

Wild animals in travelling circuses

It is not possible to meet the specific welfare needs of non-domesticated, wild animals within travelling circuses. The welfare of these animals is emblematic of the way we treat all animals under the care of humans.

Animal Welfare

The welfare needs of non-domesticated, wild animals cannot be met within a travelling circus. The Animal Welfare Act 2006 sets out that owners and keepers, including circus operators, have a duty of care to take all reasonable steps to meet the following welfare needs of animals in their care:

- The need for suitable environment
- The need for a suitable diet
- The need to exhibit normal behaviour
- The need to be housed with, or apart from, other animals
- The need to be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease

Captive wild animals have complex welfare needs and instinctive natural behavioural needs that must be met. Travelling circuses, by definition, necessitate the regular transportation of wild animals between sites and locations, as such their facilities must be portable and often size-limited in order to fit to the changeable location and travelling needs of the circus. With this in mind, travelling circuses are not able to meet wild animals' need for a suitable environment, with adequate space, enrichment materials, temperature and noise regulation - obstructing wild animals in the pursuit of activities and behavioural expression that is natural to them.

Further, time spent travelling, and performance schedules, may disrupt the normal diet of wild animals, impacting on the storage, preparation and provision of food needed to ensure these animals have a suitable diet.

Similarly, as space can be limited in travelling circuses, circuses may use group housing of wild animals. This could result in unsuitable social groupings for individual animals and high social density, which can respectively result in stress, aggression and abnormal behaviour.

Our view is supported by the 'Harris review' commissioned by the Welsh Government¹, which found a body of scientific evidence that indicated that travelling circuses do not meet the 'optimal welfare requirements' of the captive wild animals in their care and that evidence would support a ban on wild animals in travelling circuses on welfare grounds.

We see no benefit for humans or wild animals from the use of wild animals in travelling circuses. Any perceived benefit of using wild animals in circuses will not outweigh the negative impact on welfare.

From an ethical perspective, we consider that a modern UK society should not accept the welfare of wild animals being compromised in the environment of a travelling circus. By the extremely restricted nature of facilities for wild animals to exhibit their natural behaviours, circuses serve no educational value either in terms of normal behaviour for the species concerned, or in providing context for their place in the natural environment.

¹ Dorning et al, 2016 'The welfare of wild animals in travelling circuses'
http://www.ispca.ie/uploads/The_welfare_of_wild_animals_in_travelling_circuses.pdf

Ethical considerations

From an ethical perspective, we consider that the welfare of these animals is emblematic of the way we treat all animals under the care of humans and can negatively impact on the development of responsible and respectful attitudes towards animals. We are concerned that the continued use of wild animals in circuses has the potential to undermine the public's understanding of animals as sentient beings with complex welfare needs, instead framing animals as commodities that can be used to perform unnatural behaviours for human entertainment and promoting sub-optimal welfare practices that may be extrapolated and influence the way humans treat all animals.

Definitions

'wild animal' should mean 'an animal of a kind which is not commonly domesticated in Great Britain.'

It is important to recognise that some kinds of circus animals may be considered domesticated in their country of origin but are not currently commonly domesticated in the British Islands, perhaps only being kept in UK in zoos or wildlife parks. For example, in their countries of origin, camels have been used for many thousands of years by man and have been adapted for such use through breeding to encourage certain traits. Although this kind of animal is kept in the UK, the majority are kept in a manner that does not involve on-going domestication. Zoos and wildlife parks generally aim to maintain genetically diverse collections – they do not normally continue genetic selection for the purpose for which an animal may have been domesticated in their country of origin. At the time of writing, camels, for example, are therefore considered to be wild for the purposes of the Act as they are not commonly domesticated in the British Isles.

This contrasts with the position of llamas. Llamas are considered to have long been domesticated in South America; they have been widely used as a meat and pack animal by Andean cultures since the Pre-Columbian era. This kind of animal is now widely found in the British Islands in a farming environment where there is on-going genetic selection to suit agricultural needs. Hence this kind of animal is commonly domesticated in the British Islands

Any ban should cover all wild animal species without exception.

No exceptions or welfare compromises should be made for particular species of wild animal. Any ban should be consistent and not allow for any loopholes or grey areas.

Any ban should be clear that 'travelling circus' should take its ordinary meaning. We support a definition in line with that which is set out in the Wild Animals in Travelling Circuses (Scotland) Bill as below:

"travelling circus"

a) means a circus which travels from place to place for the purpose of providing entertainment,

b) includes

(i) a circus which travels from place to place for that purpose despite there being periods during which it does not so travel,

(ii) any place where a wild animal associated with such a circus is kept (including temporarily).

Such a definition avoids any unintended consequences for other types of animals displays that may move to temporary locations, such as for educational purposes.

Additional considerations

An outright ban could have negative impacts on animal welfare if existing animals in travelling circuses are suddenly retired, having no residual economic value to the owner. Any ban should be accompanied by a robust transition process that ensures the welfare of existing animals. It is essential that clear guidance is provided for existing owners and anyone delegated to enforce new regulations with respect to transitional arrangements for the rehousing/rehoming of the animals, or their disposal. In particular, animals must not be disposed to sub-optimal conditions which would further compromise their welfare.

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Travelling circuses should not be permitted to keep wild animals as 'pets'. Allowing their transport with travelling circuses so long as they are not 'used' (ie. perform or are exhibited) may continue to compromise the welfare of these animals. Animals need to be retired to suitable permanent enclosures that ensure their long-term welfare needs and that are consistent with accepted best practice for similar species kept in zoos and fully consistent with the requirements of the Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976 (as amended 2010).