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Without space to roam, the world's biggest land animals do not thrive — so what should happen to those in Europe's zoos? One sanctuary has an answer.

Kariba is an elephant. She is also a guinea pig.

Soon, her owner says, she is set to leave her home in Belgium and travel by lorry to Portugal. She will become a founding member of Europe's first large-scale elephant sanctuary.

The story of the Pangea Trust sanctuary is a story of the unexpected. It is also the story of how the world's biggest land animals have been capable of frustrating humans' plans.

Until 20,000 years or so ago, Europe had native elephants, a straight-tusked species so big that each one could provide enough food for 100 Neanderthals for a month.

These went extinct through hunting or climate change or both. Elephants from north Africa, brought by Hannibal for war, fared even worse.

In medieval and early modern times, elephants started being shipped to Europe from Asia and Africa as trophies for kings and at least one pope. In the 19th century, elephants were among the key exhibits of the first zoos. They kept arriving: Kariba was taken from the wild in Zimbabwe in the 1980s.

But in recent years scientists established that these creatures cannot thrive in zoos. The median lifespan for African elephants in a Kenyan national park was three times that of those in European zoos. Asian elephants working in Burma's logging industry had double the life expectancy of their captive cousins. Meanwhile, many European countries have banned circuses from using elephants as performers. That has created a question: what should happen to Europe's 600-odd captive elephants? Many are elderly. As members of the group die, they leave lone individuals. In October last year, Aalborg Zoo in Denmark euthanised its two remaining female African elephants, Tanja and Mai, because Tanja was ill and the zoo didn't want Mai, herself unwell, to be alone after her death. Had Pangea Trust's reserve been running, says its director Kate Moore, Mai could have retired to Portugal instead. Zoos "have a problem that we can help them with".

One of the loudest voices for rehoming elephants has been Damian Aspinall, who inherited two zoos from his father. In 2021, he announced he would "rewild" his herd of 13 elephants from Kent to Kenya. (This has not yet gone ahead and he has since been suspended as a trustee of Howletts Wild Animal Trust, which currently houses the animals, amid an inquiry by the UK charities regulator into its governance and finances.)

Pangea's first move was to find somewhere to rehome elephants. Then it found the animals themselves. Only now is it revealing its intentions to the public. Unlike Aspinall, who is outspoken that zoos including his own should wind down, Pangea carefully avoids criticising those on whose collaboration it depends.

Finding the 1,000-acre site was hard. The land had to be big and contiguous, without a public road running alongside it (this is not a visitor attraction), and with sufficient water to provide for the elephants. "The number of sites that I went to that had no water was really soul-destroying," says Moore. "It's really easy to rehome big cats. It's really hard to rehome elephants."

In Italy, the climate was right, but the land too fragmented. The Iberian peninsula emerged as the best hope. Moore found grazing land in the Alentejo, a beautiful backwater two hours' drive from Lisbon, with marble quarries and the one-time country residence of Portuguese kings. Its climate is suitably warm; the area has lower wildfire risk than other parts of Portugal.

One of the most intriguing things, I found when I visited in March, is that the project is largely uncontroversial. In the nearest village, Vila Viçosa, most people had heard of the elephant sanctuary (or "the elephant cemetery", as one couple wrongly called it).

Most thought it might inject some energy and tourists into the town. "People made a lot of questions: when? Why? But we don't have any negative answers," said Inácio Esperança, the mayor. "People say to me, 'When are the elephants coming?'" For the mayor, elephants were far preferable to the alternative. "The territory is beautiful and solar panels are horrible." "We have a lot of space that can be directed to conservation," says another local mayor, João Grilo. Elephants are welcome, "as long as they don't come walking in the street!".

Pangea's backers, including the charities Born Free and the Brigitte Bardot Foundation, are inspired by existing reserves like The Elephant Sanctuary in Tennessee. The elephants will be able to forage, bathe and socialise "on their own terms". There is a barn, but other sanctuaries have found that "elephants just want to be outside all day", perhaps coming in on cold nights, says Moore.

The elephants will have 850 acres to roam — more than 200 times the size of Tierpark Berlin zoo's elephant enclosure or 28 times that of the UK's Whipsnade Zoo. "Elephants need large spaces," says Keith Lindsay, a biologist and adviser to Pangea. "They're not just big, they're intelligent and need control over their lives or they become frustrated."

In 2022, Lindsay co-authored a report saying elephants needed at least 100ha (247 acres) of diverse habitat. Compare that to the UK's new zoo standards, which demand that outdoor enclosures for five or fewer elephants be at least 2ha — and gives zoos until 2040 to reach this.

Pangea will mostly be closed to visitors. Rewilding will be secondary to animal welfare. But there are limits to how natural the setting can be. Breeding will not be encouraged: males and females will initially be kept separate.

Portugal's conservation institute was initially "totally shocked" by the whole plan, says Moore. "I think they laughed at us. Now they champion us." Legally, Pangea falls into a grey area. It couldn't operate under a zoo licence, because it didn't want to be a zoo. It couldn't use a licence for releasing native wildlife, because elephants are not native. It had to wait for a new sanctuary law. But the national government is supportive.

Pangea has raised about half of its estimated £7.8mn budget for 2025-27. Overall, however, it can take only around two dozen of Europe's 600-plus elephants. Maybe you have to start somewhere.

One of Pangea's neighbours, a Dutch dairy farmer called Johannes Baars, saw the upside of the project. For one thing, the mayor had also agreed to pay for the upkeep of the access road. For another, Baars' three children are not interested in taking over his business. "Maybe if [the elephant sanctuary] needs more land, I can sell them my land."