



KINSHIP CIRCLE

# TENSION UNDER THE BIG TOP

FOR ANIMALS → ADVOCACY ▲ EDUCATION ▲ DISASTER AID  
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by Brenda Shoss

A public forum before a legislative committee does not ordinarily draw a mob on a Wednesday afternoon in Maine. Yet on February 19, 2003 nearly 100 people squeeze into an Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry Committee hearing to hiss or hurrah through three-and-half hours of deposition. At one point, all eyes fixate on a wooden pole that ends in a curved metal hook.

Foes and allies of the bill, "An Act to Prevent Cruelty to Elephants," examine the baseball-bat length device. Proponents of the nation's first state bill to ban the use of elephants in traveling exhibits claim the sharp hook is jabbed into an elephants' face, toes, knees and groin to punish and dominate. Opponents say the disciplinary hooks subdue the 100,000-pound animals.

Ringling Bros. and other animal circuses won't visit Maine any time soon. Later in 2003, legislators restrict circuses that use elephants to do tricks, fight or perform "for the amusement or entertainment of an audience." The bill's sponsor, Sen. Peggy Pendleton, tells the Blethen Maine News Service: "Certainly I don't want to keep circuses out of Maine. Just remove this act."

Pendleton's opinion reflects concerns about behind-the-scenes treatment of exotic animals in traveling acts. Communities that have already banned circuses, rodeos or other animal acts include: Encinitas, Pasadena, and Rohnert Park in California; Boulder, Colorado; Stamford, Connecticut; Hollywood and Lauderdale Lakes in Florida; Takoma Park, Maryland; Braintree, Quincy and Revere in Massachusetts; Richmond, Missouri; Greenburgh (public property), New York; and Port Townsend, Redmond in Washington. Many more locales prohibit specific acts and means coercion that inflict pain and discomfort.

Additionally, the Animal Protection Institute counts 19 Canadian provinces and five countries as animal-free under the Big Top. Cirque du Soleil, The New Pickle Family Circus, Circus Millennia, and over 21 non-animal circuses now attract large crowds worldwide.

At some point, every animal circus has violated federal, state and local welfare laws. Tom Rider, a former Ringling Bros. and Clyde Beatty-Cole Brothers Circus



employee, testified to Congress (6/13/00) that "[Elephants] live in confinement and are beaten all the time when they don't perform properly...When I became disturbed about the continual beatings, I was told, 'That's discipline.'"

Standard training, what Rider calls "daily systematic abuse," includes beatings and food/water deprivation to prevent a "mess" in the ring. Front paws are burned to coerce animals onto their hind legs. Big cats are choked down with neck ropes. Elephants are bound from tusks to feet in martingales. To control animals, trainers need to keep them "constantly in pain or in fear of pain," claims Tufts University veterinarian Paul Waldau.

Tim Frisco, a Carson & Barnes Circus animal care director, applies his "make 'em scream" method to elephants. Hollering obscenities, Frisco shocks the animals with electric prods and blowtorches hair off sensitive skin. In one investigative video, he tells a trainee to "tear that foot off! Sink it [bullhook] in the foot. When you hear screaming, then you know you got their attention."

If animals in circuses are "the most enriched animals on the face of the earth," as John Kirtland, Ringling Bros. executive director for animal stewardship contends, trainers would be armed with treats and other forms of positive reinforcement. Instead, circuses pack an arsenal of bullhooks, chains, ropes, cinch collars, shock prods, axe handles, baseball bats, metal pipes and whips.

Corporate sponsors like Denny's, General Mills, Burger King, Liz Claiborne, MasterCard, Visa, Sears Roebuck & Co. and more have cut ties with Ringling. Circus publicists spin a we-love-our-animals angle and denounce "animal rights fanatics." A Ringling Bros. ad in a Maine newspaper depicted advocates of the Prevent Cruelty to Elephants bill as insatiable zealots set to topple paper mills, fishing, restaurants, pet guardians and tourism.

"This ad personifies how the circus industry approaches the issue, void of any discussion of the cruelty issues or the animals they supposedly care about," says Robert Fisk Jr., president and director of Maine Friends of Animals.



In recent years, 25 animals under Ringling's "enrichment program" have died. Kenny, a 3-year-old elephant, perished after enduring two shows with gastrointestinal/upper respiratory infections. At age 4, the elephant Benjamin drowned while swimming unsupervised in a pond. An ailing Arabian horse collapsed during a procession and a wild-caught sea lion was found dead in her travel crate.

Arnie's shackles only came off when time to leap through hoops or dash over platforms under the threat of a whip. The Bengal Tiger finally snapped during a routine photo shoot. When Arnie lunged at Richard Chipperfield, the trainer's brother locked the big cat inside a crate. As other tigers watched, Graham Chipperfield pumped five bullets into Arnie at point-blank range.

Arnie's death augments a prolific career in abuse for the Chipperfield family, suppliers of animals and trainers to Ringling Bros. Earlier, a British court convicted Mary Chipperfield of 12 counts of animal cruelty for beating a baby chimpanzee with a riding crop. Her husband, Roger Cawley, was also sentenced for bludgeoning an elephant to "see how sick it really was."

Despite ongoing citations for trauma, physical harm, and behavioral stress to animals; deficient veterinary care; and insufficient sanitation, exercise, space, and shade for animals — Ringling Bros. resists most welfare reforms. In comments filed with the USDA, the corporation specifically opposes a draft policy to ban hot shots, shocking collars or belts and ankuses.

Circus reps argue that animal acts offer children a closeup glimpse of exotic creatures. In reality, forcing captive beasts to perform unnatural stunts does not teach kids about life in the wild. Elephants instinctively roam 20 to 50 miles everyday, pausing to indulge in mud and dust baths. Circus elephants perform up to three shows a day, with 50 weeks of travel in frigid or sweltering boxcars.

Moreover, statistics show that elephants — who often seize the chance to escape during exhibitions — caused at least 13 human deaths and 120 serious injuries since 1990. Captive felines assaulted 65 people, roughly one-third of whom died according to the API. Children can safely and accurately learn about wild animals through libraries, documentaries or sanctuaries.

More and more empty seats at animal circuses seems to say: Bring on the clowns, trapeze artists and jugglers. Animals don't belong under the Big Top.



1. Ask businesses that sponsor circuses with animals to drop their support.
2. When the circus is in town, ask newspapers (which often underwrite costs for ads and accept free tickets in exchange for favorable reviews) to sponsor all-human troupes rather than animal circuses.
3. Ask USDA officials to interrogate, charge and penalize circuses for violations of the Animal Welfare Act. WRITE TO: Acting Deputy Administrator, USDA-APHIS 4700 River Road, Unit 84 • Riverdale, MD 20737-1234  
ph: 301-734-7833; fax: 301-734-4978 • email: ace@aphis.usda.gov



The breaking of a 3-year-old Asian elephant calf, showing stereotypic behavior. Photo by Matthias Schnellmann, Switzerland

**ELEPHANT RAMPAGES:** A partial list of dangerous captive elephant rampages in the U.S. has led to 13 human deaths and 120 human injuries. [Elephant\\_Incident\\_List-US.pdf](#), [www.circuses.com](#)

**BETWEEN SHOWS:** Off-season, animals used in circuses are restrained in traveling crates, barn stalls or trucks. Unrelenting confinement physically and psychologically stresses animals. They cope with aberrant behaviors such as repetitive head-bobbing, swaying, pacing. *Randi Hutter Epstein, "Circus Life Drives Animals Insane, Two British Rights Groups Contend," Associated Press.*

Elephants live chained 70% their day and horses for 23 hours per day. Big cats are caged up to 99% of the time. Jan Creamer and Tim Phillips, *"The Ugliest Show on Earth," Animal Defenders, Ltd. UK, last accessed 22 Nov. 2004.*

**TRAVEL & SHOW SCHEDULES:** [www.bornfreeusa.org/a1a2\\_circus.php](#)  
Animals in circuses travel 11 months of the year — logging thousands of hours over long distances — shackled in vehicles without climate control and forced to stand or rest in their own waste.

**EYEWITNESS TO CRUELTY:** One-time Clyde Beatty-Cole elephant keeper Tom Rider testifies to Congress: "[I]n White Plains, N.Y., when Pete did not perform her act properly, she was taken to the tent and laid down, and five trainers beat her with bullhooks." *Testimony of Tom Rider, legislative hearing on H.R.2929, 6/13/00*

Prior Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus trainer Archele Hundley allegedly observes a handler sink a bullhook into an elephant's ear because the animal won't lie down. Ringling "believes that if they can keep these animals afraid, they can keep them submissive," Hundley said. "This is how they train their employees to handle animals," says Hundley, who quit after 3 months. *Ira Cantor, "Bill Would Outlaw Hooks Used on Elephants," Milford Daily News 17 Oct. 2007.*

Hundley, along with former Ringling worker Bob Tom, consult PETA about abuse witnessed regularly, including an elephant beaten for 30 minutes in Tulsa, OK. They contend the animal screamed as blood flowed from open wounds. The men say elephants are unchained for shows only and perform when sick or hurt. Horses are constrained by their throats, jabbed with pitchforks, hit in the face, whipped and "lip twisted." Their accounts reflect other Ringling whistleblowers.

U.S. Department of Agriculture officials uphold the Animal Welfare Act, but routinely overlook physical trauma to animals, eyewitness accounts of mistreatment, and sworn testimony from former circus employees who report mistreatment of elephants. [www.bornfreeusa.org/a1a2\\_circus.php](#)

**CONSERVATION CON:** Species endangered in the wild that are bred in circus "conservation" programs are never returned to native habitat; most become "replacement" performers. Captive breeding programs fail to address authentic perils animals face in the wild: poaching, trophy hunting, habitat degradation, and loss of prey. Instead, they "manufacture" animal entertainers with no intent to give them lives of freedom in natural environs. [www.bornfreeusa.org/a1a2\\_circus.php](#)