

Congress Briefing: Animal Control and use of Violence

Animal control and potential for conflict associated with the use of exotic and non-domesticated animals in traveling circuses



The flash points during the circus working day

During an average performing week, usually twice a day, performing animals with traveling circuses will be moved from their living quarters or temporary enclosures to the circus ring to perform. This often entails moving large and potentially dangerous animals across open ground. They are often unwilling or distracted.

The transfer from the cage to the circus ring creates two factors that can result in animal suffering: Firstly, workers are under pressure to get the animals into the ring on time and, secondly, they need to keep the animals moving to prevent them identifying opportunities for escape. As a result, these workers (who are often untrained general hands, not animal presenters or trainers) may abuse the animals due to irritation, anxiety, stress and sometimes simply because they don't understand the species that they are handling¹.

Thus, large cats are usually chased down temporary cage tunneling using screaming and bars to bang on the tunneling; they are moved as quickly as possible in order to focus their attention. Groups of elephants are led (or chased) through the circus to get to the big top quickly, in order to minimize the risk of them being out in the open for too long and therefore given time to think. If there is a delay before going into the ring, they are often made to go over their tricks to keep their attention.

Although some animals that are well versed in their routine may appear calm, without close control and discipline, any minor event or the sight of something unusual can cause a panic or stampede. Animals of non-domesticated species traveling with circuses have not been bred over thousands of years for compliance and familiarity with humans; their wild nature can make them unpredictable. Thus, handlers shouting, banging bars, threatening, hitting and whipping the animals commonly accompanies animal movement around the circus.

The close proximity of large and dangerous animals to the public, and the temporary nature of the facilities holding them, means that these shows can never be entirely safe.



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It could be argued that the physical circus environment even prohibits the use of other methods. Protected contact or passive control is not feasible in the traveling circus situation because it is not possible to create areas where the animals are permanently separated from the handlers. Protected contact and passive control systems require permanent facilities whereas, in the traveling circus, domination over the animal is gained by using methods involving violence; physical punishment is used as a tool which, in turn, can lead to increased aggression⁷. Such training has been criticized by renowned elephant experts⁸. The dangers faced by both humans and elephants in free contact management are well known within the industry. In fact, the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) has enacted a new policy which prohibits AZA accredited zoos from allowing care providers to share the same unrestricted space with elephants, which is to be implemented no later than September 1, 2014⁹.

Training, human interaction and the impact on the animal

Elephants in captivity do not have the space or the ability to expend the vast amounts of energy that they have, or to fill their day with cognitive tasks and food processing, as they would in the wild. This pent up energy and frustration can lead to the elephant keeper being injured³.

Actual training of the animals takes place in secret. 'Training sessions' seen by public and media when on the road are simply rehearsals; the animals are being put through well-worn paces. Circus animals are reminded during these rehearsals that disobedience will be punished. Even huge, powerful animals can be beaten into submission. Young animals, so inquisitive and playful, learn from an early age that disobedience is not tolerated; a lesson repeated throughout their lives.

In order to be useful for entertainment, highly intelligent and emotional animals such as primates are removed from their family group to create a relationship of dependency. Handlers and trainers require regular one-to-one contact with young primates to maintain control over the animal, which makes them dependent and more likely to be obedient. The handler becomes the only source of food, water, and approval. Trainers deprive performing primates of normal social contact with their own kind, locking them into a lonely world where food, water and affection are the prizes for compliance. The chimpanzee's "smile" that we see so often in performances is, in reality, a grimace of fear.

It is these emotionally and socially deprived conditions, combined with beatings, which have often given rise to attacks by abused and mentally disturbed animals.

Aggression by handlers towards animals can be physical and verbal – either can intimidate and cause fear. Such fear and stress makes these animals more dangerous. ADI has filmed the following:

- A full-grown lioness urinated in fear when she was screamed at
- Lions and tigers shouted at, poked, prodded, stones thrown at them and struck with metal bars
- A tigress being beaten with a tent pole
- A lioness rammed in the mouth with a tent pole
- Camels, llamas and other animals being beaten, kicked and punched
- Electric shocks applied to elephants' stomachs as they walked to the big top
- An elephant hacked in the leg with a golf club so that she fell to her knees
- A tiger cub smashed in the face to make him "behave"
- An elephant dragged down with vicious blows and then kicked in the face as she lay on the ground.

The use of punishment on elephants is acknowledged and accepted amongst some who work with elephants. *"Punishment may also be used to establish social or physical dominance. The traditional method of initial training of elephants uses physical punishment first to establish dominance and then shifts to reinforcement training to establish desired behavior patterns"*⁶.



An elephant hook is used to beat and drag an elephant to her knees then she is kicked in the face.



A four month old white tiger cub being walked on a leash is struck hard in the face and reels back.

It would be easier on our consciences to suppose that only a few “rogue” handlers abuse the animals in their care. However, the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported “Elephant handlers all over the country concede that they regularly discipline the animals with electric shocks, beating them with axe handles”³.

Between 2000 and 2005 there were three fatalities in the U.S., two in circuses, and five injuries involving elephants. Internationally, over the same period, there were thirteen fatalities and six injuries. This data is only for captive elephants in non-endemic countries⁶.

This brief outline of the treatment of animals, under the control of trainers, highlights just some of the grave concerns for the health and wellbeing of animals in traveling circuses.

Action Request

It is essential that Congress support legislation to prohibit the use of exotic and non-domesticated animals in U.S. traveling circuses.

The ban will protect public safety of workers and audiences.

The ban is the only and best way to protect animal welfare. The use of animals of domesticated species in traveling circuses will not be affected by the legislation.

There is no significant public appetite for non-domesticated wild animal acts.

Removing non-domesticated animals from traveling circuses lowers costs and animal-related accidents.

Countries around the world have recognized the importance of banning non-domesticated animals from traveling circuses:

National measures to prohibit the use of wild animals, or selected species, have been adopted in: Austria, Belgium, Bolivia, Colombia, Costa Rica, Czech Republic, Denmark, India, Israel, Malta, Peru, Portugal, Singapore, Slovakia, Sweden and Taiwan. Similar laws are being discussed in: Brazil, Chile, Netherlands, Norway and United Kingdom. Due to public concerns, local town and city bans are in place in the US, UK, Brazil and many other countries.



Animal Defenders International

With offices in Los Angeles, London and Bogota, ADI is an international campaign and animal rescue organization with a commitment to securing progressive animal protection legislation around the globe. ADI has a worldwide reputation for providing video and photographic evidence exposing the behind-the-scenes suffering in the circus industry and supporting this evidence with scientific research on captive wildlife and transport.

References

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