

The Last Performance of the Circus Bear

Living in the state of Alaska was one of the most incredible experiences of my childhood. Waking up each morning to the pristine beauty of the land and having the opportunity to explore the mountains of Denali, the massive Yukon River, and the wide open tundra of northern Alaska was an adventure many individuals only have the ability to witness from a television screen. One aspect of this whole experience was watching the various types of wildlife roam freely throughout the vast frontier. On one specific road trip on the Dalton Highway, I watched in awe as an enormous grizzly bear sprinted across the gravel road in the pursuit of a young caribou that was sure to be the bear's first springtime meal. This was an amazing sight to be able to see an untamed creature behaving naturally in his own habitat. Unfortunately, after I moved back to the lower 48 states with my family, I attended my first Shrine Circus as part of the graduation for our school's D.A.R.E. program and I was horrified at the animal cruelty that I witnessed.

Founded in 1906, the Shrine Circus is considered a popular family event that travels to numerous cities throughout the United States and Canada in support of the Shriner's charities for children (Blanford). The circus is widely known for its acrobats, clowns, juggling acts, and even several different species of performing animals. I was interested in attending this type of entertainment primarily for the risky stunts. However, when the animals were led to the center stage, I was shocked at the amount of cruelty inflicted on those beautiful creatures including the brown bears that were dressed in red colored dresses.

Just moments after the performance began, the circus trainers used whips and leashes to control their bears while maneuvering them into positions that bears in the wild would never imitate. They were performing headstands, balancing on large balls, and dancing to rock and roll music. At one point the trainer wrestled with the bear to impress the crowd with the animal's

enormous size when it stood on his hind legs. One bear somehow managed to ride a bicycle in circles, but when the trainer helped him onto a motorcycle, the bear crashed into the side of the ring. With the failed attempt, the trainer and his assistant seemed upset and used the whip to quickly guide the bear back to his sitting position on the chair. Watching the bears' performance midway through the whole circus event ruined the whole experience for me because of the inhumane way that these innocent animals were treated.

The utilization of bears in a circus is certainly not new nor does the practice only occur in the United States and Canada. In fact, bears are used as entertainment all over the world where each performance is purely for the purpose of attracting crowds and making profit ("A Lifetime of Misery"). That in itself is a despicable practice. However, it is how bears become performers in the first place and how they are treated for the duration of their lives in a circus setting that is most alarming.

Whether they are born within the circus conservation program or separated from their mothers in the wild, young bear cubs are deprived of the space to roam, to hunt for food, and to live within their natural environment ("Get the Facts"). They endure a rigorous training schedule that incorporates harsh, cruel treatment from their circus trainers whose main purpose is to teach them tricks. Bears are often beaten, muzzled, drugged, and one report indicates that their teeth and claws are removed in order to protect trainers from being injured. Bears have even experienced their paws being burned to force them to stand up during their tricks ("Circus Bears"). They are broken of their will to be wild bears only to be a two hour amusement for an audience to see.

When the curtain closes on the circus performance, a circus bear's life does not get any easier. They are often chained or locked up in small cages that do not allow them to move easily

and they remain there for long periods of time (Sherman). In addition to their living conditions, their trainers constantly reinforce the bear's learned behavior by inflicting repeated pain and injury in order to force them to perform. With this treatment, bears eventually begin to show various behaviors such as pacing, self mutilation, and swaying from side to side. Scientists have taken measurements of blood pressure and heart rate and have found that these behaviors have a strong correlation to the amount of fear they have for their trainers ("Circus Bears").

Bears are dangerous creatures in the wild where protecting themselves from predators is a natural instinct. When they are held in captivity and beaten until they are fearful of their trainers, it is no wonder why they lash out at humans and it is even more absurd that their behavior is considered to be unpredictable. Statistics have shown that since 1990, 13 humans have been killed by captive bears with eight of them being children (Nakate). In 2009, a bear on skates brutally killed a circus administrator and critically injured the animal trainer during a routine rehearsal in the capital of Kyrgyzstan. Because of this brutal attack, the bear was killed for his aggression toward humans (Pushkin). In another incident that occurred during a Shrine Circus performance in Grand Rapids, Missouri, a bear who was reportedly caged at the time bit off the tip of a two year old child's finger (Sherman). Fortunately, in this case, the bear was not euthanized, but this is not always the outcome. As many as 26 circus bears have been put to death since 1990 for their attacks on humans which primarily resulted from their harsh mistreatment (Nakate).

Animal cruelty within the circus is a major problem and our government has taken steps to protect these creatures with the Animal Welfare Act of 1969. Under this policy, circuses must be licensed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and provide a standard of care and treatment with regard to "housing, handling, sanitation, nutrition, water, veterinary care, and protection

from extreme weather and temperatures” (“Circuses & the Law”). However, this law does not provide specific guidelines that protect animals from “mistreatment, neglect, and improper handling and training” (“Circuses & the Law”). As an added problem, there are less than 100 inspectors to monitor an approximate 10,000 facilities and training sessions where much of the animal abuse occurs (Sherman).

With vague government laws such as the Animal Welfare Act, circus bears will continue to be deprived of a healthy, happy life. Fortunately, there are many animal rights groups who are committed to raising awareness of animal cruelty within circuses and have introduced legislation concerning this issue throughout the United States. Even individuals who believe in this important cause can make a stand against the mistreatment of wild animals. Two of the most valuable rights that we have as Americans is freedom of speech and our ability to choose. By spreading the word about this issue, more people would be able to learn and understand the truth behind the circus and even go as far as petitioning the federal government to make changes to the laws that specifically make it a punishable crime to abuse wild creatures. The next important step, in my belief, is to stop attending circuses that promote wild animals as part of their entertainment. In fact, it is also necessary to discourage school districts who reward their graduating D.A.R.E students with a field trip to the Shrine Circus. Instead, there are several circus venues throughout the country that provide enjoyment without using animals as a form of amusement for their audience (“Animal-Free Circuses”).

In the beauty of the Alaskan wilderness, I have witnessed wildlife the way that God intended, roaming free without chains binding their limbs, whips lacerating their skin, and muzzles silencing their voice. Unfortunately, I have also seen the opposite when I watched as the circus bears were exploited as a public attraction and for monetary gain, a practice I vowed

never to take part in again. Gary Kowalski once said, “It is not just that animals make the world more scenic or picturesque. The lives of animals are woven into our very being - closer than our own breathing - and our souls will suffer when they are gone” (Nakate). Already we are witnessing the death of a variety of species because of our irresponsible behavior and careless practices with relation to our environment. Circus bears do not deserve the same fate. The human race has an obligation to preserve these species that share our planet, to show compassion and respect for them by ending the senseless torture and inhumane treatment, and to ensure that they can live healthy and happy lives, just as we expect for ourselves. With a unified commitment, we can make this the last performance of the circus bear.

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