

Are elephants willing to work for access to a shower?

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Background

- Huge contrast between the complex lives of wild elephants and the often barren and static conditions experienced by zoo elephants.
- Environmental enrichment (EE) can be used to improve the welfare of zoo animals.

Aim

To define and assess EE for Asian elephants in zoos, using the maximum price paid concept. The EE tested was a shower.



Method

Two female Asian elephants, Bua and Saonoi, had to lift weights, by pulling a rope, to get access to the shower. The test was repeated with increased weights, until the elephant had reached her maximum price paid. As the comparator reward, 5 kg of hay was used.



Results

- Bua paid 1.61 and Saonoi 1.47 times more for access to 5 kg of hay than for access to the shower (fig. 1).
- Saonoi used the shower to a large extent whereas Bua's usage was rather low (fig. 2).

Conclusions

- Maximum price paid can be used to assess EE for zoo elephants.
- A shower might be a good EE for some elephants, but individual differences can be large.

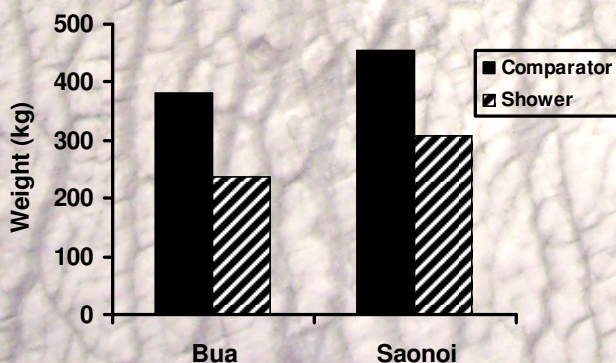


Fig 1. Maximum price paid by the elephants for access to a shower and 5 kg of hay.

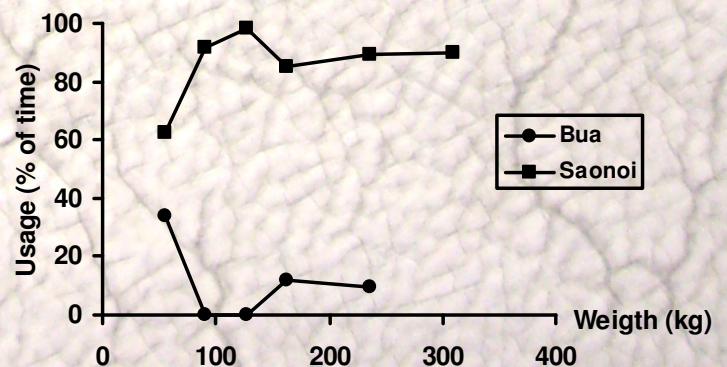


Fig 2. Usage of the shower, presented as percent of time, during the first 15 min at each weight level.