

**The Detrimental Effects of Abusive Training and The Denial of Fundamental Needs  
on the Emotional and Physical Health of Circus Elephants**

Excitement reverberates within the colorful tents of the circus as the audience gapes and shrieks with astonishment at the magical essence of the performance: flipping acrobats in flashing costumes, exotic creatures executing tricks, and comical clowns calling for attention. But, nothing is as captivating to the imagination as an elephant balancing on a ball? Despite the exhilaration that children and adults experience at the circus, many spectators do not realize that elephants suffer tremendously when performing stunts that four tons are not intended to execute.<sup>1</sup> The audience also overlooks the inhumane and brutal training of circus elephants behind the false façade of happiness. Behind the scenes, these gentle giants are being tortured by greedy and selfishly-motivated people in a way that transcend even the most fundamental humane treatment that all living organisms deserve just for entertainment.

The stringent living conditions of a circus elephant digresses from all that is quintessentially natural. Elephants are, by nature, wild animals that are only adept at living in the natural environment, where they can wander freely and survive based on their natural instincts. Unlike zoos and rescue reserves, circus environments do not promote a healthy lifestyle. Circus elephants live and travel in cramped compartments that are much more confined than their natural habitats<sup>2</sup>. Several reports have noted that

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<sup>1</sup> Lin, Doris and Mike Jaynes. "The Saddest Show on Earth: Elephant Abuse in Touring Circuses, Part 1." *The New York Times Company*, 2009.

<http://animalrights.about.com/od/animalsinentertainment/a/JaynesElephant1.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Starbreeze, "Circus Animals," [http://\\_www.starbreezes.com/11/circusabuse.html](http://_www.starbreezes.com/11/circusabuse.html).

elephants were confined for twenty hours or more in some circuses.<sup>3</sup> Research has shown that these poor conditions result in detrimental health problems ranging from psychological issues and aggravated behavior patterns to physical illnesses such as tuberculosis, foot infections, and arthritis.<sup>4</sup> Instead of being treated, the elephants are simply euthanized or put to death when the ailments are severe enough to hamper performance abilities.<sup>5</sup> Since 1992, a total of eighteen elephants died in The Ringling Brothers Circus.<sup>6</sup> This *one* circus euthanized seven elephants and the other eleven elephants died due to poor living conditions.<sup>7</sup> Elephants are, by nature, social animals that form complex social connections and live in herds for their entire lives.<sup>8</sup> They suffer tremendously when circuses deprive them of their family. In the wild, elephants live sixty to seventy years, but in captivity, it is not uncommon for elephants to live only half their normal life span as a result of poor living conditions.<sup>9</sup>

Not only are the basic needs of circus elephants repudiated, but elephants are also being beaten by their trainers and coerced to work to unreasonable extents. Due to the massive size of elephants, they are beaten at a young age so they will grow up fearing their trainers.<sup>10</sup> Because elephants do not perform circus acts naturally, intense training methods are used to enforce discipline. Bull hooks are sharp metal hooks with a spike on one end that sink into an elephant's sensitive skin and inflict pain on the tender areas

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<sup>3</sup> The Humane Society of the United States, "Ringling Brothers Will Stand trial for Elephant Abuse," August 23, 2007. [http://www.hsus.org/wildlife/wildlife\\_news/ringling\\_brothers\\_trial.html](http://www.hsus.org/wildlife/wildlife_news/ringling_brothers_trial.html).

<sup>4</sup>  
<sup>5</sup> Connie Dillon, "Circus Elephants: A Life of Abuse and Neglect," *Associated Content*, September 14, 2007. [http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/376305/circus\\_elephants\\_a\\_life\\_of\\_abuse](http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/376305/circus_elephants_a_life_of_abuse).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Mootilda, "The Horrifying Abuse of Circus Elephants," *Associated Content*, March 28, 2007. [http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/185697/the\\_abuse\\_of\\_circus\\_animals.html](http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/185697/the_abuse_of_circus_animals.html).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

behind the ears and knees, and on the top of feet in order to force the elephant to perform dangerous and agonizing tasks.<sup>11</sup> The bull hook is the most common “weapon” used, but other devices include baseball bats and pipes, whips, and electric shock.<sup>12</sup> Scars and boils, as consequences of the beatings, are simply left untreated and covered up during performances to avoid drawing attention to the concealed abuse.<sup>13</sup>

One of the most common justifications that trainers claim to rationalize the use of elephants in entertainment purposes is that elephants lack a sense of pain and an emotional capacity complex enough to impede their psychological stability. Although elephant trainers assert that “elephants cannot feel the pain because of their tough skin,” elephants are sensitive enough to feel the bite from a bug.<sup>14</sup> According to a circus elephant trainer, “Sink that hook into ‘em. When you hear the screaming, then you know you got their attention.<sup>15</sup>” If elephants can feel the pinch from an insect, imagine the excruciating pain elephants must endure when they are bull-hooked. Scientific evidence has verified that elephants possess highly advanced sensory systems that make them emotionally vulnerable in captive environments.<sup>16</sup> The sophisticated emotional capabilities of elephants are manifested in nature through the compassionate behavior elephants exude to both their families and other animals.<sup>17</sup> Spectators watching a herd of

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<sup>11</sup> Connie Dillon, “Circus Elephants: A Life of Abuse and Neglect,” *Associated Content*, September 14, 2007. [http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/376305/circus\\_elephants\\_a\\_life\\_of\\_abuse](http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/376305/circus_elephants_a_life_of_abuse).

<sup>12</sup> Starbreeze, “Circus Animals,” <http://www.starbreezes.com/11/circusabuse.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Connie Dillon, “Circus Elephants: A Life of Abuse and Neglect,” *Associated Content*, September 14, 2007. [http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/376305/circus\\_elephants\\_a\\_life\\_of\\_abuse](http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/376305/circus_elephants_a_life_of_abuse).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Starbreeze, “Circus Animals,” <http://www.starbreezes.com/11/circusabuse.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Natalie Ragan, “Wildlife in Entertainment,” *The Humane Society of the United States*, 2009.

[http://www.hsus.org/hsi/wildlife/captive\\_wildlife\\_and\\_exotic\\_pets/wildlife\\_in\\_entertainment\\_exploited.html](http://www.hsus.org/hsi/wildlife/captive_wildlife_and_exotic_pets/wildlife_in_entertainment_exploited.html).

<sup>17</sup> PBS Nature, “Unforgettable Elephants: Elephant Emotions,” (New York: The Educational Broadcasting Corporation, 1997-2008). <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/nature/unforgettable/emotions.html>

elephants have observed that the group traveled slowly because one of its members had a broken leg.<sup>18</sup> Another person reported that an adult elephant attempted to extract a baby rhinoceros stuck in the mud.<sup>19</sup> Elephants, similar to humans, have the ability to experience the emotions of love and compassion, but in captivity, the intricate networks of social and familial relations are disrupted.<sup>20</sup>

When provoked by humans, elephant emotions extend beyond elation, compassion and love to disclose a more tenebrous nature. In the United States, circus elephant rages have injured more than 120 people and have killed 57 people since 1990.<sup>21</sup> The rages and killings are primarily caused by the mental strain that circus elephants must endure in captivity.<sup>22</sup> Once given a chance to escape, the elephants release their retrained emotions on anyone who gets in their way. Though many claim that the rages are capricious impulses of elephants that cannot be predicted, psychological studies have suggested a correlation to the violent behavior. While traveling in semi-trailers and railroad cars, elephants are known to manifest a “weaving” or “rocking” behavior that is characterized by repetitive and restless side to side movements.<sup>23</sup> But, these elephants should not be blamed for their temper discharges because circuses have enforced a ruthlessly harsh life upon them that endangers the public and denies elephants any form of emotional catharsis.

By keeping elephants in captive environments, circuses defy the preservation of an endangered species. The African and Asian elephants are the only breeds of elephants

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Starbreeze, “Circus Animals,” [http://\\_www.starbreezes.com/11/circusabuse.html](http://_www.starbreezes.com/11/circusabuse.html).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Wikipedia. “Elephant.” *Wikimedia Foundation Inc, U.S.A*, February 18, 2009. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/elephant>

left remaining in the world and both breeds are on the Endangered Species list.<sup>24</sup> At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there were 5-10 million African elephants and 200,000 Asian elephants in the world, but today, only 1 million African elephants and 200,000 Asian elephants remain in the entire world.<sup>25</sup> In North America, captive African and Asian elephant populations are not reproducing rapidly enough to sustain a stable population.<sup>26</sup> Studies predict that of the 300 elephants currently residing in captivity in North America, only 17 elephants will be left in 50 years and the ones that linger will be too old to breed.<sup>27</sup> The global population of elephants will continue to decline.

Because the rights of an endangered species are being denied, now is the time to impose stricter regulations on the management of circus elephants. Laws that require humane animal treatment, such as the Animal Welfare's Act, are not potent enough to thwart unreasonable conduct towards animals.<sup>28</sup> USDA, the sponsor of this act, does not regularly investigate the handling of elephants in circuses, and if they do, the circus is merely fined, instead of punished.<sup>29</sup>

Therefore, it is up to citizens to take personal initiatives in order enforce more effective policies. Brochures can be distributed during circus fairs to educate people about elephant abuse and to dissuade them from visiting circuses with animals so that the circuses will not be funded by naïve audiences who are unaware of the cruelty behind the scenes. I have created and placed numerous brochures in the mailboxes of my

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<sup>24</sup> Connie Dillon, "Circus Elephants: A Life of Abuse and Neglect," *Associated Content*, September 14, 2007. [http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/376305/circus\\_elephants\\_a\\_life\\_of\\_abuse](http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/376305/circus_elephants_a_life_of_abuse).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Maryann Mott, "Elephant Abuse Charges Add Fuel to Circus Debate," *National Geographic News*, April 6, 2004. [http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2004/04/0406\\_040406\\_circuselephants.html](http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2004/04/0406_040406_circuselephants.html).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Connie Dillon, "Circus Elephants: A Life of Abuse and Neglect," *Associated Content*, September 14, 2007. [http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/376305/circus\\_elephants\\_a\\_life\\_of\\_abuse](http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/376305/circus_elephants_a_life_of_abuse).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

community, urging citizens to take an affirmative stance. In the brochures, I outlined the causes and effects of elephant cruelty, complemented the statements with realistic photos and immediate measures that can be taken to prevent the abuse of elephants, and attached a sample letter that can be written and sent to a local humane society. I have also gathered signatures and written two petitions to the local humane society and to the state representative urging them to oversee the humane treatment of elephants and to advocate for the implementation of more pragmatic regulations. Because the U.S government is significantly influenced by public opinion, persuading the public to adopt an auspicious stance will yield the power necessary to convince law makers. I realized that, perhaps, the sheer number of letters written by supporters of animal rights will be sufficient enough to greatly affect future decisions. As a branch of my school's Amnesty International Club, I will pursue the innovation of an Amnesty International for Animals, in which I will set my heart on accumulating copious numbers of letters written to the state, bridging efforts with the local humane society to organize a city-wide animal rights campaign, and arranging for fundraisers to donate the funds to endangered species conservation reserves.

I strongly believe that public support will eventually provide a brighter future for these poor animals and other animals in similar situations. Please help make that dream come true by gathering all of your friends, family, and community in a common effort to bring justice to animal cruelty and preserve a dying species. Avoid attending circuses that use animals, distribute pamphlets at circuses and to the greater community, write petitions to animal rights societies and legislative entities, donate funds to elephant

conservation reserves, and organize animal rights campaigns. Without your diligent efforts, there might not be a tomorrow for elephants.

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