

STATEMENT ON THE OVERVIEW OF ELEPHANT DEATHS AT ZURICH ZOO

Eleven Elephant Deaths in Ten Years: Experts Call for Zurich Zoo to end Elephant Breeding

We, the undersigned scientists, conservationists, veterinarians, elephant care professionals, animal welfare specialists and policy experts, are deeply concerned by the extraordinary number of elephant deaths at Zurich Zoo in Switzerland. The recent death of a newborn male calf, who was euthanised shortly after birth, brings the number of elephant deaths at the zoo to 11 in just 10 years. Among these deaths are eight captive-born calves and young elephants aged eight years or younger. Every elephant born at the zoo in the last decade is now dead.

This is not an isolated tragedy. It is a repeated pattern which raises serious questions about the welfare, ethics and conservation justification of Zurich Zoo's elephant breeding programme.

In light of these repeated losses, and the likely profound suffering caused to calves, mothers and other members of the elephant group, we call on Zurich Zoo to immediately cease elephant breeding, withdraw from any future breeding recommendations, prevent further transfers for breeding purposes, and develop a transparent, time-bound plan to phase out the keeping of elephants at the zoo. Continuing to breed elephants despite this disturbing record is unethical and inhumane, and is inconsistent with any credible, welfare-led approach to keeping socially complex, long-lived animals.

While the zoo may present individual deaths as unfortunate but natural occurrences, the cumulative record of repeated deaths points to a deeply troubling elephant programme that has resulted in substantial suffering and loss.

Since 2016, at least 11 elephants have died at Zurich Zoo. Only three were adults. The remaining deaths were calves or young elephants, and every calf born at the zoo during this period is now dead. Four died as newborns, two after failing to thrive and two from fatal injuries inflicted by other elephants. The remaining four died young, one at just four months from leg-injury complications, and three from EEHV, a disease that is devastating mainly captive Asian elephants. None lived beyond eight years. Behind these numbers is a tragic pattern of loss, suffering and failed breeding. One current female has lost three of her five calves, while another has lost all four of hers. This is not a success story; it is a deeply troubling record that cannot be hidden behind a carefully managed zoo narrative.

These losses are not occurring within a large, free-ranging population of elephants, where some calf mortality is expected. They are occurring among a very small, intensively managed group of elephants living in an artificial environment where every aspect of reproduction, social grouping, veterinary care, and husbandry is controlled by humans. When every calf born over a ten-year period dies in such a setting, it is evidence of a disturbing pattern that cannot be dismissed as normal or inevitable.

These deaths are not merely statistics. They represent the loss of sentient, socially complex individuals and the suffering endured by the mothers left behind.

Among elephants, there is no greater bond than that between a mother and her calf. In the wild, mothers and calves remain closely connected for many years, with females staying with their mothers for life. Calves are nurtured not only by their mothers but by other related females in the family. Scientific research has demonstrated that elephants experience grief, distress and profound social disruption when family members die or are separated. The repeated cycle of births, deaths and separations at Zurich Zoo is likely to have caused significant distress and social disruption for the elephants who remain. This continued pain for the elephants must stop.

The captive breeding of elephants primarily serves to sustain zoo populations and future exhibits for visitors. It does not restore wild elephant populations, protect wild habitat, reduce human-elephant conflict, or return elephants to functioning ecosystems. Elephants bred in zoos are not being prepared for release into the wild. They are being born into a lifetime of confinement. The concept of maintaining a 'reserve population' of elephants in zoos cannot justify breeding programmes that produce elephants who will never be released into the wild and, in Zurich Zoo's case, has resulted in the death of every calf born over the past decade.

Conservation is measured by real benefits to wild populations, not by the number of elephants maintained in captivity. True conservation protects elephants where they belong, within secure habitats and functioning ecosystems. It addresses the threats that imperil wild populations and promotes the long-term survival of the species in nature. Continuing to breed elephants in captivity, despite repeated premature deaths and suffering, is inconsistent with any meaningful definition of conservation.

The suffering inflicted on the elephants at Zurich Zoo, and the cycles of pregnancy, loss and separation for the purpose of producing more elephants for exhibition, must stop. After 11 deaths in 10 years, and with every calf born at the zoo during this period now dead, the evidence is clear: this breeding programme has failed to deliver acceptable welfare outcomes for calves and cannot be ethically justified in its current form.

Zurich Zoo must now prioritise the welfare, stability and long-term care of the elephants already in its care. Breeding more calves into a system where every calf born in the past decade is now dead is no longer defensible.

It is time for Zurich Zoo to end elephant breeding.

Signed by the undersigned experts,

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Overview of Elephants' Deaths at Zurich Zoo

Year	Elephant	Information	Parents M/F
2026	Newborn male calf	Euthanised after he was unable to stand up and walk	Thai / Indi
2025	Zali	Died at four months old from complications following a leg injury	Thai / Farha
2024	Ceyla-Himali	Euthanised at age 49 due to age-related health problems	
2023	Newborn calf	Weak and died shortly after birth	Thai / Farha
2022	Ruwani	Died at age five from EEHV	Thai / Farha
2022	Omysha	Died at age eight from EEHV	Maxi / Indi
2022	Umesh	Died at age two from EEHV	Thai / Indi
2020	Newborn calf	Died after being trampled or fatally injured by other elephants	Thai / Omysha
2020	Newborn calf	Died from severe head injuries	Thai / Farha
2020	Maxi	Euthanised at age 51 due to age-related health problems	
2016	Druk	Euthanised at age 49 after several falls and inability to get up	
2006	Chhukha	Euthanised due to arthritis at age 37	
1995	Komali	Euthanised at age 11 after becoming uncontrollable	Maxi / Ceyla-Himali
1988	Thaia	Euthanised at age 22 due to tuberculosis	

Living Elephants at Zurich Zoo

Name	Sex	Age	Notes
Thai	Male	21	Born at Hagenbeck Zoo, Hamburg
Indi	Female	40	Born in Myanmar
Farha	Female	21	Daughter of Ceyla-Himali
Panang	Female	37	Daughter of Ceyla-Himali; Sister of Farha
Chandra	Female	24	Daughter of Indi

All the above information was confirmed against the European Elephant Group (EEG) database.

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