

January 29, 2009

To the Los Angeles City Council:

I am writing to urge you to permanently close the Los Angeles Zoo's elephant exhibit and send its lone male elephant, Billy, to an elephant life time care centre. I have worked for over 20 years in elephant conservation throughout Asia, including rescue and rehabilitation of elephants and the fight against poachers for ivory. I am founder and executive director of the Wildlife Trust of India, author of six books on Indian wildlife and member of several specialist groups of the World Conservation Union (IUCN) including the Asian Elephant Specialist Group. For the past ten years, I have also been the Honorary Wildlife Warden of New Delhi and am a past recipient of the Rufford Award for Nature Conservation for my work in combating poaching of Asian Elephants.

My experience in working to save elephants in their natural habitats and observing elephants abroad in zoos has led me to the firm conclusion that captivity does not, in the case of elephants, equal conservation.

Elephants are highly social and intelligent beings that lead a nomadic life between large tracts of habitats connected by migratory corridors. In the wild, Asian elephants live in highly developed social groupings where strong family relationships are prominent. The conditions in most zoos across the world, where elephants are kept in zoo yards of a few acres or less and forced to live in small groups of unrelated elephants are inhumane and exceedingly cruel to elephants. In addition, zoos do not provide elephants with an environment necessary for exhibiting natural behavior, and the resulting frustration can lead to the development of repetitive behaviors such as swaying, rocking and a type of stereotypic head bobbing.

Late last year, the American journal Science, known for its rigorous peer review, published a study documenting that elephants born in zoos die decades before their counterparts in native lands. For zoo-born Asian elephants, the mean lifespan was 18.9 years versus 41.7 years for elephants in a logging camp in Burma, where elephants are allowed to live in a more natural state. Research also shows that elephant captive breeding programs fail, and in the rare event that the zoo produces a calf, it cannot be released back into the wild.

The recognition that the needs of elephants cannot be met in a zoo environment has led progressive institutions in Europe and North America to close or phase out their elephant exhibits. This is a step in the right direction.

Equally importantly, the survival of elephants in the wild does not rest on their display and breeding in zoos. Rather, the major threats to elephants in Asia are habitat destruction and illegal poaching and hunting. Asian elephants desperately need to be conserved in their home range states, not shipped abroad under the guise of a 'conservation breeding program', which will have no long-term benefits for the species. In addition, the shortened lifespan of elephants in zoos and the failure of breeding programs have resulted in a worldwide zoo population that is not sustainable and relies on the continued import of elephants from range countries. By paying top dollar to cash-poor countries for elephants, Western zoos are adding to, not abating, threats to wild populations by creating a commercial motivation for their capture and shipment abroad.

The best way for the Los Angeles Zoo and other Western zoos to assist in the conservation of the Asian elephant is to support field programs in Asia that preserve habitat and protect elephants from poaching. The Zoo's proposed elephant breeding program will have no conservation benefit and will actually harm elephants by holding them in conditions that will continue to fail to meet their biological and physical needs.

For all of these reasons, I urge the City of Los Angeles to stop the expenditure of \$43 million on a new elephant exhibit and vote instead for permanent closure and the transfer of Billy to a life time care centre or sanctuary without delay.

Sincerely,

Vivek Menon
Executive Director, Wildlife Trust of India
And member Asian Elephant Specialist Group. IUCN SSC