

L.A. Zoo needs to give its elephants a break

By Les Schobert

The growing national debate over zoos' ability to adequately provide for elephants demonstrates wide public concern about current conditions for Earth's largest land mammal. Now the controversy has landed in Los Angeles.

The Los Angeles Zoo is planning to build a \$16 million, two-acre elephant exhibit that, relative to zoo industry advances, is already outdated. The North Carolina Zoological Park built its three-acre enclosure 25 years ago, and is currently increasing to six acres. The Oakland Zoo provides six acres and is looking to expand again. Other zoos, realizing they were incapable of providing adequate space, simply closed their elephant exhibits.

Considering that elephants are migratory animals, which, in the wild, can walk 30 miles or more a day with their families, a two-acre exhibit, subdivided into three yards, is obviously unfit. It makes no sense for the city to squander millions in taxpayer money on an enclosure that simply does not provide the space required to keep elephants physically and psychologically healthy.

Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa has expressed concern about whether the zoo can provide appropriate space for the elephants, and wisely placed a hold on funding for the planned exhibit, pending an evaluation.

"I have been reviewing the elephants' situation at the Los Angeles Zoo and have concerns that warrant an independent review," Villaraigosa said in a press release. "I want an insightful study on the whole issue so we can do what is best for the zoo and, especially, for the elephants."

Interestingly, zoos have failed to produce any scientific evidence showing that small enclosures of one, two or even three acres are sufficient for meeting elephants' complex needs. In fact, existing evidence points to the opposite: Elephants in zoos are suffering and dying prematurely from problems unique to captivity.

Inadequate zoo conditions such as hard, compacted dirt and concrete and a lack of space lead to a variety of serious and often lethal ailments for elephants,

including digestive troubles, reproductive problems, arthritis at an early age, neurotic behaviors such as swaying and rocking, and chronic foot infections. Zoo records indicate all these problems currently are found at Los Angeles Zoo.

Evidence that such maladies do not befall elephants in the wild has led growing numbers of experts to conclude that zoo life itself is killing them. How else can one explain that elephants in zoos live just half their natural 70-year life span?

Today, the cutting edge for elephant care is being set by two private facilities (PAWS in

California and The Elephant Sanctuary in Tennessee) that offer hundreds of acres of naturalistic habitat for elephants in a setting that meets their physical, psychological and social needs and even helps heal chronically infected feet. This is the model we must look to when planning a new space for elephants, rather than the small, antiquated enclosures of the past.

Such a facility would be in the best interest of the elephants and the public, who for the first time would have the truly educational experience of seeing healthy elephants displaying natural behaviors.

The city of Los Angeles has entered an exciting period of innovation and progressive ideas. Yet the Los Angeles Zoo is proposing a costly and inhumane elephant exhibit that is a relic from the past. A two-acre enclosure is a waste of public funds, and the elephants at the Los Angeles Zoo deserve a large, high-quality environment and nothing less.

--- Les Schobert has worked as a curator at major zoos including Los Angeles and North Carolina for 35 years.