

Humans have long been fascinated by elephants, the largest land animal in the modern world. Social animals that live in herds, elephants are native to both Africa and Asia. Their large ears, long trunk, and long life span have made elephants one of the most captivating creatures on Earth. Our long-standing interest in elephants has led to several beliefs about surprising elephant behaviors.

Elephants Are Aware of Approaching Death One of the popular beliefs is that when elephants become old and weak, they know that they are nearing the end of their lives. They demonstrate this by breaking away from their herds and going off alone to certain locations often found near bodies of water—so called “elephant graveyards” —to die alone. The idea that old elephants seem aware that they will die soon is supported by the discovery of many sites containing bones exclusively of elderly elephants.

Representing Objects through Art Additionally, elephants seem to have artistic ability. Elephants can be taught to hold a paintbrush in their trunk and use it to paint on a canvas. Some elephants have been known to paint drawings that represent recognizable things: flowers, other elephants, even themselves. This talent makes elephants the only animal other than humans to produce art representing the world around them.

Fear of Mice Finally, it has long been believed that elephants have a fear of mice. In 77 C.E., the Roman philosopher and scientist Pliny the Elder wrote that elephants are more afraid of mice, small mammals that can do elephants no harm, than of the much more dangerous animals with which elephants normally share an environment, such as lions or tigers. In a recent scientific experiment in which a herd of elephants was confronted with several mice, the elephants backed away from the mice and left the area to avoid them.

NARRATOR Now listen to part of a lecture on the topic you just read about.

FEMALE PROFESSOR Elephants are fascinating, but the beliefs you just read about are based on misunderstandings of elephant behavior. First, we should not assume that old elephants are aware they will die soon just because they break away from their herds. There’s a very practical reason why old elephants leave their herds. Ya see, when elephants get old enough, their teeth become worn down and they have difficulty chewing. So elderly elephants wander away from their herd to look for softer vegetation that’s easier to eat. Softer vegetation is usually found near water. That’s why many old elephants graze near water and eventually die there, in areas we’ve come to call elephant graveyards.

Second, the issue of whether elephants have artistic ability. If you watch elephants trained to paint, you’ll notice that a human trainer is stroking the elephant’s ears whenever the elephant moves the paintbrush. Elephant ears are very sensitive, and touching them in certain ways can be used to train the elephants to do tricks. The trainer teaches the elephant to remember certain patterns of paintbrush strokes, and then encourages the elephant to repeat the brushstrokes by touching its ears. So an elephant using a paintbrush is just painting lines it’s been trained to paint. It doesn’t necessarily know that the lines are supposed to represent flowers or animals.

Third, Pliny [pliny] the Elder and others are misinterpreting the reaction of elephants to mice. Elephants that react fearfully to mice aren’t reacting to the mice themselves, but to the fact that the mice are unfamiliar to them. Being cautious about unfamiliar animals is a natural instinct. But elephants that live in environments where mice are common, like elephants in zoos, don’t react with fear to the mice. Clearly, once elephants become familiar with mice and realize that they don’t pose a threat, they don’t mind

them.

Summarize the points made in the lecture, being sure to explain how they challenge the specific points made in the reading passage.

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Movies and television have more negative effects than positive effects on the way young people behave. Use specific reasons and examples to support your answer.