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 handling[1].

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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Elephant hooked under the chin to keep the animal moving forward.

While traveling with the Bailey Brothers Circus, Krissy the elephant escaped frequently, even dismantling the electric fence. She threw hay, grass and stones at people and had a reputation for cornering and pushing circus workers. Despite this uncontrollable behavior, the circus allowed her to be fed by the public, separated by just a small, temporary metal barrier.

Around the world, circus workers and members of the public, including children, have been killed or maimed by circus animals. Lions, tigers and elephants have all escaped.

Circus Animal Control Methods

In the circus, intelligent and social creatures with acknowledged cultural habits such as elephants are commonly shackled to the ground by one front and one rear leg in order to control them. They can barely take a step forward and backward, and cannot exhibit most of their typical behaviors. Social interaction is restricted as contact is limited to the elephant shackled next to them[2]. Many circuses now claim to give their elephants regular access to a pen or outdoor enclosure, but the elephants' free time is limited; the circus is constantly on the move, and the elephants have to be prepared for their performances each day. At night, elephants are commonly chained from the time the workers finish their day to when they arrive the next day. Therefore, over half the elephants' time (up to 12 hours) may be spent chained to a stake in the ground or inside a truck[1].

An elephant hook being used on the lip of an elephant.

It is a myth that circus animals are trained using kindness and reward. ADI's undercover investigations of circus animal training over the past 15 years have shown that the tools of the trade are whips, goads, iron bars, elephant hooks and electric shock devices.

The following cruel and archaic methods are used on elephants:

The bull hook/elephant hook (ankus): A heavy bar with a sharp metal hook at the end is jabbed into the elephant's sensitive areas (behind the ears; near the eye; between the legs; on bony areas; under the stomach), in order to discourage undesired behavior.

Martingales: These are restraints. One end is fastened onto the elephant's tusks, the other end attached to chains around their front feet. These restrict head movement, the severity of which depends upon the length of the chain.

Chaining to the ground: Frequently used in the circus, the animal's movement is restricted for protracted lengths of time, usually from the evening until the next morning. Typically one front and one back leg will be chained, sometimes the neck, leaving the animal only able to walk one step forward and backward. Some scientists believe that these long periods of forced inactivity contribute to the development of abnormal behaviors such as rocking and weaving; possibly an attempt to relieve the pressure on joints and muscles.

Electric shock: Elephants may be punished with electric prods, jolted by the electric current, to discourage "undesirable behavior".

Whips: Whipping is "especially brutal" as the "sting of a whip is excruciatingly painful to an elephant"[3].

Non-domesticated animals are forced to perform unnatural acts.

The concept of punishment is not something that is seen in natural elephant society. The claim that punishment is 'natural' for elephants is incorrect. A world authority on elephants commented, *"African elephants do not "discipline their young" nor is discipline "natural in elephant society [and] therefore something that an elephant can understand""*. And *"I have never seen calves "disciplined"…Elephants are raised in an incredibly positive and loving* environment"[4]. This makes the treatment of elephants in traveling circuses even more brutal. The animal will not understand what is happening and why.

Zoos manage their elephants utilizing one of three key management systems: free contact, protected contact and passive control. Free contact (where the handler is in constant contact with the animal) is the method used in most circuses. Directing and moving the animal depends upon the use of the bull hook or ankus – the elephant must comply. The human is in the same physical space as the elephant and establishes and maintains a position of social dominance. The handler becomes part of the social structure of the elephants, usually dominating the animals. As this makes the handler vulnerable, the elephants may be restrained and manipulated with harsh discipline.

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 aggression[7]. Such training has been criticized by renowned elephant experts[8]. 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, 2014[9].

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

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 injured[3].

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].

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 countries[6].

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.

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Animal Defenders International
6100 Wilshire Boulevard, # 1150
Los Angeles, CA 90048
Tel: (323) 935-2234
Fax: (323) 935-9234
www.ad-international.org