



Animals in Circuses and their Welfare

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Introduction

A recent survey of circuses in the European Union estimated that there are around one thousand EU circuses. Suffering and poor welfare are widespread due to insufficient care and bad husbandry. Some of these would be circuses without animals (becoming popular in France) although the majority keep both wild and domestic animals. In the latter category there are mostly horses and dogs. A very high proportion of these circuses with animals are small, under resourced and with conditions ranging from poor to very poor.

The general public, veterinarians and authorities are becoming increasingly concerned about the conditions in which animals are kept in circuses. There is also increasing ethical concern about the keeping of wild animals in circuses particularly because of the impossibility of providing an environment in which most of their biological needs can be fulfilled.

The other issue which has caused concern is the methods used for training wild animals.

Areas of Concern

One of the main characteristics of a circus is the regular change of location. This means that the animals have to endure regular transportation, which is stressful and that in most instances but depending on the species, the transport wagon is the animals permanent home.

For wild animals the regular change of environment can by itself be stressful as the animal has to come to terms with changes in climate, new smells and sights.

In the vast majority of circuses the only time that wild animals leave the barren "cage" of the transport wagon would be to perform. Depending on the animals this could be a very short time.

Elephants will be closely tethered with very little room for movement so that their only exercise occurs when performing. For big cats (lions, tigers etc.) the barren environment in which they are kept for most of the time makes it impossible for these animals to satisfy many of their biological needs and this leads inevitably to behavioural disorders such as stereotypic behaviour.

The touring circus in Europe is mainly a fine weather activity and in the winter the animals go into "winter quarters". Some small circuses will dispose of their animals at this time and restock in the spring. A very few large circuses will have properly built and equipped winter quarters and on occasion with facilities for continuing to put on performances. For the majority, however, the so-called "winter quarters" are no more

than a place to park the travel wagons in which the animals will then remain until the spring.

The training of circus animals, particularly wild animals, is a matter of much concern. For obvious reasons, training takes place out of the public's view and this lack of transparency leads to supposition about the methods used and sometimes condemnation without the facts. The two basic concepts used in training animals are punishment and reward. Often it is a combination of the two. Very few trainers admit to using punishment as a procedure but many cases have been reported. Recent undercover investigations have revealed cases of animals being badly mistreated.

Conclusions

In 1997 the office of the Environmental Commissioner of the City of Vienna published "Guidelines for the keeping of Wild Animals in Circuses". They were written by three distinguished experts on the keeping of wild animals. In the foreword appears the following paragraph: "It is the general objective for the future to permit the keeping of animal species in circuses only if these animals can enjoy a lifestyle corresponding to their species, subspecies and behaviour characteristics. The authors would like to expressly emphasise that these preconditions principally cannot be fulfilled in the case of wild animals. These guidelines should in no case be misunderstood as a justification of the keeping of wild animals in circuses; rather, they should serve to improve the conditions under which animals are currently kept in circuses until the above-mentioned objective has been obtained".

It is the opinion of Eurogroup that the keeping of animals in circuses cannot be justified on ethical, animal welfare and conservation grounds, and should be phased out, starting by a ban on wild animals. Whilst this phasing out period is taking place strict guidelines should be applied and any circus which cannot conform to these guidelines should be closed down without delay.

Eurogroup for Animal Welfare and Eurogroup for Wildlife and Laboratory animals are of the opinion that the use of animals in circuses should be phased out. As a first step Member States should considered to introduce legislation to ban the use of wild animals.