

Alert Circles

By Priscilla Cobb

There's a video online from the San Diego Zoo Safari Park, showing five African elephants on Monday morning April 14, 2025 when a 5.2 earthquake strikes, shaking the earth under their feet. Feeling the tremors (like the vibrations of animals running), they sense danger. Immediately, they all gather together and form a circle – the adults on the outer ring, facing outward, circling the young elephants at the circle's center. Eyes open, trunks waving in the air to decipher the danger. When a young male elephant tries to take a place at the outer circle with the elders, the elephants use their trunks to pat him and nudge him back into a protected place.

The conservation biologists who study elephant behavior call it an “alert circle.” Its purpose is to respond to danger by bunching together, encircling the most vulnerable, to protect the young and each other from the threat. “It's a pretty democratic society,” the elephant expert explains. “Everyone has a say, and everyone can suggest a course of action. But when there's trouble, everyone will pay attention to the matriarch and do what her behavior recommends.”

Alert circles are what we're in desperate need of at this moment. Where were the elephants when masked men surrounded Rumeysa Ozturk on the street in front of her house, captured her and transported her to detention hundreds of miles away? Had the elephants been there to encircle her, to wave their trunks and point their tusks at the ICE officers, to pat and nudge Ozturk away from danger, they could have dispelled the threat. The men would have run. The elephants would have carried Ozturk to her dinner and escorted her home. They would have formed a circle in the street outside her house, remaining there as long as the danger lasted.

We need so many alert circles, so many elephants right now. We need them for the graduate students, the journalists, the colleges, the scientists, the foreign born – no matter their immigration status – the protesters, the trans people, and the government workers. If we jump up and down all at once or run through the streets hard enough and long enough, will the elephants all over the world feel the tremors through their feet? Will they run to encircle everyone who's threatened, use their trunks to pat them and nudge them into the middle of a circle of warm, gray elephant flanks, their ears flapping, their trunks raised – alert to all the dangers?