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## ***African Elephant 98 Fact Sheet (2/1/98)***

### **African Elephant** (*Loxodonta africana*)

**Description:** The African elephant is the largest land animal in the world. It can be 11 feet tall and weigh five to seven tons. The African elephant is bigger than the Asian elephant and has larger, fan-like ears. While female Asian elephants do not grow tusks, many African female elephants do have tusks. The African elephant also has a sloping forehead, a sway back and a trunk with two finger-like projections, one on top and one on bottom, instead of one as in the Asian elephant.

**Range:** The African elephants' range crosses many nations of Africa, from south of the Sahara Desert to northern South Africa.

**Habitat:** African elephants live in a wide variety of habitats from the desert regions of western Niger and the Etosha Pans of Namibia to the grassy savannahs of East Africa westward into the forests of Central Africa.

**Diet:** The African elephant eats between 300 and 500 pounds of vegetation every day. It consumes a widely varied diet of grass, tree bark and fruits. Soils are often consumed for their mineral content.

**Social Organization:** Elephants live in tightly organized herds led by a matriarch. The matriarch is usually an older female, and the herd is made up of her female relatives and offspring. Many young males remain with the matriarch's herd, but others may leave to join all-male herds. Adult African elephants have no natural enemies, and the entire herd helps defend the calves. Cows bear one calf, weighing approximately 200 pounds, which mature at about ten years of age. Most of its growth is obtained by fifteen years of age; however, it continues to grow throughout its lifetime.

**Conservation Status:** The African elephant is listed as an Appendix I species by CITES, as a vulnerable species in the IUCN Red Book, and as threatened by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. There are an estimated 600,000 elephants in Africa, but at the current rate of poaching, it could be extinct by the year 2000.

**Threats to Survival:** The biggest single threat to the African elephant is poaching for its ivory tusks. Although the 600,000 left in the wild may seem to be fairly numerous, their position is precarious. Poachers have killed most of the older elephants for their larger tusks, and the loss of a

matriarch may throw a herd into confusion. Orphaned elephants have a poor survival rate, and while elephants reach their prime at about 40 years of age, the average age has dropped to only 24 years old.

Page 2

Threatened by poachers and encroaching domestic livestock, some elephants face overcrowding in parks and reserves. A herd of elephants requires an enormous territory to forage for food.

**Zoo Programs - SSP:** The African elephant SSP was begun in August 1990. One of its first priorities is the establishment of more facilities for the handling of dangerous African bull elephants. There are about 122 cows and 13 bull African elephants in the program.

**Conservation:** One of the most important conservation measures taken for the African elephant was its listing as an Appendix I species under CITES, ending almost all trade in ivory. Increased guard protection in national parks and reserves and a forceful policy of shooting poachers on sight are some measures African nations are using to deter poaching.

**Education:** A number of environmental and conservation organizations, such as Wildlife Conservation International, have education programs about ivory and ivory poaching.

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**rev. 2/98**