

Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and California Assemblyman Lloyd Levine recently announced that Ruby, the African elephant at the L.A. Zoo, will be sent to the PAWS sanctuary here in Northern California. This is a significant achievement for those of us concerned about the plight of captive elephants' in this country, and marks the time for us to stop and reflect on where we are with our elephant campaign.

IDA has led the effort in the U.S. to compel zoos (and other holders of captive elephants) to improve conditions for these animals. There are over 600 elephants in this nation alone, a number of animals that cannot realistically be sent back to their countries of origin. Realizing that these animals must live in North America, we must strive for a much higher quality of life for them. The two U.S. sanctuaries (PAWS & TES) have raised the bar for the husbandry of captive elephants. It is time for all holders of captive elephants to follow their lead and provide similar conditions for their charges.

I am proud to say that we have had a dramatic impact on this issue in the past four years! The decision to move Ruby to PAWS is a banner victory for us since she is actually the poster child for this entire movement. The failed attempt to send her to live at the Knoxville Zoo in Tennessee to be integrated into their "herd" lit the fuse for this movement, which has since then successfully raised national awareness of this issue.

For a grassroots movement to become successful, it must become a national issue via the media (newspapers, television, and radio). We have been successful in all of these media forums, and now when reporters call they already know the issues and most are sympathetic to our cause. Let's look at our progress in the past four years:

The following zoos have closed their elephant exhibits or announced that they are phasing them out:

Bronx Zoo
San Francisco Zoo
Detroit Zoo
Lincoln Park Zoo
Santa Barbara Zoo
Gladys Porter Zoo
Lion Country Safari

Now a group of zoos is trying to buy an elephant farm in Arkansas to create a "national elephant center." This is significant because this proposed facility would encompass over 300 acres. Again we have succeeded – we have convinced zoos that captive elephants need much more space!

But the prospect of a national elephant center is not all rosy. Space available does not automatically equal space given to elephants. It doesn't matter how much space you have unless you actually give it to the elephants. Other issues of concern include:

- Social problems (shifting of animals in and out and separating bonded elephants);

- Management style (use of the ankus and chaining);
- The prospect of the center becoming an elephant breeding factory;
- Lack of transparency and public accountability; and
- Diverting funds to the center while elephants at the funding institutions continue to languish in zoo enclosures.

Certainly the center could be a step forward, but it first must effectively address and resolve all of the issues mentioned above. In addition, such a facility should be an alternative to tiny zoo exhibits, especially those in cold climates, not an adjunct to them. We have been and will continue to closely monitor this situation and keep IDA supporters informed about the situation in Arkansas.

Yes, Ruby's movement is monumental and she will have a wonderful life when she settles into pachyderm paradise at PAWS. But we must also remember those elephants who missed the opportunity to enjoy the high quality of life Ruby will experience and died miserable and broken in barren zoo enclosures. For elephants past, present and future, we will keep moving them toward a better quality of life.

Les Schobert

March 2007