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REPORT ON THE BEHAVIORAL DEVELOPMENT OF THREE  
CAPTIVE BORN AFRICAN ELEPHANT CALVES

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**ABSTRACT:** The San Diego Wild Animal Park in San Pasqual, California, had three successful African elephant (*Loxodonta africana*) births in 1982: "Tavi" (female) born 29 January, "Margo" (female) born 24 May and "Tsavo" (male) born 22 June (Lash, 1982). The gestation period for the calves was estimated to be from 21 to 21 3/4 months. By the end of their first year, each calf had grown over one foot in height to approximately 49 inches. Although they eat solid foods, the calves continue to nurse regularly at about 1 hour intervals for a duration of 1 1/2 minutes over the 8-hour period of observation.

The calves live as part of a group of elephants consisting of their 3 dams and 4 other females (aged 14-32 years). Vocalizations and associated behaviors of the adult African elephants were described by Berg (1983). Until August 1982, the calves were housed with their dams in relatively small outdoor daytime enclosures with a varying number of the other female elephants as introductions were made. At this time the entire group was released into their larger outdoor daytime enclosure which is an oval shaped area, 190.6 m long by 68.6 m wide, surrounded by a moat. This enclosure contains the essentials for a captive environment: fresh water for drinking, calf and adult pools for bathing, a mud hole for wallowing, dirt for dusting, structures for shade and to rub against, grass to supplement their diet, sufficient space for exercise, plus logs, branches and stumps for exploration, manipulation, and stimulation (see Figure 1).

The calves' behavior has been systematically documented since birth; the basic research value of this project is to set a norm for calf development. The calves' physical development and coordination used in executing their behaviors over time has been documented and filmed for analysis. In addition, since this group of seven unrelated females has lived together since the Park opened in 1972 (except one who joined them in 1976), they have organized themselves into a unit which exhibits behaviors similar to what Cynthia Moss (1981) has described in a "family unit" of free-living elephants in east Africa; thus the calves' social development is also being closely monitored for comparison to those in the wild.

From the beginning weeks of life, each calf appeared to replicate the dam's (or another female's) individual behaviors at each stage where it was able to coordinate the necessary movements. These behaviors included: bringing vegetation to the mouth, drinking with the trunk, bathing, mudding, digging with the trunk and forefeet, dusting, lying on the ground coating the body with dirt, rubbing on structures, exploration and manipulations.



Figure 1. From left to right are Tsavo, Margo, Sabu, Tavi, and Sharpie in the background. San Diego Wild Animal Park, San Pasqual, California USA.

From the first weeks of life, the calves were much more adept with their trunks than has been related in the literature on calves growing up in the wild. One important requirement for captive calves is that they have things to manipulate and climb on (small chunky branches, logs, stumps, etc.) to assist them in their muscular development and coordination (including, if not especially, the trunk) and provide them and the older elephants mental stimulation.

As occurs in free-living elephant calves (Moss, 1975), the calves at the Park are beginning to learn their group's social behavior through interactions with older members of the unit. In addition to interactions with the dam and other females, including being disciplined, 70-75% of each calf's day is spent in body contact or actual interaction with one or both other calves. This multiple calf situation provides them a means to practice some of the social behaviors they learn from the adults. Many of the calves' interactions take the form of various play behaviors such as running and chasing, stopping in a "mock charge" posture, butting and bumping, playing "tug of war" with a branch, rolling and tumbling, and trunk-wrapping followed by a pushing match. Their social play is often overseen by one of the older females, and, when their play apparently becomes "too rough" the calves are separated.

This is just a brief look into the behavior developing in the calves at the Park. The first phase of this entire project will be published in the near future. Since the elephant calf goes through a long development period, there are many important facets of their behavior yet to be learned by both the calves and the Researcher.

**Editors' note:** The calves Tavi and Tsavo were moved in October 1983 to San Diego Zoo, and then to China in the fall of 1984. Margo was sold to a private owner but is residing at Tacoma Zoo, Tacoma, Washington.

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