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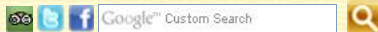
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South African vets succeed in massive elephant tusk extraction after third procedure at Polish zoo

1 August 2013

Upon invitation from the Pozna Zoo in Poland, the National Zoological Gardens of South Africa's research veterinarian and expert in elephant anaesthesia, Dr Adrian Tordiffe, and veterinary dentist, Dr Gerhard Steenkamp, undertook the task of performing a complete tusk extraction on an elephant at the Pozna Zoo. The 14-year-old, 5.2-ton African elephant bull, Ninio, had fractured his tusk in 2009 and zoo staff treated the affected area. He however damaged the tusk again early in 2012 and it became infected, causing pain and some swelling to his face.

Recently, Drs Tordiffe and Steenkamp again returned to Poland following two previous visits to complete the full tusk extraction process. The team had previously managed to drain an abscess that had developed around the root of the elephant's left tusk and were also able to remove the core of the tusk. They, however, did not have sufficient time to remove all the damaged and infected ivory as there was concern about the duration of the operation and the time that Ninio spent under anaesthesia.

For this third and final procedure, Ninio was again anaesthetised and positioned onto his right side to expose the left tusk. Dr Steenkamp got to work separating the tusk from its socket in preparation for the complete extraction

After more than three hours, Dr Steenkamp managed to loosen the tusk enough to pull it out in two pieces using a winch. "The tusk was obviously deformed by the chronic infection but all the pieces were successfully removed. At its base it had a diameter of 20 cm. It could well be the largest tusk (in diameter) ever extracted from a living elephant for medical reasons", says Dr Tordiffe.

The whole procedure took 3 hours and 45 minutes.

Ninio recovered remarkably from the surgery and started eating within a few hours. The team was delighted with his progress and his response to the various pain medications given. The following day he was interacting with the other elephants and his keepers. "The healing process will still take some time; about 18 to 24 months for his tusk socket to close up completely. In the meanwhile, the socket will be flushed out daily", adds Dr Tordiffe.

Dr Steenkamp has worked on elephant tusks for the past 14 years. He said that this is by far the most challenging extraction that he has performed as most of the equipment used had to be specially developed for an elephant of this size.

The procedure was filmed by the BBC for the programme "Operation Wild" which is expected to be aired in 2014.

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