

IT'S TIME TO ADDRESS THE ELEPHANT IN THE COMMONWEALTH

When we share our name, [Massachusetts for Elephants](#), the reaction is often, “Are there elephants roaming across the state?” There are elephants crisscrossing the Commonwealth. Roaming, however, is the last word to choose to describe their travel. Elephants and other wild animals traverse Massachusetts in circuses and traveling shows, kept in conditions that are cramped and cruel. Elephant tusks also travel in Massachusetts as part of the illegal ivory trade.

The Massachusetts Legislature has the opportunity end these practices with two pending bills: H.3376/S.2251 would outlaw the exhibition of elephants, big cats, and other large wild animals in circuses and traveling shows. H.903/S.576 would prohibit the ivory and rhino horn trafficking in the Commonwealth. Both deserve to pass in this legislative session.

Elephants are social animals, living in family groups across expansive ranges in the wild. Research reveals them to be intelligent and emotionally complex. They celebrate their young, mourn their dead, and remember their kin. A pending court case in New York state may grant them status as sentient beings, able to think, feel pain, and have emotions. The confined, largely isolated life in a circus or traveling show is the antithesis of what an elephant needs to thrive. Care for a captive elephant, like other wild animals covered by the bill, is expensive and highly specialized, something that can be beyond the capabilities of even the best-intentioned exhibitors.

Humans, too, are at risk. Elephants and other wild animals can injure people when they come in contact with them at circuses or traveling shows. Born Free USA keeps a [comprehensive database](#) of such incidents. Elephants have also been [linked to tuberculosis transmission](#) by the CDC. We all benefit when the wild remains wild.

There are sanctuaries ready and able to provide better homes for the elephants currently held captive by circuses and traveling shows. Legislative action can help them live out their lives in more appropriate settings while ending future demand for the capture and brutal “breaking” of elephants for use in so-called entertainment.

Already, 13 municipalities in Massachusetts have similar bans in place: Amherst, Braintree, Cambridge, Mendon, Quincy, Pittsfield, Plymouth, Provincetown, Revere, Somerville, Topsfield, Weymouth, and Wilmington. [According to the MSPCA](#), 37 states have addressed the issues around wild animal abuse in these settings. It is time for Massachusetts to end its status as laggard by enacting similar protections.

Massachusetts also sees trade in ivory and rhino horn. Past investigations by the [Boston Globe](#) and the [Humane Society](#) documented the illicit activity. A [May 2021 story in Bloomberg](#), says ivory sells for “about \$3,000 per pound” and the global trade is worth “\$23 billion.” Illegal poaching of elephants and rhinos to supply this market contributes to the endangered status of these animals. The story further stated that, “...gruesome photos of butchered elephants that have become almost commonplace. In recent years, massive seizures of ivory seemed to signal a headlong rush toward extermination.” We, in Massachusetts, can help stop this.

While attempts to stanch this trade have been made through bans at the national and international levels, loopholes persist. As bill sponsor State Senator Jason Lewis wrote to one of our board members, “At present, there is no oversight over the ivory sold in the state, so there’s no way to verify that something is sourced ethically or not.” More stringent regulation at the state level will align

Massachusetts and federal law making it more difficult for the illegal trade to continue. This bill intends to change the risk-reward calculus of those who fuel the demand for ivory and rhino horn by adding an additional layer of legal consequences.

Versions of each of these bills have been brought forward in previous legislative sessions. Extensive engagement with stakeholders helps ensure they will address the need without unintended consequences or undue burdens. It is time for these bills to become law.

April 16 is Save the Elephants Day. Let us mark it by helping ensure that no parent ever need tell a child that “E *used* to stand for Elephant.” We call on the Massachusetts legislature to enact H.3376/S.2251 and H.903/S.576 in this session.

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