Incorporating stakeholder perspectives into the assessment and provision of captive elephant welfare

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Abstract

Recent concerns over the welfare of elephants in UK zoos have implications for their future in captivity, and it is clear that improvements in welfare should be made. Evidence suggests that the knowledge of experienced stakeholders is vital to captive animal welfare assessment. However, there have been few attempts to consult with zoo personnel and other stakeholders on the assessment of elephant welfare, and much of their valuable knowledge of routine husbandry has not been captured in the published literature. As part of a research project commissioned by the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs, open response focus groups and workshop discussions were conducted with representatives from 15 UK elephant-holding facilities, and other experts in the welfare and behaviour of captive or free-ranging elephants. Participants described three broad categories of welfare indicators: behavioural, physical and physiological. Resources perceived to be of importance to elephants included aspects of the physical environment, such as feeding opportunities and appropriate substrate, and aspects of the social environment, including group size and relatedness. The data obtained during this study can be used to develop an elephant welfare assessment strategy, informed by the knowledge and expertise of experienced stakeholders, and for consideration of potential changes to guidelines for managing elephants in captivity.

Our approach to capturing the views of those who work closely with captive species could be applied elsewhere, in order to draw upon the extensive knowledge of expert stakeholders and consider ways to improve the welfare of captive animals.

Keywords: animal behaviour, animal welfare, elephant, stakeholder opinion, welfare assessment, zoo

Introduction

Concerns over the welfare of elephants in UK zoos have implications for their future in captivity (Zoos Forum 2010), and improvements in elephant welfare must be made (Clubb & Mason 2002; Clubb et al 2008; Harris et al 2008). For the purposes of this study, animal welfare is considered to be a concept which encompasses mental and physical health, engagement with the physical or social environment, and the opportunity to exhibit control or choice (Asher et al 2015). The assessment of wild animal welfare in captive contexts can be difficult. There are typically few animals of each species in captivity, and little standardisation in husbandry and housing (Hill & Broom 2009; Mason 2010).

Behavioural observations are central to the assessment of welfare (Dawkins 2004; Veasey 2006; Hill & Broom 2009; Mason & Veasey 2010), and some previous studies began laying the groundwork to assess elephant welfare in the UK. Clubb and Mason (2002) carried out an epidemiological assessment which gave an overview of elephant welfare across zoos. They cited behavioural problems, reproductive problems and high mortality rates as indicators of poor welfare, although they did not collect new data or explore the behaviour of individual elephants. Their report subsequently drew criticism and it was suggested that their findings were, in places, based on anecdotal evidence (Rees 2003). Harris and colleagues (2008) analysed behaviour and welfare across 14 British and Irish zoos. Using behaviour (including aggression and stereotypies), health, faecal glucocorticoid metabolites and aspects of the environment (including housing and space allowance) as welfare indicators, overall welfare scores were assigned to individuals. The results revealed welfare concerns, such as a significant correlation between increasing age and poor welfare, but due to restrictions of time and funding, welfare was assessed in a ‘snapshot’ fashion, based on very brief and limited behavioural observations.