

Use of exotic animals in Australian circuses

Background

Travelling circuses have been operating in Australia since the 1860s and over that time have used many different animals to perform for entertainment. However in recent times, the circus industry has seen significant changes including a dramatic fall in the total number of operators, a reduction in the use of animals including exotic species, and the emergence of circuses with human-only performers. For the purpose of this paper, exotic animals are defined as species which are not domesticated and whose collective behaviour and physiology is essentially the same as their wild counterparts, despite being maintained and/or bred in captivity.

Today, there appear to be around a dozen Australian circuses, with nine listed on [Circus fans of Australia Inc](#) website. Only two continue to use exotic animals in performances - [Stardust](#) and [Lennon Bros](#), both of which use lions (*Panthera leo*) and rhesus macaque monkeys (*Macaca mulatta*). The lions have been captive bred within the circus over several generations, and the macaques are either bred within the circus or sourced from zoos. For many years, several travelling circuses kept elephants, but there are no longer any elephants performing in Australian circuses. Other animals used include horses, donkeys and dogs and less traditional species such as camels, alpacas and cows.

A number of improvements have occurred in Australian circuses over the past 50 years, including an end to the use of wild-caught animals, the development of animal welfare standards for circus animals (although these are not enforceable in all jurisdictions) and an increased awareness of the need to avoid aversive training methods and unnatural performances. However, the inherent welfare problems of repeated transport, confinement, and the inability to meet the social, behavioural and physiological needs of animals in a circus environment remain. It is for these reasons that the RSPCA opposes the use of exotic animals in circuses and believes that the use of any animals should only be permitted if the evidence indicates that their needs can be adequately met (RSPCA Australia 2016).

Animal welfare risks

In response to public concerns relating to animal welfare, circuses with exotic animals now provide information on their websites about the animals they use. This generally describes the conditions under which the animals perform, are housed, transported, trained, and managed and provides assurances to the public that circuses meet minimum legal requirements and that all animals are well-cared for. However, this information does not remove the inherent problems with keeping animals in circuses or the regulation of circus standards described below:

1. In Australia, there are no national welfare standards for circus animals. Some states have endorsed codes of practice, which lack consistency but may provide limited protection to animals (see Box 1). Also, even where minimum legal requirements exist in relevant acts and regulations, they primarily only protect animals against acts of cruelty rather than ensuring circus animals have good welfare.
2. It is the circus environment itself that leads to inevitable compromised animal welfare, e.g. long periods of transportation and associated confinement, limited social groups, limited ability to express normal behaviour etc. For exotic animals, and potentially some domesticated animals, even the best housing, treatment or training methods a travelling circus can provide, cannot overcome these inherent problems.
3. Even when exotic species are captive-bred over multiple generations, they retain their 'wildness' and should not be considered domesticated. Legal restrictions on keeping potentially dangerous exotic species such as lions acknowledge this, as have [circus trainers](#) themselves.

Box 1: Links to animal welfare standards for circuses

New South Wales

<https://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/animals-and-livestock/animal-welfare/exhibit/prescribed-standards2/circus>

Queensland

<https://www.business.qld.gov.au/industry/agriculture/animal-management/land-management-for-livestock-farms/welfare-movement-livestock/animal-welfare/overview-codes-practice/compulsory-codes-practice>

South Australia

http://www.environment.sa.gov.au/managing-natural-resources/plants-and-animals/Animal_welfare/Codes_of_practice/Animal_welfare_codes_of_practice

Western Australia

<https://www.agric.wa.gov.au/animalwelfare/animal-welfare-codes-practice>

Victoria

<http://agriculture.vic.gov.au/agriculture/animal-health-and-welfare/animal-welfare/animal-welfare-legislation/victorian-codes-of-practice-for-animal-welfare/code-of-practice-for-the-public-display-of-exhibition-of-animals>

ACT, Tasmania and Northern Territory

None currently available.

4. Macaques are highly intelligent primates (monkeys) with complex behaviours and social relationships, forming strong lasting bonds. In the wild, they live in large mixed social groups. Providing for the needs of non-human primates such as macaques in captivity is extremely difficult. Space, social interactions and an interesting and stimulating environment are critical to prevent boredom and frustration. Interactions with trainers can help reduce boredom and frustration but this is not an effective or acceptable substitute for the important social bonds and dynamics with animals of the same species. In addition, repeated transport and long-term confinement in transportable housing are incompatible with achieving a good quality of life for these animals.
5. Lions kept in travelling circuses face a range of similar challenges. In their natural state, lions spend time hunting or foraging, engaging in social interactions, breeding and territory marking. A study examining the impact of captivity on large carnivores concluded that naturally wide-ranging species such as lions show the most evidence of stress and psychological dysfunction in captivity (Clubb and Mason 2003).
6. In Australia, there are limited number of veterinarians that specialise in exotic species such as lions and macaques. Accessing veterinary expertise for prompt diagnosis and treatment when the circus is operating some distance from where these specialists are located may be difficult.

In summary, the available scientific evidence indicates that exotic species such as lions and macaques in a travelling circus environment are unable to fully experience natural behaviour and positive welfare states, thereby denying their basic physiological, social and behavioural needs.

Ending the use of exotic animals in circuses

In recent years a number of reports have examined the use of exotic animals in circuses.

In 2012, in response to the concerns raised in a UK report (Radford 2007) by a government appointed circus animal working group, the British Government stated that it intended to prohibit the use of exotic species in the future (DEFRA 2012). However, as an interim measure it was

proposed to introduce regulations requiring licensing and compliance with specified standards to safeguard the welfare of animals in travelling circuses.

A scientific review of the suitability of wild animals to live in a travelling circus found that for non-domesticated animals to be suitable for circus life they would need to exhibit low space requirements, simple social structures, low cognitive function, non-specialist ecological requirements and an ability to be transported without adverse welfare effects. None of the exotic animals exhibited by Australian circuses, such as monkeys and lions, currently meet these criteria. The study concluded that the species of non-domesticated animals commonly kept in circuses appear the least suited to a circus life (lossa et al 2009).

More recently, a 2016 independent scientific report compiled for the Welsh Government concluded that wild animals in travelling circuses do not experience optimal welfare (Dorning et al 2016). The report was one of the most comprehensive of its kind and involved reviewing relevant legislation and scientific papers, as well as contacting over 650 experts and organisations around the world including trainers, circus owners, researchers and animal advocates. The following key points are outlined in the report:

Compared with static zoos, enclosures for animals in circuses and travelling animal shows are generally much smaller and less complex and the provision of environmental enrichment is likely to be extremely limited or non-existent due to the need to maintain portability, ease of handling of the animals and compliance during training sessions.

Limitations of space and facilities mean that animals are often kept in inappropriate social conditions, such as isolation of social species, grouping of solitary species and/or proximity of incompatible species.

Normal behaviour of wild animals in circuses and travelling animal shows is frequently disturbed or thwarted by handling, training, performance, transport, restraint and an impoverished environment.

Caging/tethering and the performance of unnatural movements contribute to physical deformities, injuries, lameness and psychological distress.

Travelling environments are associated with restriction of normal behaviour patterns and high levels of stereotypical behaviour in captive wild animals and are unable to meet the specific climatic and environment needs of many species, thereby adversely affecting their behaviour.

The report concluded that, based on the overwhelming evidence, travelling circuses should cease using exotic animals in performances.

In 2016, the [Ringling Brothers](#) who have included exotic species in their performances throughout the USA for over 140 years, announced they would close in 2017, with mounting pressure regarding animal welfare cited as a significant factor.

A total of 33 countries have banned the use or import/export of some or all exotic species in circuses mainly due to animal welfare concerns (Dorning et al 2016). In the UK, over 130 local authorities have banned circuses with any animals whilst at least a further 65 have prohibited circuses with wild animals (Dorning et al 2016). Furthermore, local municipalities in several countries including USA, Canada, Brazil, Spain, Norway and Poland have prohibited exotic animal circus performances.

Australian community expectations

A 2015 survey found that 68% of Australians are concerned or very concerned about the use of exotic animals in circuses (McCrindle 2015). This proportion is even higher in young adults, with over 75% of Australians aged 18-25 years being concerned about the use of exotic animals in circuses. A similar trend was seen with domesticated animals in circuses with 56% being concerned or very concerned including over 68% of young adults.

The Australian Capital Territory banned circuses with exotic species over 20 years ago and over 30 councils throughout Australia have enacted bylaws or policies prohibiting council parklands to be used by circuses with exotic species, including the Perth City Council.

Conclusion

There is a mounting body of evidence that the requirements of circus life are not compatible with the physiological, social and behavioural needs of most animals. This is especially the case when it comes to exotic species such as lions and non-human primates currently held in Australian circuses. On this basis, RSPCA Australia continues to strongly advocate for Australian circuses to discontinue keeping, breeding or using exotic animals and for the adoption and enforcement of compulsory welfare standards for all animals in circuses.

References

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