Congress Briefing: Public Health & Safety

Public Health and Safety Issues associated with the use of exotic and non-domesticated animals in traveling circuses

Children being given rides on the back of an African elephant next to closely confined tigers, whilst the waiting crowd is held back by a piece of string. A public safety hazard.

Disease transmission

The spread of diseases between animals and people has been documented in scientific literature. A paper describes the transmission of Tuberculosis (TB) from elephants to humans: three elephants from an exotic animal farm in Illinois, who were being used in a circus, died between 1994 and 1996, and were found to have TB. Of twenty-two handlers tested, eleven tested positive for TB, although the risk from human-to-human was thought to be unlikely due to the lack of a cough in the handler with active disease. However the three elephants that died *"had evidence of widespread pulmonary disease and, therefore, represented a greater risk for dissemination."* The paper also discussed the problem that the real risk for transmission to the general public is poorly understood[1].

As one study showed, it is not always apparent when an elephant has TB. The authors said, *"most elephants with active TB have no clinical signs of disease"*. The study pointed out that the only officially recognized test for TB in elephants, trunk wash culture, has serious limitations[2].

Bearing this in mind, there is a clear case for concern about public health. It has been reported that there were 34 confirmed cases of tuberculosis in elephants in the U.S. population between 1994 and June 2005[3].

Accidents and escapes

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

Common circus working practices increase the likelihood of such incidents by bringing people into dangerously close proximity to wild animals. Any animal can be unpredictable, especially when stressed or if it sees an opportunity to escape its

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confinement. The 2007 San Francisco Zoo tragedy illustrated how agile big cats can escape even a purpose-built facility[4]. It is easy to see that the risks are much greater in the portable facilities found in traveling circuses.

- In March 2014, three circus elephants escaped from a Moolah Shrine Circus performance in St. Charles, Missouri where they were being used for elephant rides, and rampaged through the parking lot, damaging a loading dock door and vehicles before being recaptured 45 minutes later.

- In April 2013, a tiger escaped during a crowded performance of the Isis Shrine Circus in Salina, Kansas. Circus staff were unable to immediately recapture the tiger which fled the main exhibition area. The Salina Journal reported a circus patron unexpectedly came face to face with the tiger, less than two feet away, upon entering an arena bathroom[5].

African and Asian elephants in a small electric tape enclosure. The African regularly attempted to escape.

- In February 2013, three circus elephants from Hanneford Circus were left out in the cold after their trailer slid off the road and onto the snow-covered median while traveling along Interstate 70 in Indiana. The elephants were offloaded and stood huddled on the Interstate while their trailer was moved back onto the road.

- In February 2013, a circus tiger attacked its trainer during a performance at the Suárez Brothers Circus (Circo Hermanos Suárez) in the city of Etchojoa, Sonora in Mexico. The tiger tamer died while receiving medical care as a result of hypovolemic shock.

Naturally herding animals like zebras are often isolated and kept severely confined – little wonder they try to escape.

- October & November, 2012 - Within two months, a Cole Brothers Circus truck carrying elephants crashed in a ditch in Mississippi; the Jaws of Life were used to remove llamas, zebras and camels from the wreckage of a Universoul Circus trailer on a highway in Georgia; and chaos ensued when a camel escaped Ramos Brothers Circus in Glendale, CA and ran across four lanes of traffic.

- In April 2012, in Cork, Ireland, an elephant trainer was crushed and later hospitalized for injuries incurred while trying to break up a fight between two elephants at the Courtney Brothers Circus. This potentially life threatening incident happened just days after an elephant named Baby escaped from the same circus and was videotaped running through a parking lot while circus staff tried in vain to stop her.

- In April 2010 a startled elephant stamped its trainer to death at the Irem Shrine, which was hosting the James Hamid Circus. The cause of the incident was not finally established, but it was

An 'exercise enclosure'. There is little to interest or engage these intelligent animals.

reported that the elephant came into contact with electrical wires.

- In April 2010, it was reported that an elephant belonging to a traveling circus in Vietnam killed a 13-year-old boy. The boy and several friends found the elephant chained to a truck inside a local stadium and teased it, throwing things at it. The distressed elephant grabbed the boy and twice threw him to the ground. The boy suffered brain injuries and died on the way to hospital. The circus said the accident happened when the guard had gone to lunch.

- On at least two occasions, zebras from Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus have escaped. In 2008 three ran out into traffic before being caught; in 2010 one zebra escaped onto a busy interstate and led police and keepers on a 40-minute chase through downtown. The circus said: *"It was just an unavoidable accident"*.

- In 2008 a bus killed an elephant after it escaped from a circus in Mexico and wandered onto a busy highway. The bus driver died and at least four passengers were taken to hospital after the accident. The elephant apparently knocked down a metal door that led to the street and wandered through two neighborhoods before trying to cross the road. The keeper at the Circo Union circus said *"I untied her so she could eat. She never did this before, but suddenly she ran at full speed and broke through the gate"*.

- In Ireland, 2006, an elephant lifted an electric wire over her head and then charged at a member of the public who had taken his granddaughter to see the animals. The elephant hit him in the back knocking him to the ground, hit him in the chest, and then stamped on him. The man commented that the psychological terror of the experience was worse than the physical injuries.

- A 16-year-old on holiday in China in 2006 was attacked by a tiger. On a visit to a Chinese circus the victim had her photo taken on the stage and was then attacked from behind by the animal. The tiger broke her ankle, causing a 5-inch wound on her leg, down to the bone.

- At the Bailey Brother Circus in 2004, Penny the zebra escaped from her pen twice in four days. She would put her head through the metal railings and lift the hinges; she also barged the railings and paced when her companion pony, Tony, was away performing. Penny would also try to escape when workers moved her from the enclosure to her trailer, pulling and kicking. Occasionally, she bit circus workers and members of the public.

Circus tigers and lions spend most of their lives in cages on the backs of trucks.

Three circus elephants in a tiny enclosure. The fencing is clearly inadequate for public protection.

Animals which do not appear to be dangerous in themselves can cause havoc if they escape in city centres or on busy roads.

- In 2004 Krissy, an Asian elephant performing with Bailey Brothers Circus in Oklahoma and Kansas, repeatedly escaped; she was able to dismantle the electric fence. She threw hay, grass and stones at people and had a reputation for cornering and pushing circus workers. Despite this potentially dangerous behavior, the circus allowed Krissy to be fed by the public, protected by just a small, temporary, metal barrier.

These incidents highlight the danger to the public of using exotic and non-domesticated animals in US traveling circuses and exhibitions.

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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