Wild animals in captivity experience physical and mental changes as they grow older, just as we and our domestic pets do. Animals may face many challenges as they age, including poor eyesight, pain and reduced mobility from arthritis, dental disease, and even cognitive and psychological issues such as anxiety and confusion. At PAWS, our dedicated staff keeps a close eye on the animals every day, and recognizes problems quickly. Once a problem is identified, veterinarians develop a treatment plan that is tailored to each individual animal’s unique needs. The relationship between keepers and veterinarians is very important, as keepers are often the first ones to notice and describe a problem in need of attention. Keepers are also the ones who usually carry out treatments prescribed by veterinarians, such as foot soaks for the elephants or medications hidden in meatballs for the tigers, or in fruit juice for the monkeys.

Caring For Elderly Animals
By Dr. Jackie Gai, DVM, PAWS Attending Veterinarian

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Captivity and Longevity - Some Live Longer
Captivity has some interesting and sometimes unexpected effects on the lifespan of wild animals. For example, species like tigers, lions, and leopards tend to live longer lives in captivity than they do in the wild. In captivity, with good care and genetics, many big cats can cope with age-related changes that would prove fatal in the wild. Of course, factors unfortunately all too common for these animals in captivity, such as poor nutrition, stress, deprivation, inbreeding, abuse and neglect, can certainly result in chronic illness and early death. Some animals considered “prey” species in the wild may also live long lives in certain captive situations, protected from predation and provided with good care and room to roam. Some of the Scimitar-horned Oryx living at PAWS’ Amanda Blake Memorial Wildlife Refuge, for example, are well over 20 years old.

One of the most common ailments of older big cats is kidney failure. Early signs of this disease include increased thirst and urination, weight loss, and poor appetite. If caught early, medications and nutritional supplements can support kidney function and slow down the disease process. Staying hydrated is very important to animals with kidney disease, so keepers use creative methods to encourage drinking such as constantly trickling water into a big bowl (running water stimulates drinking), or merely adding more water buckets to an animal’s enclosure. Renal failure is not a disease commonly seen in the wild - rather it is an effect of extended longevity in captivity.

Another age-related ailment rarely seen in wild big cats is arthritis, which is very common in captivity. At PAWS, arthritis medications and supplements...
are hidden in meat and are given daily for the rest of an animal’s life once diagnosed. Keepers also work hard to adapt habitats and dens for arthritic animals, building low resting platforms that are easy to climb onto, filling enclosures with soft soil, and building ramps to make it easier to access all parts of their habitats.

**The Myth of “Geriatric” Elephants**

It’s an often-heard quote from the zoo world that elephants are “old” past the age of 40. The sad truth is that elephants in captivity live much shorter lives than those in the wild. In fact, wild African female elephants can live active, vibrant lives into their sixties, and there have been several documented births to elephants in their sixties. PAWS’ elephants Annie, at 54 years old, and Wanda, at 56 years old, are among the oldest elephants in the United States.

Elephants suffer from a host of captivity-induced problems, including foot infections and arthritis, reproductive and birth complications, psychological stress, and stereotypic behavior. Infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, salmonella, and herpes virus plague captive elephants and shorten life span, and the stress of captivity may play a role in immune suppression - increasing susceptibility to disease. By far though, the biggest killers of captive elephants are arthritis and foot infections - multifactorial problems caused by a constellation of uniquely captive conditions such as confinement (including lack of space and movement), hard substrate, standing in feces and urine, and poor conformation.

Since elephants live for so many years, it takes long-term dedication, team effort, and daily hard work to provide for their needs as they age. As with other animals, medications and supplements are hidden in treats and given daily - although the sheer number of pills required to treat an elephant can be tricky to hide. Older elephants in captivity sometimes stop lying down to rest, and this is a very serious problem requiring action. Healthy elephants lie down to nap, sometimes during the day, and often at night. This allows them to take weight off of their joints and feet, and provides restorative sleep. At PAWS, we encourage elephants to lie down by providing piles of soft soil and habitats with gently sloping, grassy hills that make it easier for an older elephant to lie down and get back to her feet. Lakes and ponds in the elephant habitats, and even an indoor pool in the African barn, encourage them to swim and float, taking the weight off feet and joints.

As degenerative joint disease progresses, and flexibility decreases, elephants may be reluctant or refuse to lie down, which leads to a vicious cycle of more pain and worsening arthritis. Also, some elephants come from facilities where they were bullied by another elephant, and they are afraid to be in a vulnerable position where they might be attacked. It takes time for these fearful elephants to feel safe enough to lie down. At PAWS, we work to restore or instill this trust and confidence by providing a safe place for them to rest, and making sure that they share space in the barn with compatible elephants.

Older elephants, especially those that don’t lie down as often as they should, occasionally have difficulty getting back up once they are down. At PAWS, our staff monitors the elephants 24 hours a day, and when one is down we know about it immediately. When elephants need assistance getting up, we are there to provide help using hoists and specialized equipment. Often, all an elephant needs is to get her feet in the correct position to stand, and she’s quickly up and walking around normally again.
All of the PAWS elephants are trained using positive reinforcement for husbandry and veterinary care. The soles of their feet and toenails are checked carefully, and “pedicures” are done as needed to keep feet healthy. When veterinarians need to collect blood, take an X-ray, or examine any part of an elephant, a keeper, working behind a protective barrier, asks the elephant to stand in a specific position while rewarding the elephant with treats. The elephants are willing, in fact eager, participants in their own health care, which makes caring for the older elephants a real pleasure.

Pre-existing Conditions
An animal’s past history affects the time of onset and the severity of many medical problems. Many animals arrive at PAWS with a history of neglect or abuse and a host of behavioral and physical challenges. Rarely do they arrive in excellent condition. We must adapt to their special needs and provide care that is tailored to each individual. Most arrive at PAWS with little to no written medical history, so keepers and veterinarians observe them carefully from the moment they arrive in order to identify problems early.

Quality of Life
PAWS provides permanent sanctuary for all animals who come to us. Unlike zoos, we do not trade animals or send them to other facilities. This means a lifelong commitment to every animal in our care, providing the very best life we possibly can. Assessing quality of life in a sanctuary setting is unique. We are focused only on the individual animal and his/her needs, free from additional factors that often carry weight in many zoos, where animals may be euthanized because they are unattractive, no longer reproductively viable, are considered “surplus,” or because their space is needed for another purpose.

Hospice is an approach to the supportive care of the chronically or terminally ill, which focuses on providing comfort, compassion, and enhancing quality of life. In many cases, what PAWS provides is not only a retirement home for animals but hospice as well. As animals approach the end of their lives, due to age or disease, we work together to do everything possible keep them comfortable, eating and active. The decision to euthanize an animal is made as a group, and with great care, to alleviate or prevent suffering.

At PAWS, we have a deep and heartfelt commitment to treat all animals with compassion and respect, always striving to preserve their innate dignity as wild animals. Elderly animals require specialized, extra care, and these unique individuals are at the heart of all that we do.

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Sheba is now 23 years old

At 56, Wanda is one of the oldest Asian elephants in the United States