Black Beauty Ranch, she
While at Slater Park Zoo,

From visitors. Now, in

Opposite: Already close

friends, Fanny (right) and

Conga, enjoy the peace

and freedom of their spa,

bears were kept in one barren

cage on a cement slab; their small ce-

partment of Agriculture (USDA),

tour the zoo with Mr. Ribaudo

and helped prioritize

finding solutions.

The next month, The HSUS

submitted a formal report to the

Pawtucket Recreation Depart-

ment describing the deficiencies

we had found at Slater Park Zoo

and suggesting several options

for improvement available to the

city. The first was to bring the

zoo up to the standards that must

be satisfied for accreditation by

the American Association of Zo-

ological Parks and Aquariums

(AZPA). This would involve a

major overhaul of the facilities

and the hiring of professional cu-

rators. The second was to convert

the zoo into a nature center or

children’s zoo with no exotic ani-

mals. The final option, preferred

by The HSUS, was to convert the

Park Zoo in Providence, Rhode Island, when

he conducted an evaluation in 1990.

It was clear that the city

lacked the financial resources to

upgrade the zoo or hire the kind

of professional staff recommended by The

HSUS and other consultants. Any other

option would require finding new homes

for the zoo’s animals, including Fanny and

the Himalayan bears.

While the political debate on the zoo’s

fate continued within the city council and

mayor’s office, conditions at the zoo wors-

ened. In July 1991 a rhea (an ostrich-like

bird) was gored to death by an aoudad (a

wild sheep). Four days later, six fallow

deer escaped from an exhibit in which

Newcomer’s pool.” Elephants are highly sensi-

tive, intelligent, and social individuals; Fanny surely suffered from her confine-

ment and isolation.

In response to HSUS pressure, local

political figures and media representa-
tives toured the zoo with Mr. Ribaudo

in May 1991 and asked zoo and
city officials many pointed ques-
tions. This tour resulted in exten-

sive press coverage of problems at

the zoo and helped prioritize

finding solutions.

In most zoo areas, visitors had easy access

to the animals, who were getting frequent

handouts of candy, popcorn, and other in-

appropriate food. The condition of three

Himalayan bears, one male and two females, attested to their

being fed a steady stream of junk food by visitors, in addition to their zoo diet of dog

food. Whereas free-living Himalayan bear

normally weigh 100-250 pounds, these

bears were grossly overweight. Later each was

found to weigh nearly 500 pounds. Al-

so, the bears were kept in one barren

cage on a cement slab; their small es-

seum, Fanny had been captured in the wild

in 1953; Ringling Brothers Barnum and

Bailey Circus had given her to Slater Park

Zoo when she was five. For more than

thirty-five years, she had lived at the zoo

with only rare, brief periods of elephant

companionship. She had spent much of that
time chained inside a small building.

Although her small outdoor area included

a depressed in the ground intended to

serve as a pool, Mr. Ribaudo recalls: “In

my dozens of visits to Slater Park Zoo over

two and a half years, I never saw water in

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Black Beauty Ranch. Fanny began her thirty-nine-hour journey to a new home for Fanny, and officials’ reluctance to lose her as a attraction, delayed definitive action. Meanwhile we began searching for new homes for Fanny and the bears.

In June 1992 John W. Grandy, Ph.D., HSUS vice president, Wildlife and Habitat Protection, wrote to the city council. He repeated HSUS objections to conditions at Slater Park Zoo and conveyed our offer to pay for Fanny’s relocation to a suitable sanctuary. In July Mr. Ribaudo reiterated our offer to the Pawtucket mayor and expressed our willingness to assist in finding suitable new homes for the other animals as well.

In January 1993 we mailed our Rhode Island members an Action Alert calling for the zoo’s closing. Soon after, the Pawtucket City Council unanimously voted to close the zoo. In February the mayor formally accepted the council’s decision and appointed a relocation committee, which included Mr. Ribaudo, to research options for relocating the zoo’s animals.

In May the committee chose Black Beauty Ranch in Murchinson, Texas—a 620-acre animal sanctuary run by the Fund for Animals—as the most suitable new home for Fanny. Black Beauty Ranch had a new elephant barn, and “Conga,” a twenty-one-year-old female African elephant, was one of the ranch’s residents. An animal sanctuary, the facility is familiar with elephant behavior believed Conga and Fanny would be compatible.

Upon arrival in her one-acre enclosure, Fanny walked to a pond, drew water into her trunk, and sprayed herself. Later, in her corral in the elephant barn, she met Conga. As related by Christopher Byrne, manager of Black Beauty Ranch, within minutes Fanny and Conga began sharing hay and intertwining their trunks.

Three weeks later Slater Park’s Himalayan bears were removed for transport to Wildlife Images Rehabilitation and Education Center. Located in Grants Pass, Oregon, this animal sanctuary is noted for its expertise in caring for bears. With the assistance of two veterinarians, the bears were placed in separate ventilated cages for the cross-country journey. Tragically, just five hours’ distance from Wildlife Images, the male bear was found dead in his cage. The apparent cause of death, as later determined by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Forensic Laboratory in Ashland, Oregon, was acute failure of the pancreas induced by poor diet, obesity, and the stress of transport. The two female bears reached Wildlife Images safely.

Mr. Ribaudo and Gulf States Regional Director James Noe visited Fanny in July and found her doing well. On a healthier diet, she has already lost some excess weight. She and Conga socialize daily.

Dave Siddon, director of Wildlife Images, reports that the female Himalayan bears are also doing well. Like Fanny, they are adjusting to a healthier diet.

The Slater Park relocation committee has found new homes for the zoo’s sheep, goats, horses, cows, and lone ox. Soon it will be relocating the zoo’s three spider monkeys to Wildlife Rescue and Rehabilitation Center in San Antonio, Texas—a facility inspected and approved by Messrs. Noe and Ribaudo. The Pawtucket City Council has not yet determined the new function of the zoo’s site, but there is strong support for recreating a farm that occupied the site in the late seventeenth century. This facility would have a few domestic animals, at most, as part of the historical farm setting.

The process of closing Slater Park Zoo and relocating its animals has been arduous. “I have never before been involved with an issue so time-consuming, so intense, so draining, and so rewarding,” Mr. Ribaudo comments.

“Today few cities are getting into the zoo business,” says Richard Fairnante, HSUS director of captive wildlife, “and many of them will be looking to get out—for the same reasons that existed at Slater Park. A zoo is a luxury item in the budget.” He points out, however, that many “Slater Parks” remain. Of the 1,600 animal exhibitors licensed by the USDA, only 160 are AAZPA-accredited zoos; of the remaining 1,440 exhibitors, nearly 200 are municipally owned zoos.

Ultimately, public zoos are the responsibility of their respective communities, which determine whether or not a zoo will close and where any displaced animals will go. Even so, the Slater Park Zoo experience shows that, working together, animal advocates can convince communities to change, even halt, “business as usual” at facilities that exhibit animals. Most of the zoo’s animals have now been moved to facilities better equipped to meet their physical and psychological needs. Fanny and all the other animals relocated from Slater Park have the chance for a better life. We hope that other municipal zoos will stop to reassess how they care for animals.