

Modern Slaves: the Secret Life of Circus Elephants

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Slavery has been abolished in the United States, hasn't it? Certainly people no longer hold captives and subject them to merciless beatings and dreadful living conditions, right? There are laws against that, aren't there? These statements are not as true as one may believe. There are still slaves. They are beaten and chained and there is little legislation doing anything about it. Where are these atrocities occurring, and who are the subjects of such misery and torture? Well, they're coming to a town near you. Cole Brothers, Bentley Brothers, Carson and Barnes, Ringling Brothers, and many other circuses are all slaveholders by every meaning of the word. Who are the slaves? They are none other than the elephants.

Circus elephants are subject to comparable conditions to that of African-American slaves in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Asian elephants are taken from their homeland, where they are an endangered species, and brought into big tops to be trained. They are beaten and forced to do unnatural tricks, such as headstands, to please the public eye. If they don't obey they are beaten and stabbed with bull hooks (Meyer). Samuel Haddock, a former Ringling Brothers Elephant trainer, says in a Washington Post interview: "The baby elephant is slammed to the ground.... See its mouth wide open? It's screaming bloody murder. It doesn't have its mouth open for a carrot." This elephant was being trained to lie down on command (Montgomery).

This kind of cruelty certainly should ring a bell for anyone educated about American slavery. Slaves were whipped, beaten, and subjected to terrible living conditions. Circus elephants are bound with chains in tiny spaces no bigger than an

average automobile, often for up to twenty hours a day. This confinement has harmful physical and psychological effects (Jaynes). The elephants are only released for training or exhibition, neither of which are ideal alternatives. If an elephant does not perform properly, it is beaten. If it isn't learning a trick properly, it is beaten. There is no mercy for these elephants and no hope for a better life.

Most circus elephants are born into the business. One can only imagine the horrors of being born into slavery. But surely these baby elephants get to stay with their mothers, right? Well, that's not so for these performers-to-be. They are cruelly and untimely separated from their mothers between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four months, as compared to the natural age to leave the mother of five or six years (Montgomery). Samuel Haddock recalls the separations in his interview with *The Post*:

When pulling 18-24-month-old babies, the mother is chained against the wall by all four legs. Usually there's 6 or 7 staff that go in to pull the baby rodeo style.... Some mothers scream more than others while watching their babies roped.... The relationship with their mother ends. (Montgomery)

Such a traumatic event would clearly impose great emotional scarring on both the mother and child. On the other hand, at least they won't have to suffer through life until the natural life expectancy of seventy years. Elephants in captivity are expected to live only fourteen years (APNM, "Natural...").

Let's take a closer look at the physical abuse circus elephants undergo on a regular basis. These elephants are forcibly made to learn and perform new tricks and perfect old ones constantly. In training, positive motivation is the last thing on trainers' minds. Elephants are forced into unnatural positions with whips, bull hooks, and

pitchforks, and repeatedly so, until they learn a given trick. If the trick is not learned fast enough, not performed well enough, or an elephant just misbehaves, then it is punished with immobilization, electric shocks, puncture wounds, and even burns from blow torches (APNM, “Elephants...”). One may initially think that the elephants’ tough skin would protect them, making seemingly horrible punishments nothing more than mild discomforts. However, the leathery appearance of an elephant’s skin is misleading, for it is about as sensitive as a human’s skin according to PETA Vice-President Daphna Nachminovitch (Colletti). Perhaps this fact will help bring realizations of circus elephant abuse closer to home.

An avid circusgoer may argue against these allegations of harsh physical abuse due to lack of visible evidence or suffering during performances. He or she may claim to have never seen a flesh wound of any kind on any performing elephant before. This means they must not be abused as harshly or as often as is claimed because there would not be enough time for such ample recovery before a performance. That circusgoer would be correct in that the animals do not have time to recover from training injuries before a performance, but that doesn’t mean they’re not there. Circus staff will apply types of powder to an elephant’s wounds before a performance. This powder, be it special make up or even just topsoil, has a masking effect to shield open, possibly fresh, wounds from the public. This is known as “spot work” (APNM, “Elephants...”). The circus knows it would put a massive dent in its reputation and revenue if the general public found out about such abuse. Clearly, it knows what it is doing is wrong. However, it is content with merely covering it up. Heaven forbid the staff be forced to show any mercy.

If you are not yet convinced of the severity of the situation at hand and have a mind-set along the lines of, “it doesn’t affect me, so why should I care?” then the following information may come as a shock. Not only does the issue of circus elephant abuse affect everyday citizens, but it affects them on a level of life and death. A human strain of tuberculosis, *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*, has been diagnosed in many captive elephants. Tuberculosis is an extremely deadly, highly contagious airborne bacterium. Even worse, improper or incomplete treatments develop drug-resistant strains in some elephants. At a crowded circus, especially one at which the animals are up close and personal, one sick elephant could contaminate any given number of spectators in its vicinity. Tuberculosis can take weeks to show symptoms, and if not properly diagnosed and treated it can very easily kill a human (Griffith). Children are especially susceptible because of their weaker immune systems, and children are generally a large portion of circusgoers.

If constant elephant torture, confinement, and a life expectancy that is a mere twenty percent of that in the wild isn’t a wake-up call, then the threat of human lives being taken should be. Circus elephants need our help, for their own good as well as that of humanity. Luckily there are ways to help these poor animals. The simplest way to do so is to boycott any circuses that use animals in their acts. There are many circuses that only use humans in their performances, including Circus Smirkus, Cirque Dreams, The Modern Gypsies, and Cirque du Soleil, just to name a few (ASPCA). By attending only these animal-free circuses, you are making a difference and helping the effort to ban circuses that use animals, especially if you get your friends involved.

Boycotting is a must as far as supporting the cause for ending circus animal abuse, but anyone can take it one step further by taking a couple minutes to sign already existing petitions stating that circuses utilizing animals in their acts should be banned, many of which are online. One can also start a petition of his/her own to present to the community. By doing so, this single person has both boosted awareness of the horrible conditions circus animals must live under as well as taken legal action to improve these conditions. Even if the petition is not accepted, the issue has been presented to the local government and persistent efforts may well pay off.

An easy way to get involved in fighting animal-abusing circuses is to browse through resources and information given on circuses.com, a PETA-operated website, and similar sites. Among its list of easy ways to help out are links to pages concerning circus-related animal abuse issues in other communities and how you can support these communities in their fight against these heinous acts. Also, it gives a “to-do list” of procedures to follow when a circus comes to town, such as documenting potential signs of animal abuse by taking photos (Circuses.com).

No matter how much you help or what compels you, every little effort is one more step toward a world free of circus animal abuse. Whether you are shocked by the physical torment endured by elephants, even as babies, torn by the emotionally scarring premature family separation, scared of tuberculosis exposure, or just want to do your part in helping out an endangered species, you can make a difference. You can help abolish this modern slavery. I, for one, am never attending a circus with animals again. I invite everyone to do the same. There are plenty of other sources of entertainment, but leave the animals out of it. Join the fight. Be an activist. End slavery.

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