



Creating the Nation's first BioPark

National Zoological Park · Smithsonian Institution · Washington, D.C. 20008

Letter from the Desk of David Challinor
December 7, 1989

My recent letters have been about the tamarins and ferrets and our efforts to promote their survival in the wild. This letter is about Toni, a 24-year-old female Indian elephant.

Toni arrived at the Des Moines, Iowa, Zoo from Thailand in October 1966 when seven months old. There she stayed until 1971 when she went to the zoo at Scranton, PA, to replace another elephant that had died. For the next 18 years she lived as the only occupant in an elephant house without access to an outdoor yard. Three months ago when the decision was made to close the Scranton Zoo, Toni, its last inhabitant, was finally prepared to move to the National Zoo in Washington. Many local citizens opposed her departure fearing that a change of quarters would be too traumatic for her, but in the end, Toni was coaxed into a large furniture van and driven for five hours to our Zoo.

Toni is still in quarantine in separate quarters in the Elephant House, but we hope to introduce her to our three other elephants (two Indian and one African). The process will be slow. First she has to unlearn the bad habits (from our perspective) that she had acquired from her long isolated existence. Very slowly, with three or four keepers in attendance, she is being trained to lift her feet to be chained for her daily close inspection. We monitor what she eats, which is considerably less than the other elephants, but encouragingly more than she used to eat, both at Scranton and when she first arrived here. The keepers will weigh her this week to see if she is gaining weight, as she has no past weight record. It is time consuming for an animal to unlearn behavior; much slower than to teach a young one new procedures. The keepers estimate that they now have only 10% of the control over Toni that they have over the three other elephants. Toni is learning but has relapses. Only three weeks ago when being prepared for feeding, without warning she tucked in her chin and butted our experienced elephant keeper, Kathy Wallace, so hard that she needed medical attention and was away from work for several weeks. Happily, Kathy is back at work and, with Collection Manager John Lehnhardt, has resumed the training chores.

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the education and recreation of the people."

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By next spring when the weather warms, we hope to have Toni under sufficient control to introduce her to the elephant herd. Being social animals, our goal is to try to keep groups like this together. A very long-range goal is to develop an elephant breeding group at Front Royal to duplicate the only successful elephant breeding activity in the U.S., which is now at the zoo in Portland, Oregon. Female elephants can bare young into their fifties, so that our three Indian females may all one day become mothers.

The next Smithsonian World television program will feature the National Zoo, and you can see first hand our elephants being trained. It will be shown around Washington, D.C. on WETA at 8:00 pm on January 24, 1990, and should be released on other public television stations at about the same time. Watch for local announcements.

A closing touch to my elephant story concerns unsold Halloween pumpkins. A friendly dealer dropped off about 130 of them at the Elephant House, as both the elephants and the rhinos relish them. Nancy, the African elephant, picks up the pumpkin whole and pops it in her mouth, but the two Indian elephants step on them and carefully scoop up the squashed remains, behaving like some grandchildren I know.

On this light note I wish you all a very happy holiday season. I appreciate your interest and support and, on behalf of the National Zoo, would be grateful for any year-end donations. Checks payable to the National Zoological Park are deductible in accordance with IRS regulations and can be sent directly to me. With many thanks and best wishes, I look forward to seeing you in the Spring.