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The Ethical Disconnect of the Circus: Humanity's acceptance of Performing Elephants

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In America, People grow up attending circuses and most people love them. The purpose of this article is to provide information about elephants and convince current circus attendees and people with fond memories of childhood circuses not to attend animal circuses in the future. This is not an easy task. I have been writing on various issues of Animal Rights (AR) and other animal-centric subjects for some time now and the plight of the elephant is one very dear to me. It is true that all performing animals suffer, but these great beasts seems to suffer more and it is my vain hope that this small article will in someway increase awareness about them and help them, whom I love so much.

People usually have fond memories of the circus, and that's the problem anti animal circus activists face. It is difficult to convince an adult to abandon an activity that has long been considered a worthy and positive family tradition. It is this positive aspect of the tradition that should be called into question. And in enters the old enemy, ignorance. Plenty of forms of suffering have pleasing facades, and it is education that will

lead us to the truth. The ethical disconnect between the spangled elephant performer and the chained and miserable off stage elephant existence exists simply due to ignorance. I attended circuses before I knew the specifics of them as well. In fact, my life long love of elephants stems from an elephant ride I took as a young boy of 6 or 7 at a small circus in my hometown. Indeed most Americans' exposure to elephants solely occurs in zoos or circuses. Now it is time we considered these great creatures and asked about the specifics of their lives we do not see, the times spent not in the spangles and the rings and the lights but in the chains, tiny enclosures, and unendurable isolation. Another quick note: this is intended to be a very brief introduction to the plight of performing elephants. For more details, please seek out places such as PAWS (Performing Animal Welfare Society), Circuses.com, or Elephants.com.

To understand why circuses are such a negative experience for elephants, one must know a few things about their habits in the wild and their conditions in the ring. Elephants often weigh upwards of 11,000 pounds and they do not naturally stand on two feet or balance on small platforms in the wild, contrary to what information circulated by circus suggest. Circuses ensure potential circus goers that they tricks the elephants perform are based around natural behaviors observed in the wild. Rest assured, elephants did not evolve to support their massive weight on their front two legs. This is abuse and in fact leg and foot problems are a leading cause of death for elephants who spend long hours standing on cold concrete, often in their own excrement, or support their weight on two legs at a time. One can look to the tragic story of Stoney the elephant, who performed in the Luxor hotel in Las Vegas under the horrendous care of his abusive and now deceased trainer Mike La Torres, to see what happens to elephants forced to

repeatedly stand on two legs*. If people were aware of these terrible abuses to which circus elephants are submitted, inherent human ethics of compassion would affect many humans and the demand for circuses would wane. Applying economic pressure seems to be the only sanction America understands. Education could one day create a social sanction, and that is surely slowly occurring, but for now removing monies from the animal circus owners is the best way to help these elephants and to break the ethical disconnect caused by ignorance of these great beasts' plight.

Much has been written about the training of circus elephants. In order to get them to do such "tricks" for our amusement often trainers will burn their front feet with blowtorches or inflict other terrible amounts of pain as persuasion. When you see elephants performing, it is not because they love to do it or that the tricks are exaggerated extensions of natural behaviors. They perform these tricks because they are in fear and know they will be punished if they do not perform. Undercover video has been taken, and you can view one such trainer and his horrendously painful techniques on Circuses.com in order to not solely rely on my, admittedly, very passionate word.

Elephants have skin as sensitive as humans -we know they can sense when a fly lands on their back -but the cruel training practices are not the most disturbing aspect of captive performing elephant life, according to some. In the wild, elephants will often walk 30-50 miles a day for no apparent reason other than the walking. They like to walk, and we do not have the right to deprive them of their walking. Elephant researchers have ascertained they often are not motivated by food searching or mating instincts; they simply seem to love to walk. When not performing, most Elephants are kept chained in a

space no bigger than an automobile or enclosed in special pens lined with electric fences that are millions of times smaller than their natural behavior. When chained in such a tiny enclosure, elephants often display stereotypic behavior, such as swaying from foot to foot and trunk waving. Researchers feel these stereotypies are brought on by extreme boredom, isolation, and they often display behaviors often witnessed in mentally ill humans. Even if this is conjecture by concerned Animal Rights Activists (ARAs) such as myself (which is not the case), it is a fact that these behaviors have never been observed in the wild.

During touring season (nine months a year) Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey's Greatest Show on Earth has been reported to keep its elephants chained for up to 20 hours a day. And it's not just Ringling, and it's not just circuses. Zoos, unfortunately for those of us who would truly love to see and visit elephants, are often just as bad. This article focuses on circuses, but keep in mind that elephants are only suited to live on expansive, thousand acre sanctuaries or in the wild. It is true elephants face human dangers in the wild; however, to keep these great beasts in captivity it to create an inhumane crime.

Children are understandably amused by the elephants, and they love to see them do their tricks. However, adults need to realize the complex needs of these creatures are - at best- not fully understood by us. Perhaps it is simply me, but it seems but everyone has fun at the circus except elephants and other performing animals. My question is simple: how does sitting on a chair and wearing spangled headdresses in any way appreciate the natural needs of these animals? And my other question -which tends to be more

controversial for some reason- is why do we think we have the right to force these animals into these situations? Circuses tell us that they are utilizing practical methods of elephant conservation and they have their animals' best interests at heart. If that were so, why are they not constantly given treats and positive reinforcement during shows, as some have asked? Whipping and questionable (at very best) training practices do not seem to have their best interests in mind. Forget treats, if someone truly loved elephants, why would they not want them in places such as some of the American elephant sanctuaries that exist in which they can live in the manner in which they evolved? The fact is that the circus is an old tradition that exists in order to turn the exotic and rare experience of seeing an elephant into money for the circus owners.

Circuses abuse elephants even if not pain management techniques are involved. The mere constraint of these animals is suffering. And the horrible thing is they bear their slavery in silence. They walk slowly, never trumpeting in joy. They slowly trudge from their chained enclosures where they are bedecked with jewels and spangles and then led to the performance area. This is all we see. What we don't see is these elephants alone, chained, swaying from foot to foot, and slowly going mad. And for what, an astute, intelligent, and kind person may ask. All so we can pay these circuses money, see a show, and be entertained for a few hours. The obviousness of the anti circus argument seems logically beyond reproach. When viewing elephants in circuses and captive situations, the looks on their faces seem to be all the argumentative ethos an educated and compassionate person would need in order to not only stop attending animal circuses, but to actively support elephant sanctuaries and educate the public who is not evil, simply unaware.

Often, many are unwilling to read about or witness the cruelty of the industries they support for mere entertainment or taste buds. A pertinent example is the American mass confinement factory farming operations currently supplying the vast majority of the American demand for meat. Many refuse to watch the undercover videos shot in slaughterhouses, yet they continue to eat meat. Please read the following section and realize that if you attend animal circuses, this is indeed what you are supporting.

The Elephant Alliance reports:

From 1994 to 1998, at least 26 circus elephants died premature and unnatural deaths. Most circus elephants are chained by at least two legs for 95% of their lives in a space no larger than an automobile. They are unchained only to perform. The natural behavior patterns of the elephant, which have evolved over thousands of years, are denied by this confined, chained, and dominated life. To disrupt and prevent the natural behavior of these intelligent, social creatures is not only inhumane and cruel, but stressful to the individual animal as well. And they have provided the details of each Elephant death that could have been prevented if they were in Elephant Sanctuaries instead of circuses (2005. Global Action

Network.com)

I maintain that if the public had widespread knowledge of this cruelty, things would change for the better for the elephants. Again, this ethical disconnect can not as easily exist in the open light of reason.

Since the 1950's, there have been a surprising number of elephant and human deaths caused by forced Elephant captivity. Children have been plucked off elephants' backs by their trunks and crushed beneath elephant feet. Elephants have rampaged and ran into the crowd crushing and killing adults and children. Rampaging elephants have been shot down in a hail of gunfire in front of terrified children who will bear the emotional and psychological scars of what they've witnessed for decades. Beyond animal suffering, human safety is another significant reason not to take your kids and the people you love to animal circuses. There have been over 30 people killed by performing elephants during rampages, and rampaging is a very pertinent issue we need to quickly take a look at.

For a quick lesson in common sense empiricism, let's ask ourselves a question. What happens an intelligent and social animal is chained by itself for twenty hours a day? It slowly goes mad and eventually lashes out at its enslavers; most of us would as well. But it bears to examine the very real history of elephant rampages in circuses over the years. The fact is that circuses are not safe places for children or adults if performing animals are present. Let me be clear: I am not claiming inherent violence in these animals, nor am I claiming they are always dangerous to humans in the wild. But I am making the common sense observation that if any thinking sentient creature is abused, restricted, and robbed of its natural rights it may likely go mad. And with insanity often comes violence.

Elephant rampages are our fault. Humans do not have the right to put creatures in situations where this might even have a possibility of happening. In a widely circulated video of an elephant named Janet rampaging, the horrors are easily seen. The elephant

escaped during a performance and began destroying cars and property. Janet was brought down in a hail of gunfire and it was all captured on video. One cannot watch this noble elephant be shot down in confusion and indescribable pain without feeling disgust for the human race and what we have done in the name of “entertainment.” If you attend circuses, the sad and unpopular fact is that you are funding elephant torture, enslavement, and you cause them pain. As for the video of the dear and departed Janet, the most damning thing in the video occurs as the gunfire is erupting and the elephant is suffering and vomiting from the pain of dozens of shots. In the back ground the viewer can hear a hysterical woman scream the words "stupid animal" over and over again. Why is the elephant stupid? Who were the ones who chained it the majority of its life? Who were the ones who forced it to perform, to give rides, to stand on two feet? Who profited and put human circus goers in harm's way by parading this beast around as if we owned it? There is not a significant divide, to me, between the human world and the animal world; it is all the animal world to me. And if there are any stupid animals, I want this unknown woman to know, it is humans. We are the stupid animals.

Note that Janet had rampaged before and their circuses refused to retire them. They continued showing her, she rampaged again, and killed people before being gunned down. Janet had a load of children on her back when the rampage began. What this means is that the circuses involved, The Great American Circus is guilty of these human deaths. Go ahead and try to make that particular charge stick in a court of law. Still, people seem not to care. They won't give up the circus going experience that brought them so much joy as kids. I don't understand and I want to ask these people why they don't care. Why don't you care about the abuse of these elephants? Why do you think they

are not worthy of protection and intrinsic value? You must understand that nothing will change, nothing will get done unless we speak out en masse against this madness. Please avoid circuses in order to avoid tragedies such as Stoney and Tyke and Janet and the many, many others. And let's also not forget the human deaths, as well. Every last one of them: pointless and avoidable. It is up to you. As an elephant activist, I'm working at putting myself out of a job. It is one of my dearest dreams to have a day when elephants are only found in the wild, unmolested, or in sanctuaries. And, some people say, won't that be sad that the vast majority of people will never be able to see elephants anymore. Interesting comment. To know that they are safe and cared for and at peace, I would gladly forfeit any chance for me to see an elephant in person for the rest of my life. What many painfully anthropocentric humans do not realize is that elephants do not exist in order to bring us happiness or entertainment. My dear hope is that one day humanity will give them a full pardon and never negatively interfere with them again. Care professionals and sanctuary workers will take plenty of pictures and videos for elephant fanatics such as myself to take joy in. If our little kids never get to see one in person, so what? I agree with others who have remarked that we don't deserve the animals anyway. Considering the long standing tradition of abusing elephants in circuses, it is apparent. We do not deserve elephants.

So what should be done with all these performing and captive elephants once the ethical disconnect is abolished? This is an easy fix. Many circus options exist that do not require the abuse of animals. Human only circuses are available and several are world famous. The Cirque du Soleil is an amazing outfit that outperforms Ringling and is far more successful. These amazing human entertainers are there by will and choice, and

they are not whipped and forced to perform sick, injured, or against their will. Dancing bears, elephants, big cats and other animals have no say so, and these human circuses should be supported by all means. Performing animals do not have many voices speaking out for them. And the ones who do speak out, such as myself, are often dismissed as fringe radicals and not given proper consideration of our message. We will continue speaking, writing, and yelling, but it is only the language of economics that America speaks and if people no longer attend animal circuses, animal circuses will no longer exist.

As for what is to be done with the elephants once they are all retired from traveling circuses, the answer is elephant sanctuaries. PAWS runs an amazing one in California and in Hohenwald, Tennessee, the Elephant Sanctuary operates on 2,900 acres. In these sanctuaries, elephants are able to live as they have evolved to live. If you can, please consider donating to these sanctuaries and help spread public awareness of these wonderful places. It is far too easy to ignore the plight of animals you never see and are not affected by. However, these beings are helpless and it is our duty as the sentient caretakers of planet Earth and its animals to make sure that none suffer and none are abused. Please send a powerful message to circuses by withholding your money and not attending. They are noticing. They are noticing that Cirque du Soleil makes vastly more money than Ringling. And if anyone has been to a Ringling show recently, it is apparent that the “greatest show on Earth” is having financial problems as of late. It is scaled down, not impressive, and cannot compare with the larger more successful animal free Cirque du Soleil. Just like fur and other highly anachronistic American status symbols of decades past, circuses are drying up and vanishing. America has had some sick and

disgusting traditions in its past, and it's time we made animal circuses go the way of slavery, smoking, and other equally small minded activities. Please help the elephants and the animals by not going to animal circuses.

Work Cited

Global Action Network. 2005. Date accessed: 2008, July 11. Available from World Wide Web:<<http://www.gan.ca/campaigns/circuses/factsheets/elephant+deaths.en.htm>>

Author's Note:

* - Further research has revealed a new perspective on the deceased trainer of Stoney the Elephant, Mike LaTorres. While it is true he appears to have made significant mistakes during the final year of Stoney's life (USDA-APHIS reports, veterinary records from four vets, and federal court records support this), it is also true he was most likely not as abusive as my previous statement implies.

The oversight is mine, and I wish to correct it. It is very likely he did not have proper guidance and support from governmental regulatory bodies and since he is deceased his side of the story is lost with him and perhaps should be given the benefit of the doubt. It is the massively accepted cultural ethical climate which supports animal performance which should be examined, not the individuals who are earning their living within it. In short, members of the public who purchase circus tickets are possibly far more to blame for tragedies such as Stoney than the animal trainers and executives who earn their living in animal performance -- 28 September 2010.

Author's Note Added 2 February 2011 (eds.)