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Performing Animal Welfare Society Expresses Condolences on Death of Greenville Zoo Elephant Joni Death raises important questions about elephants in captivity

San Andreas, Calif. (June 16, 2014) – The Performing Animal Welfare Society (PAWS) today responded to the death of Greenville Zoo elephant Joni. The elephant died in a transport vehicle on Saturday while being relocated to the Cheyenne Mountain Zoo in Colorado Springs, Colorado. PAWS is an animal welfare organization that cares for 11 Asian and African elephants at its 2,300-acre, natural habitat captive wildlife sanctuary in Northern California. Five of PAWS' elephants are Joni's age or older.

"Everyone at the Performing Animal Welfare Society sends their most heartfelt condolences to the people of Greenville," said PAWS president and co-founder Ed Stewart. "We feel very sorry for Joni and our thoughts are with everyone who cared for and about her."

Though Joni – also known as Joy – was only 44 years old, the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) accredited Greenville Zoo has referred to her as an "elderly" elephant. According to Stewart, however, elephants have a long lifespan similar to that of humans. In the wild, female African elephants are considered to be middle-aged when in their 40s. Had Joni remained in Africa and were alive today she would still be reproductively active. It is well documented that African elephants in their 60s have successfully given birth and raised offspring.

"It is simply wrong to say that Joni or any other elephant in her 40s is geriatric or elderly," explained Stewart. "The truth is that captivity has physically debilitated these elephants to the point where they suffer maladies normally associated with old age. It is a misnomer to say they are elderly."

Stewart cites small, unnatural enclosures that restrict the movement elephants naturally need and rigid surfaces like concrete and compressed soil as the causes of deadly foot disease and arthritis – the leading causes of death for elephants in zoos. Elephants in captivity also suffer high rates of infertility, infant mortality, stillbirths and birth complications, and abnormal behaviors such as repetitive rocking and swaying.

The last elephant death during transport involved 36-year-old Wankie, a female African elephant who collapsed while being transferred from the Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago to the Hogle Zoo in Salt Lake City in early 2005; both are AZA-accredited zoos. Wankie was euthanized shortly after arriving in Salt Lake City.

PAWS has moved 20 elephants, including young, sickly and older elephants from various facilities to its sanctuary via truck and by plane. Most recently, the sanctuary received three elephants from a Canadian zoo who were transported by truck. The elephants were constantly monitored via video cameras placed in their climate-controlled transport crates.

Stewart concluded: “Captivity will never be right for elephants. Even the largest enclosures are still too small to meet the needs of these intelligent and very complex creatures. Add to that the practice of transporting elephants from place to place and you have animals who just do not thrive in captivity.”

Joni’s cause of death is yet to be determined.

For more information on PAWS, please visit www.pawsweb.org.

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Founded in 1984, the [Performing Animal Welfare Society](http://www.pawsweb.org) (PAWS) operates three sanctuaries in Northern California that are home to a large variety of species including 11 Asian and African elephants, African lions, tigers, and other exotic animals rescued or retired from circuses, zoos and the exotic pet trade. PAWS is licensed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. It is accredited by the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries, and is rated a four-star charity by Charity Navigator. PAWS is currently celebrating 30 years of rescue, sanctuary care, education and advocacy.