



NONHUMAN RIGHTS PROJECT

Minnie the Elephant FAQ

On November 13, 2017, the Nonhuman Rights Project (NhRP) [initiated habeas corpus litigation](#) on behalf of elephants Beulah, Karen, and Minnie, demanding recognition of their fundamental right to liberty and their release to an elephant sanctuary. Following the deaths of both Beulah and Karen in 2019, Minnie is now the Commerford Zoo's sole surviving elephant. With the support of world-renowned elephant experts, the NhRP argues that the Commerford Zoo's imprisonment of Minnie unlawfully deprives her of her ability to exercise her autonomy, including the freedom to choose where to go, what to do, and with whom to be.

Who is Minnie?

Minnie is an Asian elephant who was born in the wild in Thailand and imported to the US in 1972 when she was two months old. Shortly after, a New Jersey couple, in search of a baby elephant to incorporate into their traveling petting zoo, purchased her so she could become “the first elephant in the world to be raised as a member of a household.” In 1976, the couple sold Minnie to the Commerford Zoo, which has frequently used her in weddings, film productions, photo shoots, circuses, and fairs.

Through study and observation, scientists have established in the uncontroverted affidavits filed in Minnie’s case that elephants:

- Are autonomous, empathetic, and self-aware
- Possess a theory of mind (awareness others have minds) and have insight
- Understand causation
- Engage in true teaching (taking the pupil’s lack of knowledge into account and actively showing them what to do)
- Engage in ostensive behavior that emphasizes the importance of a particular communication
- Are able to act intentionally and in a goal-oriented manner, and detect animacy and goal directedness in others
- Use specific calls and gestures to plan and discuss a course of action, adjust their plan according to their assessment of risk, and execute the plan in a coordinated manner; and have complex learning and categorization abilities
- Cooperate and build coalitions
- Understand the physical competence and emotional state of others
- Point and understand pointing
- Have a working memory, and an extensive long-term memory that allows them to accumulate social knowledge
- Use a wide variety of gestures, signals, and postures
- Engage in intentional communication, including vocalizations to share knowledge and information with others in a manner similar to humans
- Have an awareness of and response to death, including grieving behaviors

What is Minnie's life like at the Commerford Zoo?

For decades, the Commerford Zoo has transported Minnie to events across the Northeast where she has been forced to perform tricks and give rides under threat of a bullhook, which is designed to inflict pain on elephants in order to subdue and control them. When she is not laboring at these events, she is kept on the Commerford Zoo property in Goshen where she appears to spend most of her time in a small, dark barn with limited access to the outdoors. Now that Beulah and Karen have died, she is without the psychologically necessary companionship of other elephants.

How do you know Minnie is suffering at the Commerford Zoo?

For over 40 years, the Commerford Zoo has confined and exploited Minnie despite the [physical](#) and [emotional](#) harms this exploitation is known to cause. Many people have observed Minnie, Karen, and Beulah being jabbed with bullhooks, engaging in stereotypical behavior indicative of suffering and anxiety, and in visible distress. Minnie has a history of attacking her handlers, injuring them and members of the public, including an incident in which, as documented by PETA, “an eyewitness reported that one of the employees had provoked the elephant by striking her in the face.”

Additionally, over the past year there have been serious concerns about Minnie's health and overall welfare. At the 2018 Big E Fair in Springfield, MA, fairgoers and advocates were [shocked](#) by her [alarming appearance](#). She was seen walking with a limp and had fresh wounds from a bullhook or other sharp object.

The USDA has cited the Commerford Zoo over 50 times for failing to adhere to the minimum standards required by the Animal Welfare Act. Violations that pertain to the elephants alone include: failure to have an employee or attendant present during periods of public contact with the elephants; failure to give adequate veterinary care to treat an excessive accumulation of necrotic skin on the elephants' heads; failure to maintain the elephant transport trailer; inadequate drainage in the elephant enclosure; failure to dispose of a large accumulation of soiled hay, bedding, and feces behind the elephant barn; and failure to keep an elephant under the control of a handler while she was giving rides.

The Commerford Zoo has merely kept Minnie alive; nothing about her life at the Commerford Zoo resembles what is necessary to meet her basic physical, psychological, and biological needs.

Where would Minnie go?

Both U.S. elephant sanctuaries—the Elephant Sanctuary in Tennessee (TES) and the Performing Animal Welfare Society ARK 2000 (PAWS)—have agreed to provide Minnie with lifelong care and refuge at no cost to the Commerford Zoo. They specialize in meeting the biological, physical, and psychological needs of elephants.

Isn't a sanctuary just another form of captivity?

At the AZA-certified [TES](#), elephants can roam freely in one of three areas that comprise a 2,700-acre habitat with year-round access to the outdoors, including spring-fed lakes, pastures, and woodlands. At [PAWS](#), elephants have access to many acres of space and topographic features and stimuli required for their emotional and physical wellbeing, such as trees, hills, valleys, vast openings, pools, mud, shrubs, and other natural objects. Elephants at both sanctuaries are

allowed to form herds, similar to what occurs in the wild, with the freedom to choose how they spend their time and with whom.

In contrast, at the Commerford Zoo, Minnie has little to no freedom of movement, is controlled by a bullhook, lives in a climate that is inappropriate for elephants, is now without the company of other elephants, and has a history of receiving inadequate veterinary care.

As PAWS [writes](#), “A true sanctuary respects the integrity of individual animals, providing safe, healthy, and secure refuge in enclosures specifically designed for the unique animals whom they support.”

Is it true, as the Commerford Zoo claims, that Minnie is a beloved member of their family who “would not know what to do” in a sanctuary?

We don't doubt that the proprietors of the Commerford Zoo are fond of Minnie in their own way, but her relationship with them is defined by servitude and made possible by a bullhook and other coercive or violent modes of control.

As Dr. Joyce Poole and other elephant experts who have supported Minnie's release to a sanctuary [make clear](#), in order to survive and thrive, elephants need freedom, and they need the company of other elephants. The life the Commerford Zoo has forced Minnie to lead has only caused her harm, and the Commerford Zoo's property comes nowhere close to providing her with the freedom, enrichment, and opportunity for healing that a sanctuary can. In sanctuaries, elephants with histories even [worse](#) than Minnie's have thrived because, for the first time in years and with no bullhook in sight, they have ample space to roam, socialize, and make choices about where to go and with whom.