulu, just as she once did with Gita. 'Ruby has a life that all elephants in captivity deserve,' Doyle said. 'It's the first time she's able to walk on soft surfaces, choose her own food. She can do things that are natural for elephants to do.'

After leaving the barn, Ruby threw a few trunkfulls of dust over her back and headed over to the fence separating her from Mara and 71, PAWS two other African females. In a subtle but important display of acceptance, Ruby and 71 turned their backs to each other, which means there is a good chance that soon all four elephants can be integrated into one, free-roaming group, as Derby plans.

'Ruby has progressed so rapidly,' she said. 'Her next step will be to go out into the big habitat with the other girls. Not a herd, because there are no herds in captivity. These are unrelated dysfunctional individuals who've learnt to get along. That's the best you can hope for in captivity.'