

Santa Barbara New Press

April 30, 2006 12:00 AM

Elephants don't belong in zoos.

And any zoo officials who cite "conservation" or "education" -- the two tired-out standbys to justify captivity -- would be hard-pressed to make the case that elephants must be in zoos for their own good.

Simply put, even the largest of zoo spaces are too small for these animals.

If elephants from different parts of the world must be kept in any kind of captivity -- and that's a big if -- then putting them in wide-open sanctuaries is the only proper course of action.

There's been some attention to the conditions that elephants in circuses must endure. The industry is plagued by charges of mistreatment of not just elephants but also bears, tigers, primates and numerous other creatures.

Circus officials cage, chain up and force these animals to travel long distances as caravans go from town to town. The animals must perform to their human captors' satisfaction or put up with physical and emotional abuse.

Now, thankfully, there's also some attention focusing on elephants in zoos.

Assemblyman Lloyd Levine, a Democrat from Van Nuys, has authored legislation known as Assembly Bill 3027 that would require elephants to have at least 5 acres of space. He also wants to ban the use of bullhooks on elephants, as well as other cruel practices, according to a news report.

The assemblyman says, "It is clear that elephants throughout our state are suffering. We can turn our backs and look away, or we can work together to provide them with better lives.

"We must find a way to give these elephants the level of care they deserve -- not just in California, but nationwide."

The News-Press supports Mr. Levine's efforts to improve the lives of elephants in captivity in California.

That said, though, isn't California a more enlightened state that should look down on any captivity outside of large sanctuaries?

There's a long way to go.

Take the Santa Barbara Zoo's two Asian elephants -- named Sujatha and Little Mac by officials -- who've recently moved into a larger exhibit space that still is way too small.

Mr. Levine's bill would mandate 5 acres of space, while the Santa Barbara Zoo provides just a 13,000-square-foot space for the two animals.

Elliot Katz, a veterinarian who founded the nonprofit In Defense of Animals, tells the News-Press that this amount of space is "disastrous. As far as I'm concerned, as a vet, that's cruel and abusive to keep elephants in a space that small."

It certainly is.