Congress Briefing: Captivity &Transport

The scientific evidence of the effects of captivity and transport on animals and their use in traveling circuses

When animals need to adapt to both accommodation and husbandry practices for the traveling environment a number of issues and challenges arise. While attempts may be made to manage these challenges, we would submit that the practical difficulties they present are an integral part of the traveling circus environment and, therefore, cannot be completely eradicated.

Limited periods in the same location

The nature of the traveling circus is such that most of the year is spent on tour; this is the primary source of income. The Bailey Brothers Circus started one tour in Mexico before heading into the U.S. and did not return to their permanent quarters for almost eleven months. They took a six-week break before departing again. Generally, a circus will spend between a few days and two weeks at a particular location, sometimes longer.

Portable accommodation

A circus needs to be able to set up and dismantle accommodation on a weekly basis – caging and fencing, therefore, needs to be collapsible, small and lightweight. Thus, the very nature of the business sets restrictions on the animal facilities that can be provided.

Even if large transporters and complex enclosures were available, there would still be a cost to animal welfare; the animals would need to spend even longer waiting to be unloaded while more extensive and complex enclosures and caging are erected.

The character of a site (e.g. parking lots or industrial areas) can also have an impact on animal welfare. Animals tied on concrete or asphalt will suffer a poor environment, unnatural hard standing, lack of interest and stimulation. Busy downtown activity adds to the circus noise, lights, visitors and vehicles that can disturb animals attempting to rest.

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Frequent transportation

On a regular, often weekly, basis animals must be loaded onto transporters and taken to a new location. The common routine is for animals to be loaded in the late afternoon on a Sunday, remaining in their transporters until the rest of the circus is loaded, and then traveling to the new location. The animals are not unloaded until the next morning or even afternoon[1].

Inevitably, some animals will become sick or injured or even give birth on tour. At best, sick or injured animals would face a long journey back to the circus' permanent quarters to recover, but it is more common for the animal to continue the tour. The distances involved in traveling across the U.S. means that once animals leave their permanent facility, they are soon well beyond the point of no return.

Extended periods in transporters

As mentioned earlier, animals suffer extended periods in vehicles due to the need to dismantle and pack up the circus for travel and then, on arrival at the new location, erect the facilities before finally unloading the animals. Thus, they must remain in their trailers for far longer than the journey has taken.

Even a short journey can entail several hours in vehicles. This extended confinement represents poor animal welfare and causes suffering. For example, observations found elephants in a trailer for 19½ hours for a 5-hour journey and a sick elephant in her trailer for nearly 18 hours for a 45-minute journey[2].

When animals are moving to and from the circus to fulfill additional commitments – for example elephants giving rides at fairs – it can significantly increase the time they spend in transporters. Elephants with Bailey Brothers Circus spent a whole day inside the trailer, traveling to a Hindu festival to provide rides. Two days later, they traveled from Austin to Kansas and did not leave the trailer for the entire day. As a result, in a 72-hour period the elephants left their transporter for only six hours, in order to give rides at the festival. Following this, they were driven to Butler, Missouri, and were not let out of their trailer until noon. One elephant was immediately chained up outside and only released for the afternoon show.

Such distances and schedules are unavoidable in a traveling circus or exhibition and therefore, by their very nature, these shows present a welfare cost to the animals they use.

The scientific evidence on suffering

A review of the scientific literature on studies of the effects on animals of transport, captivity and confinement elucidates the biological indicators of stress, as well as the behavioral and psychological effects. Three widely used groups of wild animals are considered here:

Elephants

It has previously been found that *"species that were naturally wide-ranging were more vulnerable to welfare problems in captivity, including psychological dysfunction and stress as exemplified by stereotypy"* [3].

A stereotypy is a repeated, relatively invariate sequence of movements, which has no obvious function[4]. Stereotypies are indicators that the animal is having problems coping with the environment which, *"While commonly observed in elephants in captivity, stereotypic behavior has*

Elephant chained inside a transporter.

never been reported in over 34,000 sightings of wild elephant groups containing 1 to 550 individuals"[5]. This is a good indication that captivity has extremely detrimental effects.

The unavoidable mobile nature of the circus means that below standard animal care is inevitable. For example *"It is obvious that the need to bathe and dust is an important mental and physical requisite in the life of an elephant. Elephants who travel with circuses and shows are not provided with necessary daily mud and water baths"*[6].

Additionally, improper foot, leg and spine posture, due to the smooth concrete surfaces in captivity, lead to painful arthritis as well as other joint problems[7]. Clearly, elephants suffer both physically and mentally from the conditions imposed by the traveling circus.

Big cats

Carnivores frequently show stereotypic behaviors such as pacing when in captivity. A study revealed that carnivore stereotypy levels and captive infant mortality rates are significantly predicted by natural ranging behavior (e.g. home-range size and typical daily travel distances)[8].

Lions have diets and feeding patterns that are difficult to duplicate in captivity where they lack the opportunity for brief, but intense, periods of exertion related to hunting. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that lions in captivity tend to become obese and suffer the associated problems[9].

Tigers are solitary hunters in the wild, with limited social contact. Their solitary way of life makes them unsuitable for housing in groups, as both sexes are territorial and fights are likely to occur[10]. A study of the circus industry described how circuses often transport tigers in groups and that severe fights can break out[11]. Circus tigers have shown a wide range of abnormal behaviors, including stereotypies such as pacing, which has been shown to increase as the duration of transport increases[12].

Non-human primates

Non-human primates are our closest relatives. They are highly intelligent, have emotional and social lives and many live in close family groups. They suffer in captivity, just as we would. Most non-human primate species share more than 90% of their DNA with humans[13], with the chimpanzee DNA sequence differing from ours by only 1-1.5%[14].

Captivity affects different animal species in very different ways. There is, however, consensus among researchers regarding the higher risks of suffering for the species with more intelligence and cognitive abilities[15]. Clearly, the impoverished environment and lack of stimulation in the traveling circus seriously compromises the welfare of the non-human primates.

Chimpanzees display a range of postures and gestures both similar to, and in the same context as, humans[16]. For these highly intelligent animals stress may be psychological as well as physical[17]. For chimpanzees, socially deprived individuals show reduced levels of normal behaviors and a higher level of abnormal behavior, as well as a wider range of abnormal behaviors[18].

The demands of continual transport and re-adjustment appear to be directly related to abnormal primate behavior, which itself usually indicates that the animal's psychological welfare is at a suboptimal level[19].

This very brief outline of scientific findings related to animals subjected to captivity and transportation highlights just some of the concerns for the health and wellbeing of animals in traveling circuses.

Traveling shows are no place for exotic and non-domesticated animals.

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.

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