

Sad, short life behind bars



CAPTIVE for an audience ... an RSPCA study claims elephants in zoos live blighted, unhappy lives compared with their cousins in the wild.

Pictures: AP/AFP

LONDON: Elephants in zoos live short, stressed lives blighted by disease and injury, a report has warned.

The RSPCA-led study found that African elephants in captivity in Europe, including Britain, live on average for just 17 years, a third of the lifespan of those roaming wild.

Asian elephants in European zoos and safari parks survive an average of

19 years, less than half of those working in Burmese timber camps.

Also stillbirths and infant deaths are much higher among the captive population, the journal *Science* reports.

The study's authors are calling for a ban on elephant imports and restrictions on their transfer from zoo to zoo, which they say is extremely stressful.

Scientists looked at data on more

than 4500 female elephants. Almost 800 were in European zoos between 1960 and 2005. The rest lived either in Kenya or Burma.

RSPCA researcher Dr Ros Clubb said it was likely the captive animals are feeling the effects of obesity.

A high-calorie diet, combined with lack of exercise, can cause them to become dangerously overweight and

make pregnancy and labour difficult.

Britain has 73 elephants, about a 10th of the European total, in 14 safari parks and zoos. Annie, Britain's one remaining circus elephant, still makes public appearances with the Bobby Roberts Super Circus at the age of 55.

Dr Rob Atkinson, the RSPCA's head of wildlife science, said: "Surely the way forward is to encourage

conservation programs in native habitats rather than condemn elephants to a shortened and unhealthy existence in our zoos?"

But Dr Miranda Stevenson of the British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums insisted that huge improvements have been made to breeding programs.

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