

KEEPING CIRCUS ELEPHANTS TEMPORARILY IN PADDOCKS – THE EFFECTS ON THEIR BEHAVIOUR

J Schmid

Universität Institut 1, Erlangen/Nürnberg, Staudstr 5, 91058 Erlangen

Abstract

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*The purpose of this study was to investigate the behavioural effects of keeping circus elephants in paddocks. Therefore some species-typical behavioural characters and the occurrence of stereotyped movements were observed and compared in unshackled paddock keeping versus shackled keeping. The investigation includes 29 elephants (19 *Elephas maximus*, 10 *Loxodonta africana*) at four circuses located in Germany and in Switzerland.*

The results showed that paddocks offered more freedom for comfort, social and play behaviour since such activities were observed more frequently in paddocks than in shackled keeping. Also, stereotyped movements were nearly absent in paddocks and very frequent in shackled keeping. In comparison to shackled keeping, paddocks were more suitable for the needs of elephants.

Keywords: *circus elephant, comfort behaviour, paddock keeping, play behaviour, social behaviour, stereotyped movements.*

Introduction

Elephants have been kept shackled in stable tents since they have been presented in circuses. Today there are 305 elephants in European circuses (European Elephant Group 1993). Most of them are kept shackled. The chains of circus elephants are attached diagonally to one foreleg and one hind leg on the opposite side. This kind of fixation strongly restricts the freedom of movement to such a degree that these animals are not able to exhibit most of their species-typical behaviour. Wild elephants show various social, comfort and play behaviours, seeking physical contact with other members of the group, calming and protecting inexperienced young, taking a bath daily and wallowing in mud and dust to take care of their skin etc (Kurt 1986; Moss 1988). All of these activities are restricted when elephants are kept shackled. Stereotypies, also called 'weaving', are connected with unsuitable keeping systems (Kurt 1986; Poole 1988).

In 1990 guidelines for keeping, training and the use of animals at circuses and similar institutions were issued in Germany in connection with the Animal Welfare Act (BML 1990). For the first time these guidelines request that elephants be kept in unshackled groups in a paddock for at least one hour per day. A paddock in this sense is an enclosure which is limited by an electric fence. The purpose of this study was to ascertain the effects on the behaviour of circus elephants when kept unshackled in paddocks.

