

Let Them Roam



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Media Statement: Animal Law Reform South Africa, the EMS Foundation and Chief Stephen Fritz

A historic legal encounter is set down for the 19, 20 and 21 May 2026 in the Gauteng High Court (Pretoria), when an application will be heard to release three elephants, Lammie, Ramadiba and Mopane from the Johannesburg Zoo. The application seeks to have a team of experts work with the elephants to re-integrate them into a wild environment in a sanctuary.

[Animal Law Reform South Africa](#), the [EMS Foundation](#) and [Chief Stephen Fritz](#) will be arguing that the Constitution as well as many statutes places obligations on the zoo to ensure the welfare and well-being of the elephants is properly addressed. The conditions in which they are currently being kept fail to meet their obligations and the Elephants' fundamental needs. In light of their current circumstances, the applicants argue that it is unconscionable for the elephants to remain in the Zoo.

David Bilchitz, a board member of Animal Law Reform South Africa (and Professor of Law at the University of Johannesburg and the University of Reading (UK)), explains that "this will be the first time a South African court has been asked to decide if the conditions in which these elephants are being kept meets the state's legal obligations. In our view, supported by the top local and international experts, the elephant's welfare and well-being are being seriously compromised by their continuing captivity in conditions far removed from their natural habitats."

The applicants together with the experts contend that the elephants are sentient beings who usually live in complex social structures with wide-ranging stimulation and can walk up to 40

km per day. In the zoo, they have very little stimulation and are confined in an enclosure not much bigger than a soccer field.

Michele Pickover, Executive Director of the EMS Foundation, explains: “As a result of the unnatural condition in which they are being kept, the elephants are displaying signs of severe psychological distress, frustration and boredom. They display apathy, listlessness as well as disturbing behaviours such as swaying from side to side, and playing with their food as there is nothing else to do.”

Chief Fritz, senior chief of the Khoi community, also argues that the continuing captivity of the elephants demonstrates disrespect for the customs and culture of the Khoi people who revere elephants. Continuing their captivity is an affront to their value system which places emphasis on the interconnectedness of the well-being of humans and elephants.

The parties are urging the Gauteng High Court (Pretoria) to order the relocation of Lammie, Mopane, and Ramadiba to an elephant rehabilitation centre located in the Limpopo Province. Under the careful and expert watch of a team of international experts, the elephants will be provided with the opportunity to re-integrate into an environment where they can give expression to their physical, emotional and social needs.

The possibility of successful rehabilitation is attested to by the events in 2024 in which the South African government agreed to retire African Elephant Duma (previously named Charlie) from the Pretoria Zoo. Duma, who spent 40 years in captivity, and who was the last elephant in South Africa's only national zoo, is now flourishing in the wild, powerfully demonstrating that Elephants can be successfully rehabilitated and live out their lives in conditions in which they can flourish.

David Bilchitz concludes: “In summary, our message is to let these elephants roam and express their natural behaviours. That is not only the right thing to do but what the law in South Africa now requires in its recognition that animals are sentient creatures whose individual lives deserve respect.”

For Further Information and Queries:

EMS Foundation: Michele Pickover michele@emsfoundation.org.za and Megan Carr megan@emsfoundation.org.za

Animal Law Reform South Africa: David Bilchitz davidb@saifac.org.za and Misha Dhupelia communications@animallawreform.org.