



ZOOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION
OF AMERICA

June 1, 2015

Honorable Ora Houston, Chair
Health & Human Services Committee
Austin City Council
301 W. Second Street
Austin, TX 78701

RE: Opposition to Prohibition of Animal Control Devices

Dear Madame Chair Houston:

Among the professional members of the Zoological Association of America we have several persons with extensive experience with elephants, as well as numerous other species of animals that 175 million Americans went out to see in zoological parks throughout the nation last year. Based on their counsel, we must oppose any legislation defining management and training of these elegant and powerful animals as “cruelty”, or “abusive behavior.”

In fact, while its form has evolved over time, the ankus /elephant guide tool was invented centuries ago to allow our gigantic companions to accomplish joint tasks with humans who mostly love and take care of them. It has performed, in the hands of people who are experienced, roughly the same function as a bridle on a horse, to allow humans to communicate with the animals with which they work. The guides have long been considered a part of proper elephant care and husbandry, as they serve as an extension of the trainer’s arm. Used properly, the guide is no more inhumane than a snaffle bit in horseback riding, which are not banned anywhere to my knowledge.

Have some people abused animals by beating them? Of course. The most famous case, from California some years ago, involved a zookeeper using an axe handle, but cruelty to elephants and all other animals is already against the law in Texas, the United States, and despised by most of the people on planet Earth. The few remaining animal venues that care for elephants in this country are strictly regulated by the USDA and the Animal Welfare Act. The problem with a restrictive ordinance is that there aren’t many ways to manage elephants, even by people who would never hurt them. Without managing them, it is more difficult to take care of them in a way to keep them from injuring themselves or their handlers.

Use of the guides can enrich the elephant’s life and allow the professional to build a trust with the animal. Limiting the trained professionals in their care for these animals can lead to animal boredom, lack of enrichment and could put the caregivers at risk.

Dr. Mark Wilson, DVM, is the Founder and Director of the Florida International Teaching Zoo, and a professional member of the Elephant Managers Association. He is a veterinarian with decades of experience with elephants. A recent letter from Dr. Wilson to us contains the statement: "As an experienced elephant veterinarian, I can attest that the best veterinary care afforded to any elephant is a trained and manageable elephant attended by a professional elephant handler using an ankus/guide." He explains that a mere set of walls for containment "are a secondary less desirable option for veterinary care."

Other experts in elephant veterinary care have informed us that the proposed wording in some of these laws pushed by animal rights activists could be interpreted in such a way as to eliminate assisted reproductive techniques such as semen collection and artificial insemination, as well as some veterinary procedures such as rectal exams and treatments.

This is no need for regulation far beyond prohibitions of cruelty to animals, and if you question the proponents, you will find that rarely, if ever, have any of them cared for an elephant. We would be delighted to answer questions or provide further information, but are unfortunately not able to be present at the hearing this week.

Yours very sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A.B.S.' followed by a stylized flourish.

Alan B. Smith
Executive Director
(614) 893-9999
asmith@zaa.org