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BC SPCA - Circuses

Background

The BC SPCA is opposed to the capture, acclimatization, training and use of animals, particularly exotic ones, in circuses. In the past, people were thrilled at the sight of huge elephants standing on their hind legs, bears riding bicycles and lions and tigers jumping through flaming hoops. However, with greater awareness of the behaviour and needs of wild animals and their habitats, many members of the public have come to question the ethics of the circus environment as it applies to animals.



An increasing number of communities throughout Canada have adopted by-laws rejecting the use of wild or exotic animals in circuses and similar performances. British Columbia is the leading Canadian province with [19 municipalities banning circuses](#) that have wild and exotic animals performing. Modern circuses have already begun to redefine themselves by eliminating outdated and exploitive wild animal acts becoming [animal-free circuses](#) - the best known of which is probably Canada's own Cirque du Soleil. The majority of people do not see an 'educational value' in circuses where bears are taken out of their natural habitat to ride bikes.

For animals still trapped in the existence of the travelling show, it is crucial that the [public help their cause](#). More work is needed to ensure that Canada becomes a country where wild animals no longer suffer in circuses.

Conditions on the Road

Circuses travel from one city to another to perform their shows. Touring seasons last quite a while, some 48 - 50 weeks of year. Some circus animals may end a tour with one company only to be placed in another circus tour group, thus working all year long.

Bears, lions, elephants, and other animals travel in 'beast cars' where they sleep, eat, and defecate. Zoocheck's [Performing Prisoners A Case Against the Use of Wild Animals in Circuses, Travelling Shows & Novelty Acts](#) report states:

One example is the Moscow Circus which housed Asiatic brown bears, some weighing more than 500 pounds, in cages measuring just 41 inches wide by 54 inches long during its Canadian tour in 1991. The bears were not able to stretch out, play, explore, or engage in their normal repertoire of behaviours. Few animal living quarters are as devoid of stimulation as the circus beast wagon.

Dr. Ken Langelier, a veterinarian who has conducted investigations of circuses for the British Columbia SPCA reports that a trainer with the Carden Circus, on a Canadian tour for the Shrine Circus, said he *"...had lost one bear to heat prostration in a previous tour"*. According to Langelier, *"This particular circus performed two to three times daily seven days a week for 72 straight days while in Canada. The trainers relayed it was a tiring schedule for both them and their animals..."*.

Zoos in the past shared similar animal handling methodologies found in circuses, but have since introduced more effective and humane practices. For example, elephant management in zoos no longer chain elephants, yet this is a common practice in circuses.

Public Safety

Is it safe to have wild animals in proximity of people and their homes? Experience has shown that circus animals have

gotten loose because of inappropriate cages or barriers. These large wild animals despite trainers claiming to have them under control, at anytime may follow their natural wild instinct and not behave as a 'tamed' animal. Wild animals should be kept wild by respecting their wildness and keeping a safe distance.

[Deaths and injury](#) to people have been recorded widely as a result of circus animals due to poor emergency protocols and equipment at circuses. Zoocheck's report found the following Canadian incidents on record:

- 11/93 Metro Toronto, Ont. A keeper at the Metro Toronto Zoo was gored through the abdomen by an elephant.
- 3/91 Oshawa, Ont. A 450 pound tiger featured in Jane Jones Exotic Circus leapt on passersby on two different occasions.
- 7/90 Mississauga, Ont. A 600 pound tiger escaped for 10 minutes from the Shrine Circus.
- 8/88 Mississauga, Ont. A brown bear at a Moscow Circus matinee performance bolted into the audience.

Trade in Wildlife



According to the 1994 Traffic Europe-World Wildlife Fund report [CITES](#) and *The Regulation of Wildlife Trade for European Circuses*, there is a limited but consistent circus trade in wild-caught apes, bears, elephants, and other species which has escaped the attention of wildlife trade enforcement authorities. According to Zoocheck's report "the impact of the illegal trade on wildlife populations is devastating. It is estimated that 80% of the animals handled die either in the capture process, in transit or within first few months of captivity."

How Can You Help Animals in Circuses

Now that you have a snapshot of what is happening under the big top you may want to know how you can help the animals. Choose one or more of the suggestions below to help.

1. Call your City or Municipal Hall and find out if Council is considering a by-law to ban circuses that have performing wild or exotic animals.
2. Fax a [letter](#) to the mayor expressing your concern about the community supporting acts that abuse animals. Copy your letter to the SPCA or local humane group.
3. Write a similar letter to the media. Don't hesitate to send your letter to the editor of both daily and community papers expressing your point of view.
4. Join or start a committee, perhaps working with the SPCA or local humane group, whose goal is to implement a [campaign](#) to convince Council to adopt a by-law against the use of wild/exotic animals in performing venues.
5. Don't attend a circus with performing animals - only attend [animal-free circuses](#).

Websites

For more information on the plight of animals in circuses visit these sites below:

- [Animal Protection Institute](#) - API has a circus campaign you may want to refer to for your campaign. It provides: fact sheets, expert opinions, sample letters, action alerts, advertising, and more.
P.O. Box 22505, Sacramento, CA 95822, USA
- [Canadian Federation of Humane Societies](#) - this site has an entire section demonstrating how to campaign for circus animals. An excellent Canadian resource.
Suite 102- 30 Concourse Gate, Nepean, ON K2E 7V7, Canada
1-888-678-CFHS
- [Captive Animals Protection Society, The](#) - this United Kingdom humane group provide reports and fact sheets on circuses. They also have campaigns for specific animals in danger from circuses.
P.O. Box 43, Dudley, West Midlands DY3 2YP UK
- [PETA](#) - People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals provides background information on various circus acts and provides a "activist" view on how to deal with circuses coming to town.
501 Front Street, Norfolk, VA 23510, USA
(757)622-PETA
- [World Society for the Protection of Animals](#) - this site provides news items on circus if you use their search engine and type in 'circus'.
44 Victoria Street, Suite 1310, Toronto, ON M5C 1Y2
(416)369-0044
- [Zoocheck Canada](#) - is a national animal protection charity established to protect wildlife in captivity and in the wild. They have an excellent report available on line about circuses.
1729-3266 Yonge Street, Toronto, ON M4N 3P6
(416)285-1744

Animal-Free Circuses

In BC the Mexican International Circus provides animal-free circuses across BC and Alberta. For other [animal-free acts](#) visit the CFHS (Canadian Federation of Humane Societies) site.

<http://www.sPCA.bc.ca/AnimalIssues/circus.asp>