

Exotic Animals in Circuses Fact Sheet

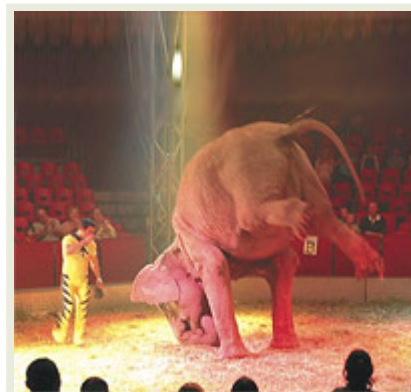
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Circus, a changing tradition

The traditional circus concept, as introduced by Philip Astley in 18th century London, was a show with clowns, acrobats, horses, musicians and dancers. Exotic animals were not part of the performances and were introduced much later, in Australian circuses late 19th century. [1]

In those days circuses also exhibited giants, bearded ladies, conjoined twins etc. in 'freak shows' and even Aboriginals as 'sideshow savages'.² But changes in popular culture and moral values led to the decline of these forms of entertainment and freaks and exotic human cultures became the objects of sympathy and respect rather than fear or disdain. Unfortunately, under the pretense of tradition, circuses such as Lennon Bros and Stardust Circus still make a mockery of exotic animals by dressing them up in shiny costumes and making them perform unnatural tricks.



The practice of forcing wild animals to perform under the big top is unnatural, outdated, and undeniably cruel.

How exotic animals suffer in circuses

Circuses defend the use of exotic animals by claiming the animals are loved and well cared for. But, adding to an overwhelming body of evidence, the 2009 scientific review 'Are wild animals suited to a travelling circus life?' by the University of Bristol in the UK confirms that "the species of non-domesticated animals commonly kept in circuses appear the least suited to a circus life." [3]

This comprehensive study shows that circus exercise pens and beast wagons were on average only 26 and 27% respectively of the already minimalistic recommended sizes of zoo outdoor and indoor enclosures. [3] Elephants in circuses may even be kept chained continuously up to 23 hours a day. [3] These conditions cause severe stress to non-domesticated animals, leading to abnormal behaviour (stereotypies) such as pacing by big cats, head bobbing by elephants or mouthing cage bars.

Although data on the effects of transport on animals in circuses is limited, the Bristol researchers conclude that "confinement in barren enclosures for

Some circuses invite visitors to

long periods of time is of welfare concern". [3] In a vast country like Australia, circuses must travel for extensive periods of time for most of the year in extreme weather conditions, hence there is a severe risk to the welfare of circus animals.

The study continues to report that the majority of evidence suggests human audiences have stressful effects on non-domesticated animals, and that high noise and brilliant light — inherent elements of circus performances — have been noted as having negative welfare impacts. [3]

observe 'trainings' to show animals are trained only with rewards. But these 'trainings' are simply repetitions after the animals have already been taught the tricks behind closed doors. Several undercover investigations over the last decades have revealed brutal cruelty behind the big top and have lead to convictions for animal cruelty. These findings disprove any claim of an essential relationship of trust between the animal and performer/trainer.

Contra education

One could argue that keeping animals in captivity for education or conservation aims serves a purpose. But circuses don't play a role in either of them. Unlike zoos, circuses don't participate in any endangered species programs. They therefore play no role in protecting animal species from extinction.

A Fellow of the Australian College of Educators, Associate Professor Barry Spurr of the University of Sydney, argues that not only do performing-animal circuses perform no educational purpose, but: "they are anti-educational, sending wrong messages to children about how animals behave, naturally, and how they should be respected, ethically. Circuses encourage children to believe that animals exist to perform unnatural acts for audiences' amusement, and to spend their lives in captivity for this purpose. Nothing could be more damaging to nurturing children's education about animals and their respect for them and their welfare". [4]

Internationally outlawed, but not in Australia

Around the world, the plight of animals in circuses is increasingly heard. National, regional and local governments in at least 30 countries have already banned the use of exotic or all animals in circuses. An increasing number of Australian councils are taking part in this trend, but the Australian Federal and State Governments policies are failing these animals.

The requirements in the — mostly voluntary — guidelines for the keeping of animals in circuses in Australia are far below what is generally required for the same species kept in zoos and are totally inadequate to protect their welfare. Lions in New South Wales for example are granted an enclosure of at least 300 m² if they live in a zoo, in a circus they are only entitled to 6 hours a day in an 'exercise area' of 20 m². For the remaining 18 hours they can be locked away in beast wagons. The flawed reasoning is that performing animals require less space. But this claim is strongly questioned by the latest research which shows animals in circuses only spent 1–9% of the day performing or in training. [3]

The future for the circus

As Cirque du Soleil, Circus Oz and many other popular circuses have shown, the success, quality and economic viability of the circus does not require the use of any animal. With an ever increasing majority of Australians objecting to the exploitation of animals, the circus has to stop using exotic animals if they desire to continue to play a role in our society.

Animals Australia's position

For Animals Australia, entertainment stops where animal suffering begins. Circuses can not recreate a natural environment nor can animals in circuses perform much natural behaviour. A non-domesticated animal's life is consequently impoverished and the keeping of exotic animals in circuses should therefore be banned. The animals currently being kept by circuses need to be re-homed in a quality sanctuary or zoo.

What you can do

1. Refuse to pay for animal suffering. Pledge to [only visit animal free circuses](http://www.animalsaustralia.org/take_action/pledge/circus-cruelty/) (http://www.animalsaustralia.org/take_action/pledge/circus-cruelty/) .
2. Tell your family and friends about the cruelty behind the big top, and explain to your children why you won't take them to a circus with exotic animals.
3. Write to your council, state and federal government to demand a ban on exotic animals in circuses.
4. Donate to Animals Australia to [support our crucial campaigns](http://www.animalsaustralia.org/support/monthly_giving.php) (http://www.animalsaustralia.org/support/monthly_giving.php) .

References

- 1 **St Leon MV** 2006, *Circus & Nation*. PhD Thesis University of Sydney.
- 2 **ABC 1** 1 June 2008, *Message Stick – Freak Show To Big Top*.
- 3 **Iossa G, Soulsbury CD and Harris S** 2009, Are wild animals suited to a travelling circus life. *Animal Welfare*, 18: 129-140.
- 4 **Associate Professor Barry Spurr**, Department of English, University of Sydney; *in personal correspondence*



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