

Outdoor Amusement Business Association

Frequently Asked Questions

About Performing Animals

(Last updated 5/26/2002)

Q. How are performing animals cared for? Wouldn't they be better off in the wild or a zoo?

A. Circus animal owners and handlers are professionals, and know first hand the importance of healthy, well adjusted animals – we are the true experts when it comes to animal welfare! Our animals are members of the family, loved and cared for just like your family pet.

Performing animals often live longer than other animals in captivity, and generally outlive their cousins in the wild. In fact, the oldest living elephant in North America is a retired circus elephant.

Independent studies by animal behavior specialists, such as Dr. Ted Friend of Texas A&M University, and England's Dr. Marthe Kiley Worthington have concluded that the care and welfare of circus animals is equal to that of animals in zoos, stables, kennels and farms.

Q. Don't animals die prematurely when held in captivity?

A. On the contrary, circus and performing animals tend to live longer than their counterparts in zoos and in the wild. The leading cause of death in circus animals is *old age!* The oldest living elephant in North America is a retired circus elephant. Many attribute their longevity to an active lifestyle and good physical and mental condition from interaction with humans and other animals.

Q. Is it right to keep these animals in captivity? Wouldn't they be better off in the wild?

A. Most circus animals were born in captivity. In fact, international law now prohibits the taking of endangered species, including elephants, from the wild. Unfortunately, for many of these species, the wild is not a welcoming environment. Habitats are being destroyed and animals are vulnerable to disease, poachers, and natural predators. Captive animals play an important role as ambassadors for their wild cousins – teaching people about their needs and challenges and about our responsibility to ensure their future survival.

Since the first Asian elephant was brought to this country by a circus in the 1800's, circuses have been at the forefront of successful breeding programs to help ensure the future survival of this highly endangered species. Without captive breeding programs, many endangered species are tragically headed for extinction. Circuses and animal exhibitors also fulfill an important role in educating and engaging the public in the fight to protect the future for threatened and endangered species.

Q. With all the animals shows on TV and the internet, aren't the days of performing animals coming to an end?

A. Animals, particularly elephants, are the *number one* attraction at circuses, according to industry and patron surveys. For many people, the circus provides the first or most memorable encounter with an elephant, tiger or other exotic animals. In spite of the popularity of television documentaries, there is no substitute for the sight, sounds and smells of a live animal.

Circuses also play an important role in educating people about the needs and challenges of many endangered species and the responsibility that we all have to ensure their future through habitat protection and responsible breeding programs. In fact, the most successful breeding programs for captive elephants are taking place under the sponsorship of American circuses, ensuring that these species will survive for future generations.

Q. Why are elephants chained?

A. Regulations require that elephants on traveling shows be contained through the use of chains or electric fences to ensure the animals' safety. Similar to picket lines for horses, chaining assures that elephants do not wander away from their enclosure. The chains, or 'tethers' are placed on one front leg and the alternate rear leg, allowing them the freedom of movement to sit, turn or lie down, while preventing them from leaving the area. Chains are used for their strength, durability and because they are easy to keep clean. In addition to daily performances and rehearsals, elephants are exercised regularly and, weather and space permitting, are often turned out into low voltage electric paddocks for play and interaction.

Q. Who ensures the care and well-being of performing animals?

A. Circus, zoo and performing animals are regulated by a comprehensive network of laws and regulations at the local, state and federal levels. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) oversees the care, housing transportation and health of zoo and circus animals under the Animal Welfare Act. USDA inspectors make unannounced visits to at least once a year, both on the road and at their home facilities. State and local animal welfare laws also govern the care and treatment of animals and circuses are often visited by local inspectors and fish and wildlife agents while on tour. In addition, the Outdoor Amusement Business Association (OABA) recently adopted a set of recommended professional standards for the protection and welfare of its performing animals.

Most importantly, circus animals are held to an even higher scrutiny: that of the circus going public! Over 300 million Americans attended circuses with animals in the last ten years and witnessed first hand the excellent care and treatment of these amazing animals

Q. Why is an "ankus" or bullhook used? Doesn't it hurt the animals?

A. An "ankus" is a tool we use to guide the elephants. It's long handle and pointed tip are designed to be an extension of the handler's arm and fingers. It is not intended to hurt the animal when used properly. Similar to a bridle on a horse, or a leash on a dog the ankus is a tool to guide the elephant.

Q. How are circus animals trained?

A. Like other trained animals, circus animals learn through a process of reward and repetition. Performances are designed to display an animals natural abilities or movements on cue. The animals disposition, aptitude and intelligence are taken into account during the training process. A trainers most important tools are trust and a personal relationship -- or bond – with the animal. Training requires communications, patience, understanding, repetition and rewards

Q. Circuses have many wild animals. Aren't they a public safety risk?

A. Circuses have an outstanding safety record. According to industry and insurance statistics, 30 million Americans attended a circus with animals in 1999, *without incident*. More than one million people participated in elephant rides *without incident*.

Our insurance carriers have endorsed our circuses and shows, stating that, with respect to elephants, the attractions are considered neither high risk, or liability ridden.

Q. Don't elephants carry contagious diseases like tuberculosis? Do they pose a health risk to the population in general?

A. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the USDA organized National Tuberculosis Working Group, there has *never* been a single recorded incident of a disease being transferred from a circus elephant to a patron

Captive elephants and handlers are tested annually for TB (per USDA regulations). Elephants that test positive are quarantined and treated before being allowed to resume contact with the public.

Q. How do you explain proposed legislation to ban or restrict animal performances?

A. Support for this type of legislation comes from a small, vocal, well-funded minority whose agenda goes well beyond the banning of circus elephants. Animal activists groups put forth an emotional and philosophical argument, not a factual one. Many of these groups do not believe in eating meat, wearing fur or owning pets. These groups also do not believe that animals should be exhibited under any circumstances. Certainly such a bias challenges the credibility of their argument. The abolition of circus animals is just one item on their agenda. Congress, and many states, counties and cities have repeatedly rejected their proposals, after reviewing the facts.

The OABA will work with concerned legislators to draft legislation that would penalize animal abuse or mistreatment in any circumstance. The OABA will not support any legislation that singles out circuses or animal exhibitors.

We believe that the ultimate choice lies with the individual. Those who do not care to attend a circus performance have that option. Meanwhile, the over 300 million patrons who attended the circus in America in the past decade continue to demonstrate a strong public support for this rich family tradition. Circuses are proud to provide life, safe, affordable family entertainment that is always rated 'G' and truly for "Children of All Ages"