

# Elephant Lands

## Oregon Zoo

Summative Evaluation  
Executive Summary  
March 2017



Terry O'Connor Consulting  
*Linking conservation and education*



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## Executive Summary

Elephant Lands opened at Oregon Zoo in December, 2015, the largest exhibit project in the zoo's history. Designed by CLR Design, the six-acre, \$57 million habitat has provided the zoo's Asian elephant herd with an area four times larger than their previous home. Formations, Inc., working with Emily Routman Associates, designed the interpretive content and visitor experiences.

**Main Message:** The main message woven throughout Elephant Lands' interpretation is "...Oregon Zoo's deep commitment to the welfare and conservation of these highly intelligent, social and emotional animals."

**Evaluation Team:** With a strong commitment to evaluation, Oregon Zoo commissioned front-end audience research in 2012 to inform the development of interpretive content for Elephant Lands, and formative evaluation (2013) to test interpretive signs with zoo visitors. Both studies were conducted by Terry O'Connor Consulting LLC, who returned in 2016 along with Nette Pletcher and James Danoff-Burg of Pathways Collaborative to conduct the summative evaluation.

**Purpose and Methods:** The purposes of the summative evaluation studies were to learn how visitors spent their time at Elephant Lands and what seemed most interesting to them, and to assess the effectiveness of exhibit interpretation in order to determine if Oregon Zoo had met its education goals. Zoo staff selected three evaluation methods: a timing-and-tracking study, visitor intercept interviews and focus groups.

The evaluation team designed instruments for each study that were submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the California State University at San Marcos by James Danoff-Burg, Ph.D.; each was granted an exemption. Evaluators conducted the timing-and-tracking studies and the focus groups, and trained Oregon Zoo VAST volunteers who conducted the visitor intercept exit interviews.

**Timing-and-tracking studies** (using both scan and focal sampling) were conducted by evaluators in September and October, 2016. These were designed to gather data, through unobtrusive observation of visitors, to learn how people utilized Elephant Lands and which experiences appeared to be most engaging.

**Visitor intercept exit interviews** were conducted by volunteers from October through December, 2016 to get direct feedback from visitors about their experience at Elephant Lands. Questions were designed to learn: (1) what visitors learned about elephant biology, behavior and conservation; (2) if respondents understood the zoo's commitment to elephant welfare; (3) how their Elephant Lands experience enhanced visitors' respect and empathy for elephants; (4) what visitors learned about the shared history of humans and elephants; and (5) if visitors' experiences influenced their support for Oregon Zoo and their intent to take conservation action.

Three **focus groups** were conducted by Nette Pletcher in January 2017 with zoo members and one each was held with staff and volunteers to explore these questions in greater depth. Focus group members discussed interaction with staff and volunteers and provided feedback on whether Elephant Lands has accomplished what voters expected when they approved the bond measure that financed this habitat.

This report presents a summary of key results and conclusions, and is a companion document to the full report that includes detailed results, analysis and recommendations.

*"For a long time I was anti-zoo, but coming up here and seeing how wonderfully the animals are treated and the open spaces, and the realization that most people are not blessed to travel globally, and how else can children learn about animals up close and personal... I think Elephant Lands solidified in my mind that this is really okay. This exhibit helped me see the value of zoos."*

- Visitor in a focus group



## Summary: Key Results and Conclusions

Results of this summative evaluation demonstrate that Oregon Zoo has effectively achieved its education goals for Elephant Lands. The following summary of key results and conclusions provides supportive evidence, organized within our six primary research questions and goals for the Elephant Lands habitat.

### Elephant Lands Goals

- A. Understand the zoo's vision for elephant welfare
- B. Develop a better understanding of elephant biology and behavior
- C. Develop a stronger positive emotional connection and respect for elephants
- D. Recognize how people have valued - even loved - elephants as part of their culture and their community
- E. Understand how human activities have created problems for elephants and what each of us can do to ensure their future
- F. Be aware of the zoo's long term commitment to elephant breeding, research and conservation
- G. Feel supportive and proud of the zoo and its efforts on behalf of elephant welfare, conservation and sustainability
- H. Support us in our work, including opportunities (donor, member, volunteer) to partner with the Zoo on citizen science, research and field conservation efforts
- I. Change personal behavior(s) as a result of interaction with this exhibit

**Visitor Intercept Survey:** A total of 121 interviews were completed by Oregon Zoo volunteers:

- 66% of respondents were female; 34% were male
- Of 105 respondents, 34% were Oregon Zoo members; 66% were nonmembers
- 19% were first-time zoo visitors; half of all respondents visit the zoo at least twice annually
- 85% percent indicated that they had a "Very Good" or "Excellent" experience

### What do Visitors to Elephant Lands Learn about Elephant Biology, Behavior and Conservation?

#### Visitor Intercept Survey

- 79% of interview respondents said Elephant Lands effectively or very effectively communicated that elephants live in family groups led by a dominant female who maintains order and provides her family with survival skills.
- Messaging about palm oil threats and human-elephant conflicts hold promise for the greatest conservation education impacts for Elephant



Lands. Almost half of all respondents had never heard that these situations threatened elephants.

- As a result of their visit, 62% were more likely or a lot more likely to buy products that they know contain only wildlife-friendly palm oil.
- In contrast, 88% had learned about the ivory trade before their visit to Elephant Lands.
- Interview respondents confirmed that Elephant Lands effectively or very effectively communicated messages about the zoo's care for, research about, and conservation of elephants:
  - Oregon Zoo maintains a healthy, diverse population of Asian elephants (83%)
  - The work of Oregon Zoo staff has led to a deeper understanding of these complex animals and has improved the lives of elephants around the world (87%).
  - Oregon Zoo supports efforts to protect wild elephants in Asia and Africa (75%).

### Focus Groups

- Focus group participants enjoyed seeing the elephants engage in natural behaviors and learning about elephant biology and adaptations. The water features in the habitat are a great source of delight, along with novel objects that provide behavioral enrichment.

## What do Visitors to Elephant Lands Learn about Oregon Zoo's Vision for Elephant Welfare as Demonstrated through Elephant Lands?

### Visitor Intercept Survey

- 93% of survey respondents said that the exhibit effectively or very effectively communicated that Elephant Lands is designed to nurture elephants' social relationships and provide an environment full of choice.
- Survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that:
  - This exhibit shows that Oregon Zoo is committed to the welfare of elephants (98%).
  - Elephant Lands provides physical activity and mental stimulation to meet elephants' needs (93%).
  - Elephants at Oregon Zoo have a good quality of life (91%).
- The perception that elephants at Oregon Zoo have a good quality of life (91%) shows tremendous gains when compared with results of the same question asked in the Elephant Lands front-end evaluation online survey, reported in 2013, in which 64% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed, 20% disagreed and 16% did not know.

- When asked an open-ended question about the things that they noticed about the new habitat, survey respondents mostly commented on the greater space available to the animals, but also their perceived happiness, choices available to them, and their increased ability to interact with other elephants. Visitors clearly appreciated the contributions of Elephant Lands to improving the welfare of elephants at the zoo.

### **What do Visitors to Elephant Lands Learn about the Shared History of Humans and Elephants around the World and in Portland?**

#### **Visitor Intercept Survey**

- Visitor intercept interviews revealed that the main ways that visitors perceived the shared history of humans and elephants were either through messaging about conflicts, conservation and many commendations on the care of elephants by the zoo.
- Visitors greatly support the zoo's work of caring for elephants in the wild and also the care and space provided for these animals in the Elephant Lands habitat.
- Packy was the eighth most frequently mentioned in response to the open-ended question, "What were your three favorite experiences at Elephant Lands today?" All of the interview respondents who mentioned Packy were from the Portland area.

#### **Focus Groups**

- Visitors were very interested in the strong bonds between Oregon Zoo keepers and the elephants; however, this relationship between humans and elephants did not seem to translate to an appreciation for human-elephant relationships (positive or negative) in a global sense.
- Focus group participants did not generally recognize the relationship between humans and elephants as an important take-away from the exhibit. However, individual members of the herd are treasured, with visitors returning repeatedly to watch the growth and development of young Lily and sexually-maturing Samudra. The powerful connection that Portland natives have to Packy was especially apparent in comments made and stories shared during the focus group interviews.

### **What Impact does a Visit to Elephant Lands have on Visitor Empathy/Respect for Elephants and their Conservation?**

#### **Visitor Intercept Survey**

- After a visit to Elephant Lands, 83% of survey respondents agreed that they felt a stronger connection to the elephants and 84% felt their consumer choices made an impact on elephant conservation.

- Most survey respondents (62%) also stated that they felt an increased empathy/respect toward the elephants after their visit and 55% felt that they increased their understanding of what they can do to help conserve elephants.
- Visitors were strongly moved to increasingly act on behalf of elephant conservation causes advocated by the zoo. Those involving the palm oil trade had more than half of the visitors being more likely to act after their visit to Elephant Lands. When asked about a series of local sustainability actions that they could adopt that would benefit elephants, about one-third of survey respondents were more likely to engage in all five actions as a consequence of their visit.

### Focus Groups

- Among the focus group participants, Elephants Lands was characterized as impressive, both in its size and its impact on the Oregon Zoo visitor experience. After a lengthy construction period, members are pleased to have a modern habitat with features that support best practices in animal welfare. There is a definite sense of pride among locals, as well as among staff and volunteers, who recognize Elephant Lands as an important step forward in the long history that Oregon Zoo has with elephant care.

## What Impact does a Visit to Elephant Lands have on Visitor Support for the Oregon Zoo?

### Visitor Intercept Survey

- Visitors were strongly moved to increasingly support the zoo as a consequence of their visit. Two-thirds of the survey respondents either were already zoo members or were more likely to become members; two-thirds also said that they either already supported or were more likely to financially support the zoo's elephant conservation efforts.
- Notable improvements in survey respondent attitudes were seen with respect to pride in what the zoo is doing to protect elephants in the wild (80%) as a consequence of their visit to Elephant Lands.
- When asked an open-ended question about whether they have any other comments, interviewees responded with purely positive and grateful compliments about the zoo ("Appreciate having a zoo like this in our city"), the habitat and staff (87% of responses).

*"Love what the zoo has done with Elephant Lands with more interactive(s) than the previous exhibit & more inviting for elephants & visitors."*

### Focus Groups

- Focus group participants who voted to support the bond measure that funded Elephant Lands are satisfied that their taxes were well-spent. Everyone agreed that Elephant Lands met or exceeded the expectations of the public. Whether comparing it to the old Oregon Zoo elephant habitat or exhibits at other zoos, there was consensus that Elephant Lands was superior. They are willing to continue making financial contributions to support additional habitat improvements.
- For focus group participants, the visitor experience extended beyond Elephant Lands through the use of social media and other opportunities for learning through the zoo. Participants appreciate and seek out detailed information about the elephants, the habitat and the zoo's conservation efforts.

### What Features of the Elephant Land Interpretive Package are most Memorable and Engaging?

- The most engaging action for visitors to Elephant Lands was watching elephants as they moved, ate and interacted with each other, as measured by frequency of occurrence, duration, and favorable comments throughout all of our studies.

### Visitor Intercept Survey

- In response to an open-ended question about their three favorite experiences at the Elephant Lands habitat, survey respondents overwhelmingly effused about the habitat design, space for the elephants, and the ability of visitors to still be able to get close to the elephants.
- The majority of survey respondents (75%) were unaware that an Elephant Lands app existed. The zoo may wish to do some additional mentions of the app on maps and signs, as the very few people who were moved to download the app, seemed to gain additional insights into elephant behavior.

### Timing-and-Tracking Study

- The three most frequently utilized signs were elephant ID signs (17), the Elephant Lands map (13), and Feet (7).
- The three most engaging graphics, each with an average stay-time of over half a minute, were Sounds, Trunk, and Elephant ID signs.
- Although less frequent, reading and interacting with elephant-related exhibits were the next most common visitor behaviors.



## Focus Groups

- Focus group participants thought that interactions with staff and visitors provide the most memorable learning experiences: daily keeper talks showcase the strong bond between keepers and elephants while educating visitors about the importance of training; volunteers provide additional opportunities for visitors to learn more intimate details about the habitat, elephant adaptations, behaviors, and the zoo's conservation work.

*"I have more faith in this zoo and how they take care of the animals. Seeing it in action was reassuring."*

- Visitor response to a Keeper Talk

- Focus group participants recognized volunteers as knowledgeable about elephants and passionate about the zoo.
- Opportunities exist for staff and volunteers to address the zoo's role in elephant research and conservation and how visitors can take conservation action more effectively.

*"I love stumbling upon [volunteer interpreters] when no one else is around and getting their full attention. They are always really excited to talk and very helpful."*

- Visitor

Focus group participants perceived the overall design of the habitat as beneficial to elephant welfare and conducive to family fun. Elements throughout the habitat such as the feeding tower, the sand substrate, and the shift doors, intrigue visitors and impress upon them how much attention was given to detail during the construction phase. Public spaces that are designed to facilitate comfortable viewing and accommodate resting areas contribute to a positive visitor experience.