

Newborn elephant at Houston Zoo welcomed, appears thriving

By Alex Stuckey
Houston Chronicle

HOUSTON — Tilly reached her wrinkly trunk through the steel cables of the Houston Zoo's elephant enclosure on a recent morning, wiggling it side-to-side as if waving hello to the gathering crowd of visitors.

The *Houston Chronicle* reported that just a few feet and a couple of fences stood between the six-week-old elephant and a little boy of about seven who, at the sight of her flopping trunk, waved back furiously.

"Hi baby elephant!" he shouted to the about 500-pound pachyderm.

Tilly wasn't actually waving, she just lacks the muscle control to hold her long snout steady. But those facts certainly didn't matter to the excited boy, whose mother snapped photos of the encounter.

Tilly is the second Asian elephant calf born at the Houston Zoo in as many years — a major feat for zoo personnel in an era where just two to four elephants are born in captivity across the country every year. Tilly, for example, is one of only two elephants born in captivity in the U.S. this year, according to Absolut Elephant, the oldest and largest database of elephants worldwide.

"To have two calves born in back-to-back years is a great accomplishment," said Aaron Halling, a Houston Zoo elephant keeper. "This is special. It's just an awesome feeling."

The zoo's herd now stands strong at 10, including Thai, a 12,000-pound bull who fathered both Tilly and her older sister, Joy, now one.

The Houston Zoo's elephant population growth stands in stark contrast to many other zoos across the nation, where officials have been forced to close their exhibits due to lack of space.

In fact, instead of shuttering their exhibit, Houston has doubled its elephant enclosure to 3.5 acres, adding in 2017 a 7,000-square-foot barn specifically for the male elephants, 75,000 square feet of yard, and a 160,000-gallon, 12-foot-deep pool.

But that's not all the zoo is doing to help the animals, which have been on the endangered species list under the U.S. Endangered Species Act since 1976. Houston Zoo officials have spent about a decade working with conservation partners in Borneo to protect the Asian island's 1,500 elephants from extinction. Zoo keepers also have recently been in communication with elephant conserva-



tionists in Laos, hoping to start a program there.

"The health of the forest is in many ways connected to healthy elephant populations," said Peter Riger, the Houston Zoo's vice president of conservation.

"Their need for protected areas and migration corridors literally protects hundreds of species, including amphibians, insects, mammals, birds, and many others," Riger said. "In turn, the health of the landscape supports human communities in their livelihoods."

As Tilly posed at the fence line for her adoring fans, Joy came plodding across the yard to share some sisterly cuddle time with the newborn.

Joy has a different mom, but she has accepted Tilly as a full-blood sibling — a common occurrence in wild elephant herds, Halling said.

When a baby elephant is born in the wild, it is raised and protected by the entire herd, led by a matriarch. Because elephants are social creatures, they depend on those interactions to survive, according to the Defenders of Wildlife, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit conservation organization.

This family structure is one of the reasons the Association of Zoos and Aquariums created a rule requiring accredited zoos to have more than one elephant — at least three females (or the space to hold them), two males, or three of mixed gender — on exhibit.

The association's requirements also force zoos to create more space for the animals. There isn't an exact acreage amount requirement per pachyderm, but

the rules stipulate that there must be enough space and "environmental complexity" to stimulate behaviors, including social interactions, that would happen in the wild.

"If the elephants are healthy and socially adapted, then whatever is being provided meets the standard," according to the regulations.

Since those requirements went into place about eight years ago, the association has seen a decrease in the number of zoos with elephants. Only 32 facilities had Asian elephants and 37 facilities had African elephants, association data shows, compared to 2011 when 41 institutions had Asian elephants and 42 institutions had African elephants.

In Houston, the 10-member herd has 3.5 acres at their disposal. There are multiple water features where they can play and cool off and an abundance of toys. It's not uncommon to see Joy dragging a tire across the yard with her foot, enticing her older siblings to play.

Things appear to be good for elephants at the Houston Zoo now, but keepers have, in the past, had their share of issues with the enormous animals.

Between 2000 and 2008, three young elephants died of EEHV (elephant endotheliotropic herpesvirus), a herpes virus afflicting the animals across the globe. Elephants with EEHV become lethargic and lose their appetite. Their head starts to swell and they become lame.

The disease is a problem for young Asian elephants both in captivity and in the wild. It can be treated, but it has an 85 percent mortality rate, according to Ethos Veterinary Health, which provides specialty and emergency care for animals in 14 locations across the country.

Houston Zoo vets have been working with Paul Ling, associate professor of virology and microbiology at Baylor College of Medicine, since 2009 to study this disease. The protocol they've developed to diagnose, monitor, and treat the disease is used all over the world.

Houston Zoo officials could have started an Asian elephant conservation project in India. They could have made inroads in Thailand. They could have saved the elephants in Laos. Instead, they picked Borneo, an island near Malaysia where about 1,500 Asian elephants roamed.

The zoo honed its Asian elephant effort in on Borneo about a decade ago, Riger said, because they only have about \$100,000 each year to play with, money raised through ticket sales and special events at the zoo. By focusing on one region, they can really effect change, he added.

The 287,000 square-mile island of Borneo made sense because the zoo already had contacts there, through Orangutan and carnivore conservation efforts that began in 2004. The zoo tries to

WELCOME, TILLY. This July 30, 2018 photo shows a baby elephant named Tilly at the Houston Zoo in Houston. Tilly is the second Asian elephant calf born at the Houston Zoo in as many years, a major feat for zoo personnel in an era where just two to four elephants are born in captivity across the country every year. (Steve Gonzales/Houston Chronicle via AP)

support one conservation program per animal species on exhibit.

And the Asian elephant is in desperate need of help. At the start of the 20th century, about 100,000 Asian elephants roamed the wild. Today, that number has decreased by at least 50 percent and it continues to decline, according to the World Wildlife Fund.

Like their larger counterparts the African elephant, Asian elephants have been hunted for centuries for their tusks, which are used for ivory carving and jewelry making. But now, one of the biggest threats to Asian elephants is loss of habitat caused by population growth and increased use of their land for agricultural uses.

Asian elephants are migratory and follow the same land-to-water routes for decades. But as Borneo's population has increased — the most recent count was about 18 million people — the elephants' routes have increasingly been interrupted by fences, plantations, or homes, often resulting in the destruction of crops and personal goods. Islanders shoot or poison the elephants, Riger said.

But by teaming up with conservation partners on the ground in Borneo, such as Hutan, a conservation organization, he added, the zoo has been able to turn around that trend.

"When you are a local villager and you see your crop completely destroyed overnight, you will not be inspired to save the elephants," Dr. Marc Ancrenaz, scientific director for Malaysia-based Hutan, said in a statement.

"Elephants need forests to survive, and people need to convert the forest into other types of land uses, such as agriculture, to survive, hence the conflict," he said. "If we can't make peace there, extinction is inevitable."

There is now a hotline landowners can call when an elephant herd stampedes into places it shouldn't. And Houston Zoo personnel are developing plans to help island residents understand where to put electric fences, both to keep elephants out of their crops and to help direct the elephants onto different migratory paths.

For the most part, Riger said Borneo residents are open to these changes. They've been living alongside these elephants for centuries, he added, but human-elephant conflicts have just recently become a problem.

"It's not that people are against having elephants," Riger said. "But elephants that are taking up plantation crops are the ones causing problems."

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Millions in limbo as nativist anger roils Indian state

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So if those people are given work permits, minus political rights, they could be very valuable in Assam," said Nani Gopal Mahanta, an Assam-based political analyst.

But he defends the survey: "It's a question of sovereignty, it's a question of the security of this country."

Officials insist that the process will be open and trustworthy.

"It's going to be a fair procedure," Hajela, the project coordinator, said. "We will ensure that no genuine citizen gets left out, and at the point in time, ensuring that the ineligible don't find their names there."

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