

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

RE PROHIBITION TO KEEP WILD ANIMALS IN CIRCUSES

Samantha Scott BVSc MRCVS

(The following represents the author's opinion and does not necessarily reflect that of the veterinary profession as a whole.)

The author is a veterinarian with thirteen years clinical experience in all aspects of general practice. The ten years have been spent in referral behaviour work and in completing welfare audits on zoos and circuses in UK, EIRE and Canada for various welfare organisations. She is currently Honorary Clinical Lecturer in Behaviour at Glasgow University Veterinary School, Honorary Fellow at Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies, Edinburgh and runs a veterinary referral clinic from both locations and in private practice across Scotland.

CARNIVORES IN CIRCUSES

The outline below is specifically directed at the keeping of lions in circuses, but may generally be applied to any carnivore or indeed most mammals, whilst bearing in mind the species ethology. For solitary species, such as most of the big cats, the psychological pressures are greater still since they are forced to spend time in proximity to animals that they would usually make every effort to avoid.

The difficulties in assessing the big cats in captivity are highlighted when one considers the lion.

Whether in zoos or circuses, the lion is behaviourally the most sedentary of the cats.

It is simple to conclude from observing ocelots, servals, amur, leopards, lynx and bobcats that these species do not do well in confinement - almost every exhibit has at least one individual performing a stereotypic behaviour. The bigger cats, the tigers the jaguar, the leopard and the cheetah are also prone to showing disturbed behaviours, depending on their management, their environment and their social structure.

The lion as a species tends to show fewer behavioural abnormalities in captivity than the other felids, but the author has still observed stereotypic behaviour in these cats when the management constraints are severe.

Does one simply conclude, therefore, that these animals are more adaptable to captivity?

Or is it that they can tolerate a poorer husbandry regime for longer before they start to display the outward signs of mental suffering?

There are (and this is still debated) several stages in the progress of mental suffering. They are not clearly delineated; they do not all necessarily occur nor in stepwise fashion. It must be remembered that the brain of the felid has many of the same neurotransmitters, the same basic biochemistry and physiology as the human brain. There are wide individual variations in the etiology, development, progress and outward manifestation of mental disease/distress in humans; there is no data to support the proposal that the same variation does *not* occur in lions, felids generally or other sentient creatures.

The stages are:

Frustration – “boredom”	}	<u>CONFLICT</u>
Fear - prevention of flight/fight response	}	

transient conflict may lead to **DISPLACEMENT ACTIVITY**, eg pacing before feeding

Frequent/permanent conflict may mean that the **displacement activity** loses its original purpose (to reduce conflict) and original stimulus

OR behaviours such as self-mutilation, oral stereotypies, other locomotor stereotypies may develop without first manifesting as a displacement activity.

OR aggression to group members / attendants / public

OR chronic anxiety states

OR withdrawal, physically and/or mentally, progressing to a state of learned helplessness or “ennui”.

If one removes an animal from its normal environment, its normal social grouping, restricts its natural behaviours and the choices it can make about its day-to-day life it would not be unreasonable to suppose that this would impose some level of suffering, perhaps physically, perhaps in mental stress, or both.

A lion, or a group of lions in a circus are so restricted in space that they cannot perform many of their natural behaviours. In some cases they cannot stretch or turn around in the beast wagons.

Obviously they cannot hunt, which is their main release of energy and most tend to become lethargic and overweight.

They cannot choose their social groupings; in the wild this would be determined by family groups and by age; the adolescent males leaving the group when they are

perceived to be a threat by the male of the pride. Circuses do not keep their lions in “prides” as such, but in convenient groupings to do with age and experience and stage of training.

Any aggression within the group cannot be easily dissipated because there is nowhere to escape, and no room to perform the normal behaviours, which would divert aggressive confrontations. Although lions are the most sociable of the cats and live in groups from two or three to forty, the pride territories may be as large as 400sqkm, depending on the region, prey numbers etc.

The stability of the pride depends upon the lionesses; in turn their stability in part relies upon the fact that they are related and will have grown up together. This is not the case in the circus. Even if there were a small group of related females, one cannot extrapolate from the wild situation and suggest that this would be stable group; the presence of males, the birth and development of cubs are all fundamental to the normal functioning of the pride. And breeding of lions in and by circuses only produces surplus animals who are either euthanased or passed on to “sanctuary” situations whose conditions are often far from the ideal.

The proximity of the lions to loud machinery, to the public, to human attendants, exposure to travel and transport stresses should all be taken into account when considering the quality of life for a circus lion.

One might argue that the animals can adapt to these stresses and it may be true that some individuals appear to adapt better than others. However, adaptation itself requires the considerable outlay of considerable resources by the animal; whilst it is adapting to one aspect of its life it cannot cope with such as infectious disease, climatic changes or other stressors. It may suffer from sub clinical or frank disease or experience the kinds of conflict that may go on to manifest as mental disturbance.

Training methods are a matter of considerable controversy. Circus and animal trainers maintain that training is achieved via a reward only based system Opponents of circuses insist that cruelty is always involved in training.

It is likely that, in most cases, a combination of instrumental learning techniques (wait for the required behaviour to be performed naturally and then reward it, linking it to a command signal) and fear based aversive training is used. Many of the behaviours performed are not natural and therefore will have to be “encouraged” by one technique or another. The other fundamental point is that unless these animals are afraid of their trainer they are likely to attack. None of these animals are truly tamed.

If one watches lions performing in a circus they will almost invariably be mouth breathing. Felids do not “pant” as easily as canines and mouth breathing usually only occurs when they are very hot and need to lose heat, or when they are stressed in another way (fear, conflict, aggression, pain).

In summary: the author would recommend that wild animals cannot be kept adequately in circuses. This is based on:

- a. Severe space restriction: lions cannot perform natural behaviours.
- b. Questions over training methods

c. Mental suffering imposed by a and b above and by all the stressors involved in circus life : transport, climatic changes, noise and air pollution exposure, proximity of public, requirement to perform.

d. Inability to provide adequate exercise facilities.

e. Inability to provide a stable social grouping.

f. Questions over surplus animals if breeding.

g. Questions over source of animals (zoos?/dealers?) if not breeding

PARROTS

The specific problems for parrots are:

1. Highly intelligent animals whose intelligence and requirement for attention can be compared with that of a four year old child.
2. Parrots form monogamous pair bonds in the wild – in order to get them to perform satisfactorily it is likely that the human trainer will take the place in the parrot's perception of the partner. This then becomes problematic when the trainer cannot be with the parrot all the time and when other humans are seen to encroach upon the situation.
3. Parrots are highly destructive and need to be provided with a wide range and constant supply of branches and the like to destroy. This also carries implications for security.
4. Zoonoses such as Psittacosis are common.
5. parrots are extremely sensitive to environmental changes such as air quality.
6. The result of failing to address adequately the physical and psychological needs of parrots results in aggression (to each other and to humans), self mutilation (in the form of feather plucking) and emotional withdrawal

signed

Samantha Scott BVSc MRCVS

0044 1620 815615

GSM 07831 231 503

E-mail abg67@dial.pipex.com

2 Coates Cottages, Longniddry, East Lothian EH32 0PL Scotland,