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Will a herd of elephants roam in a Tehama County preserve?



Plans to introduce captive elephants onto a cattle ranch are being considered by Tehama County, which is scheduled to make public an in-depth environmental review next year. The Performing Animal Welfare Society offers sanctuary for elephants, shown here, in San Andreas. **Brian Baer** Sacramento Bee file

BY JANE BRAXTON LITTLE

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In the midst of precipitous decline of elephants worldwide, an ambitious, privately funded project is proposing to offer a handful of captive animals a humane quality of life in the rolling hills of Tehama County.

The Tembo Preserve plans to introduce elephants onto a 4,900-acre cattle ranch at a pace that allows them to develop the social relationships their African relatives enjoy in the wild. It may take a century, but the project hopes to restore family life to a herd of up to 50 animals in a place that allows them to just be elephants, said Joel Parrott, CEO of the Oakland Zoo, which is working in collaboration with the Tembo Foundation.

There's nothing natural about just being elephants in Tehama County, halfway around the world from their native habitat. This is cattle country – home of the Red Bluff Roundup – where ranchers worry that elephants will drive up the price of hay, disrupt native wildlife and spread disease. It's a place where water is more valuable than gold. And how, neighbors wonder, will browsing by 6,000-pound pachyderms affect the iconic oak savannahs that grace the hillsides on the site west of Cottonwood?

The Tembo Preserve also faces criticism from elephant advocates. Most are against keeping elephants in zoos in the first place, and they adamantly oppose any kind of breeding in captivity.

What Tembo proposes is neither a conventional zoo nor a sanctuary for damaged animals to live out their lives. It will use zoo elephants, starting with three or four young males to form a bachelor group. The plan is to gradually introduce several zoo females of breeding age. And the inevitable, intentional offspring? "We'll keep them," Parrott said.

As the herd grows he expects the females to stay together, forming a lineage of sisters, aunts and grandmothers characteristic of wild African elephants. When the males age out of the family group, Tembo will provide more space for them as solitary animals or loose bands.

The Tembo proposal comes as hundreds of thousands of wild elephants are being slaughtered for their ivory tusks, and their habitat is falling prey to the needs of

human communities in Africa and Asia. Every extra cent of the money raised from displaying and studying captive elephants – by zoos, sanctuaries and private foundations like Tembo – should go to protecting and preserving elephants in their native environment.

Still, Tembo may be the next best thing to saving wild elephants.

The preserve promises space, a decades-old demand made by elephant advocates that zoos have recently acknowledged, however reluctantly. It promises companionship in family groups, a requisite for healthy elephants that zoo associations have only recently agreed to provide. It promises breeding under the most natural of conditions for captive animals.

More tenuous are Tembo's commitments to research and education to benefit elephant conservation. Parrott envisions long-term metabolic and behavioral studies that cannot be done on wild animals because they are too inaccessible. Results, however, may be 50 years off. The project promises educational opportunities but will offer no immediate access for local students or the general public.

Most elusive of all, Tembo promises to devote what it reaps financially and scientifically to conserving wild populations of elephants in Africa and Asia. Only time and a bit of sleuthing will tell if it delivers.

Despite the caveats, one of the nation's outspoken zoo critics has given Tembo a backhanded endorsement: "If we're going to have zoos, let them be like this," said Carol Buckley, founder of Elephant Aid International.

Whether Tembo has that opportunity is ultimately up to Tehama County. An in-depth environmental review, due to go public in early 2017, could crush it.

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