

Protect wild animals in traveling shows

A guide to ending the use of wild animal acts in
your community



**THE HUMANE SOCIETY
OF THE UNITED STATES**

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Getting started

Traveling wild animal shows transport animals for temporary exhibition at various venues such as arenas, fairgrounds, parking lots, convention centers and shopping malls. The animals may perform tricks, be displayed in small, portable cages, or be used for public handling. Life on the road is miserable for the animals ranging from elephants, bears and big cats to zebras, camels, kangaroos and sea lions. As of 2023, eight states and nearly 200 localities in 37 states have passed various restrictions governing the use of wild animals in circuses and traveling shows. **Advocates like you helped pass these laws. You can be a part of this important trend.**

The public has become increasingly aware of the plight of animals used in traveling shows, leading to ever-increasing opposition to their use for such exhibitions. In response, more communities and states are passing laws that ban the use of wild animals in traveling shows.

This toolkit provides you with guidelines for eliminating this abusive and archaic form of entertainment in your community. You will also find samples of:

- Fact sheets.
- Letters to the editor.
- Letters to sponsors and venues.
- Letters to lawmakers.
- Legislation passed in other communities.
- Testimony.

Whether you want to write letters to the editor, contact sponsors and venues, start a social media campaign or pursue a legislative initiative, the HSUS is committed to supporting your efforts to protect the many elephants, tigers, lions, bears, primates and other wild animals who endure a miserable life simply to provide the public with a few fleeting moments of so-called entertainment.

Upon request, we can provide current fact sheets on dangerous incidents with captive wild animals, problems with specific exhibitors, and a list of localities that have passed legislation restricting the use of wild animals in traveling shows.

Three main problems with circuses, fairs, festivals and other venues that feature transient wild animal acts and displays:

1. Trainers use **violent and inhumane training methods** to force animals to perform confusing and physically grueling tricks on command. Countless videos, whistleblowers and eyewitness accounts confirm that, behind the scenes, circus trainers use beatings and other forms of aversive physical punishment to make wild animals submissive and coerce them into performing difficult and unnatural tricks.
2. Animals used in traveling shows are subjected to **prolonged confinement** as they are hauled from city to city in poorly ventilated trucks and trailers. They are denied basic necessities, such as adequate exercise and space and access to clean cages, food, water and veterinary care.
3. Using wild animals in traveling shows poses **public safety risks**. Rampaging elephants have bolted out of circus tents with frightened children clinging to their backs, and big cats and primates have run amok and injured children.

For assistance, contact wildlife@humaneociety.org.



Learn the issue

Circuses have been traveling to cities across the country performing with wild animals such as elephants, tigers, lions and bears for more than 100 years, but attitudes have changed, and it is important for laws to reflect public opinion. Circuses have rightfully earned the reputation as the cruelest shows on Earth due to the way they train, confine and neglect animals.

STATE OF THE CIRCUS INDUSTRY

Animal-based circuses have been dwindling in popularity for decades, while contemporary circuses that dazzle crowds solely with skilled human performers, such as Cirque du Soleil, have soared. According to a November 2016 article in Forbes magazine, circus attendance in the United States dropped an estimated 30% to 50% over the previous 20 years, and gross revenue from circuses in the U.S. fell almost 9% between 2007 and 2012.

69% of Americans are very or somewhat concerned about the treatment of animals in circuses.

- 2015 Gallup Poll

Some circuses have eliminated some or all wild animal acts, while others have shut down completely. Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus eliminated elephant acts in 2016, citing in part a shift in public opinion about the use of those animals in circuses. After folding its tent in 2017 due to declining ticket sales, Ringling Bros. announced plans in 2022 to revive its shows, but as animal-free entertainment. Cole Bros. Circus, a circus that used animals and primarily traveled up and down the East Coast, went out of business in 2016 after over 130 years of operation. A number of Shrine Circuses have either eliminated, or announced plans to eliminate, elephants and other wild animal acts. Circus Vazquez, which used to travel with elephants and tigers, now boasts on its website: “[W]e are an animal-free circus! The evolution of the circus and the people’s choice has led us to make the artists the greatness of our show.” The non-animal model has been so successful for the Vazquez family that they launched another animal-free circus called FLIP! circus.

There is no better time for advocates to finally put an end to big top cruelty.

CRUELTY UNDER THE BIG TOP

There are many problems with using wild animals in circuses. Some of the biggest issues include cruel training, lengthy travel and constant confinement.

Training

Animals don’t perform confusing and often physically grueling circus tricks because they want to—they perform because they’re afraid not to. Trainers use violent methods, including beatings and electric shock, to force animals to perform difficult and frightening tricks on command. For example, tigers would never voluntarily jump through a fiery hoop, and elephants would not willingly stand on their head or hind legs. These animals are conditioned through cruel behind-the-scenes training sessions to perform these maneuvers or suffer the painful consequences. Unnatural tricks also place a great deal of strain on animals’ muscles and joints, leading to crippling injuries and painful conditions such as arthritis.

For animals in circuses, there is no such thing as “positive reinforcement”—only varying degrees of punishment and deprivation. Tools of the trade include bullhooks, electric shocking devices, whips, sticks, chains, muzzles and rope. Circuses easily get away with routine abuse because no government agency monitors training sessions. The widespread availability and use of videos taken by the public, undercover investigations, government documents and whistleblower reports have provided ample documentation and irrefutable evidence that the suffering animals endure in circuses is real and systemic throughout the industry.

One of the earliest incidents captured on video by a circusgoer was the beating of a baby elephant named Mickey during a performance in Oregon in 1994. The 15-month-old elephant collapsed, screaming and bleeding as his trainer repeatedly struck him with a bullhook for failing to perform a trick. One spectator stated, “I have never heard a scream in my life like the scream that came out of that baby elephant.” The trainer pulled the elephant out of the tent and “got it down on the ground again. It was screaming and trying to crawl away on its hands and knees like a human being.” The trainer pleaded no contest to animal abuse charges brought by local authorities.



Trainers condition elephants to fear the bullhook at a very young age.

A bullhook resembles a fireplace poker and consists of a long rod, sharp metal hook and spiked tip, and is used as a weapon to inflict pain and suffering on elephants. Trainers use the hooked and pointed end to strike, jab, pull, prod and hook sensitive spots on the elephant's body, such as behind their ears, and on their feet and trunks. The use of bullhooks results in trauma and physical injury, often including lacerations, puncture wounds and abscesses. **This barbaric device is used by all circuses that use elephants.**

Scientists, keepers, veterinarians, conservationists and other authorities on elephants agree that the bullhook has no place in modern elephant management and care. In 2023, the Association of Zoos and Aquariums ended all uses of the device in accredited facilities.

Shocking photos taken by an elephant trainer with Ringling Bros. documented the progression of violence involved in training elephants to perform circus tricks. Baby elephants are forcibly pulled from the nurturing care of their mothers and are then disciplined for exhibiting every natural instinct and behavior. During training sessions, the babies are bound with ropes and wrestled by several men into unnatural, confusing and physically challenging positions. They scream and struggle as they are stretched out, slammed to the ground, gouged with bullhooks, and shocked with electric prods.

Perhaps the best evidence of how utterly damaging bullhooks are to elephant welfare is from an undercover investigation of Carson & Barnes Circus. Tim Frisco, the animal care director, was captured on video during profanity-laden, violent, behind-the-scenes training sessions. Frisco describes how to use the bullhook by instructing trainers to "Sink that hook and give it everything you got." He goes on to say "hurt 'em" and "make 'em scream," emphasizing that "when you hear that screaming, then you know you got their attention." Frisco demonstrates the force needed by swinging the bullhook like a baseball bat, saying, "When he starts squirming too [expletive] much, both [expletive] hands—BOOM—right under that chin." Frisco is videotaped aggressively hooking elephants as one trumpets in agony.

Frisco also shocked elephants with electric prods and cautioned that the beatings must be concealed from the public. Given the terrifying abuse elephants endure in hidden training sessions, it's no wonder that the mere presence of a bullhook serves as a constant reminder to elephants that failure to obey commands will result in a sharp metal hook slicing through their sensitive flesh.

Elephants are not the only animals who suffer for "entertainment." Big cat trainers also use abusive dominance and fear-based training and handling methods.

In 2017, an undercover investigator with the Humane Society of the United States spent several weeks working and traveling with Ryan Easley's ShowMe Tigers circus act. Our investigation found that the eight tigers featured in the act were trained and handled through the violent use of whips and sticks and were forced to perform tricks that could lead to physical ailments. Easley, who uses the stage name Ryan Holder, toured at that time with Carden Circus, often performing for Shrine Circus.

Our investigator documented Easley using a lunge whip and a long stick as training tools to control the six female and two male tigers. He cracked the whip, which would sometimes make a loud noise or come in contact with the tigers, and used the stick to prod and hit the tigers. While Easley did not always use the same degree of force in whipping and striking the tigers during the show as he did during a practice session, the tigers never knew what to expect. It was obvious that the mere presence of these tools created a great deal of anxiety and fear for the tigers.

While in the performance ring, the tigers exhibited classic signs of fear and behavioral stress. They squinted, flinched, flattened their ears back, sat with hunched shoulders, snarled, cowered, moaned in distress, swatted at Easley or the training tools, crept reluctantly to position in the performance ring, and bolted back to their pedestals—sometimes in the middle of a trick. During a practice session, our investigator documented Easley becoming visibly annoyed with a tiger named Tora who was not responding to commands. Easley aggressively whipped at Tora to get her down



Tora flinches and snarls as Easley whips at her 31 times during a practice session.

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Some of the tigers are forced to walk backward and hop forward while upright on their hind legs, a physically grueling trick that could lead to physical disorders such as arthritis. Jay Pratte, an animal behavior expert, trainer and wildlife consultant with 25 years of experience, stated in a declaration provided to the HSUS, “Ryan Easley utilizes archaic training methods which entail fear, force and punishment. In my professional opinion, the tigers at ShowMe Tigers are suffering from psychological neglect and trauma on a performance ring, and bolted back to their pedestals—sometimes in the middle of a trick. During a practice session, our investigator documented Easley becoming visibly annoyed with a tiger named

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The psychological scars of abusive training can remain with animals long after they leave the circus. Big Cat Rescue in Florida has been the final stop for 21 tigers and leopards who previously performed in the circus. Its staff has observed these retired circus cats since 2000 and notes that they always arrive fearful of people, especially people carrying anything that looks like a weapon. At the sanctuary, long poles are used to pull waste to the side of the cages, and the staff takes great care to never raise the poles near the cats, which causes them to flinch, wince, lay back their ears, run, roar or hide. Similar fearful reactions have not been observed in rescued big cats who were not forced to perform.

Some of the saddest circus acts feature bears. Muzzled and leashed bears wearing ridiculous costumes such as tutus are forced to perform degrading tricks that include: riding bicycles and motorcycles; walking upright on their hind legs; walking on a balance beam with their front legs while their hind legs are high in the air; walking on a barrel as it moves across the floor; hopping over rails; precariously balancing on oversized balls; and skipping. Without cruel training, these animals would never perform such confusing and unnatural tricks. Rather than showcasing a wild animal's natural and unique behaviors, demeaning circus acts reduce these majestic animals to clumsy clowns and objects of ridicule.

Travel and Confinement

In addition to inhumane training methods, animals used in traveling shows spend much of their lives on the road, transported across the country in crowded, poorly ventilated trailers and subjected to extreme temperatures. Animals such as big cats, bears and primates are forced to eat, drink and sleep in the same small cages where they defecate and urinate. Elephants are kept tightly chained and barely able to take a step. Inadequate exercise and prolonged standing in wet, unsanitary conditions leads to deadly foot problems in elephants. When chained and confined in small spaces, handled with electric prods and bullhooks, and kept in socially deprived conditions, elephants become dysfunctional, unhealthy, depressed and aggressive.

Before Ringling Bros. eliminated its elephant acts, the circus transported the elephants on trains. Court records revealed that the elephants were chained in boxcars for an average of more than 26 consecutive hours, and sometimes for as many as 60 to 100 hours, as the circus moved across the country.

Research demonstrates that even short-term transportation can have a detrimental impact on the well-being of big cats. One study found that cortisol levels, the primary stress hormone, increased as much as 482% and remained elevated for nearly two weeks following brief transport periods. Other factors, such as increased respiration rates and pacing, were also noted in the study.

In a 2017 HSUS investigation into ShowMe tigers, our investigator found that when Ryan Easley went on tour for the circus season, the tigers were kept in pairs in transport cages that measured 6½ feet long, 4 feet wide and 4 feet high. The two male tigers, each weighing more than 500 pounds, shared one transport cage. Except for the few minutes each day when the tigers performed, they were kept exclusively in transport cages where they ate, slept, paced, urinated and defecated in the approximately 13 square feet of floor space afforded to each one. Not once were they provided the chance to exercise outside the transport cages. In fact, the tigers' exercise cage was never even unloaded from the trailer.

Additionally, Easley's tigers were never provided with any enrichment items to keep them physically and mentally active. Tigers love to swim, but Easley's tigers had no access to a pool. Confined to transport cages on the road, they were never able to walk on grass, jump onto elevated resting platforms or even stretch upright.

Tigers are generally solitary animals. When multiple tigers are caged together in cramped conditions with no opportunity to escape from an aggressive, stressed cagemate, conflicts can turn deadly. Such was the case with another circus, Circus Vazquez, where a female tiger was killed and nearly decapitated after she was left in a cage overnight with five incompatible big cats.

Constant travel also means that sick or injured animals may not have access to emergency veterinary care. For example, in 2004, a 2-year-old lion died from apparent heatstroke while the Ringling Bros. train crossed the Mojave Desert. And in 1997, an elephant who had been sick with salmonella was found dead in a 120-degree King Royal Circus trailer by police in Albuquerque, New Mexico. A total of three elephants and eight llamas were crowded into the overheated trailer.

An elephant named Beulah, who belonged to RW Commerford & Sons, was used for years at the Big E fair in Massachusetts and died a few days after the start of the 2019 fair. She was forced to suffer through photo ops with the public while dying from a blood infection.



A whip mark appears on the back of a tiger's head (right) as Easley whips him.

The tigers used by ShowMe Tigers spent 23.5 to 24 hours per day in transport cages.

In 2003, UniverSoul Circus was traveling with a “boxing” kangaroo act. Presented as a comedy routine, the kangaroo was restrained by a harness and taunted by the handler into defending himself. The kangaroo developed a dangerous disease called lumpy jaw, which can be caused by crowding, poor hygiene and an improper diet. The circus kept the animal on the road for months despite his suffering from this deadly bacterial infection, and the kangaroo eventually died. Just over two months later, a second kangaroo died, reportedly during transport from a vehicular accident.

Extreme confinement continues once the circus arrives at performance sites. Elephants are confined to small pens or chained by two legs, barely able to take a step in any direction. Other animals are usually left in the same small cages that they traveled in. A 2015 New York City permit application for the big cat act with UniverSoul Circus showed that the tigers were kept in compartments on the travel trailer that gave them only 64 square feet of floor space, or about one-fourth the size of a one-car garage. In comparison, the average size of tiger enclosures at zoos accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums is 5,500 square feet.

Sadly, conditions may be no better when animals are housed at their “home” facility. Before Easley’s circus act went on tour, the tigers were kept at his winter quarters in Hugo, Oklahoma. Despite temperatures that were often well below freezing, the tigers had no heat source and were only provided a mere inch of bedding during bitterly cold weather.

Tora, the tiger who our investigator documented being subjected to extensive whipping during the practice session, did not receive veterinary care for a raw open wound on the side of her face. The U.S. Department of Agriculture, which enforces the AWA had previously cited Easley in 2012 for not providing veterinary care to Tora when she had a 1-inch cut on her ribcage.

During our investigation, Easley disposed of a “retired” 12-year-old tiger at Tanganyika Wildlife Park, a poorly run roadside zoo in Goddard, Kansas.

There are many examples of traveling shows depriving animals of the bare minimum space required under the federal Animal Welfare Act, which governs the care and treatment of animals in circuses. For example, the USDA cited Carson & Barnes Circus for keeping two bears in cages that measured only about 4½ feet by 4½ feet. A Kelly Miller Circus chimpanzee exhibitor was cited by the USDA for keeping a solitary chimpanzee in a poorly ventilated, undersized cage on a trailer. The cage measured only 6 feet long by 4 feet wide by 5 feet high. An adult female chimpanzee has an arm span of about 6½ feet and can grow to 3½ feet tall, illustrating what little space was provided for this great ape.

The big cat expert who attended Ringling Bros.’ performances in 2016 also observed the tigers’ living conditions. He found that the cages lacked adequate shade in 80-degree temperatures. Some of the tigers were panting constantly; the cages were devoid of enrichment necessary for the big cats’ physical and psychological well-being; the floor surface was the hard concrete of a parking lot;

and the tigers were housed in groups, forcing normally solitary animals into situations of unavoidable conflict. These are sadly all-too-common occurrences at traveling acts that use animals. There is another risk associated with transporting wild animals—escape from flimsy and poorly secured trailers. In 2017, a tiger who toured with Ringling Bros. was spotted on an interstate in Atlanta, Georgia, along a school bus route, and then in a residential area, where she was ultimately shot and killed by police. Transporters were unaware she had escaped until they arrived at their destination in Tennessee. In 2018, a zebra with a traveling zoo in Utah fell out of a trailer when the vehicle’s rear door swung open as it was traveling on the interstate. The zebra was dragged until the vehicle could come to a stop. She sustained such extensive skin, muscle and tissue wounds that she ultimately had to be euthanized. In 2000, a 400-pound bear fell from a trailer while a circus was driving at night on a freeway through New Orleans, Louisiana. The bear was hit by the trailer after he landed on the highway. Motorists found him on the road, dazed and bleeding from his mouth. Traffic was halted for three hours while the bear was tranquilized and transported to the Audubon Zoo for treatment. The circus staff did not notice that the bear was gone until they stopped for fuel 20 miles down the road.

PUBLIC SAFETY CONCERNS WITH USING WILD ANIMALS IN CIRCUSES

There are several public safety concerns with using wild animals in circuses, including public endangerment and disease risks.

Danger

Wild animals are clearly dangerous and unpredictable, and their use in traveling shows puts the public at risk. Since 1990, scores of people, including dozens of children, have been injured by bears, big cats, elephants and primates used in circuses, and 10 people, mostly handlers, have even lost their lives. There have been many instances of tigers escaping from cages, elephants rampaging and even zebras bolting through traffic. When an animal such as an elephant or a tiger rebels against a trainer’s physical dominance, trainers cannot protect themselves, let alone the general public.

There is no AWA requirement that traveling shows carry dart guns to tranquilize an escaped animal. If lethal force is necessary, it will be up to local authorities to deal with the situation. In two separate, widely publicized tragedies, “shoot to kill” ended up being the only option for law enforcement when elephants snapped during shows and endangered the public, including children and local police.

In Palm Bay, Florida, an elephant named Janet with the Great American Circus went on a rampage while giving rides to five children and one adult in 1992. Janet ran out of the tent with the people still on her back and charged through the circus grounds. She threw two circus workers about 20 feet into the air, rammed a tractor-trailer and picked up a police officer who tried to rescue the riders. Janet then threw the officer, picked him up again, and almost stepped on him. Hundreds of circusgoers panicked and fled

screaming. Police fired 43 shots at Janet but were unable to kill her until they used armor-piercing bullets. Twelve people, including the trainer, were treated at a hospital for injuries. Janet's trainer was Tim Frisco, the same trainer who, several years after the Palm Bay incident, was videotaped beating and shocking elephants behind-the-scenes at Carson & Barnes Circus.

In 1994, an elephant named Tyke, who belonged to John Cuneo, killed a trainer and stomped on and injured a groom shortly before a performance with Circus International in Honolulu, Hawaii. Tyke then ran amok, breaking out of the arena and leading police on a chase through several city blocks. Tyke was shot and killed by police, but it took 87 shots to bring her down. One hour after the initial shots were fired, a bloodied, 21-year-old Tyke was pronounced dead before a crowd of police, TV cameras and hysterical onlookers. Ambulance officials described a scene of "total panic" as circusgoers fled from the arena, pushing and trampling each other. Fourteen people were transported by ambulance to the hospital, and others drove themselves. Multiple lawsuits were filed, and Cuneo paid a \$12,500 penalty to settle USDA charges of causing Tyke trauma and harm and jeopardizing public safety.

The following are just a few additional examples of dangerous incidents involving wild animals used in traveling shows, including incidents that caused injury to the public:

2024 – Montana

An elephant escaped from a circus, wandered through busy downtown traffic, in front of a casino, pausing on a residential lawn. Handlers with bullhooks chased and returned her to the circus.

2024 – Indiana

Five zebras, four camels, and one miniature horse were rescued after their transport vehicle caught on fire on the interstate. Two law enforcement officers required treatment for smoke inhalation.

2021 – Texas

An elephant at the Endangered Ark Foundation attacked a visitor during an elephant experience, causing serious and life-threatening injuries. While this occurred at a roadside zoo, these same risks exist when elephants are on the road, and particularly when they are used for rides or public contact.

2018 – Pennsylvania

Several children fell off a camel who was being used for rides at a Shrine Circus. An adult passenger dangled precariously from the camel's carriage when they started bucking and running amok.

2018 – Arizona

Two zebras belonging to Hedrick's Exotic Petting Zoo escaped from a festival and wandered onto a road. One was hit and killed by an SUV, and the driver was taken to a hospital.

2017 – Massachusetts

A capuchin monkey in a petting zoo at the Brockton Fair bit an 18-year-old girl while she was feeding the animal.

2015 – Georgia

A lemur escaped from a cage at a fair and bit two bystanders.

2014 – Missouri

Three elephants with Shrine Circus escaped, pushed through a door and bolted into a parking lot, damaging two cars.

2014 – Missouri

A bear cub used in a traveling petting zoo nipped 18 students at Washington University.

2013 – Kansas

A woman attending the Shrine Circus encountered a tiger, who had escaped during the show, in the bathroom.

2009 – Indiana

At least a dozen children and one adult were injured when an elephant giving rides at the Murat Shrine Circus knocked over the scaffolding stairway leading to the elephant ride.

2007 – Georgia

A baboon bit a 17-month-old boy at the Columbia County Fair.

2006 – New York

An adult tiger clawed a 4-year-old boy at a county Fair.

2004 – Indiana

An ambulance responded to the Hadi Shrine Circus after a chimpanzee bit a circusgoer on the cheek. She was posing for pictures with the animal and was treated for a puncture wound.

2004 – New York

A tiger bolted from the New Cole Bros. Circus in Queens. Dozens of police officers pursued the tiger for 30 minutes as he prowled for a mile through a park crowded with picnickers, scattering screaming people and causing two traffic accidents.

2004 – Texas

An elephant with a Shrine Circus attacked an arena worker following a performance. The elephant knocked the man down, threw him into a wall and pinned him against a fence, resulting in more than \$16,000 in medical bills.

2003 – Florida

A tiger traveling with UniverSoul Circus escaped while their cage was being cleaned. The tiger climbed over a car, jumped over a fence, headed down an alley, and frightened employees at a nearby restaurant.

1997 – Michigan

A muzzled and caged bear with the Shrine Circus bit off the tip of a 2-year-old child's finger.

1997 – Pennsylvania

A 400-pound tiger used in the Franzen Bros. Circus killed 50-year-old trainer Wayne Franzen in front of 200 horrified schoolchildren. The tiger pounced on him when he turned his back, grabbed him by the neck and dragged him around the circus ring.

1993 – Arkansas

A tiger performing with the Shrine Circus escaped, ran into the audience and bit a 13-year-old girl.

1993 – North Carolina

A 3-year-old girl required stitches after she was attacked by a leopard traveling with the Great American Circus.

1990 – Oregon

Two leashed and collared chimpanzees became out of control during a Circus Gatti performance. They dragged the trainer into the stands, pulled a child from her seat and onto the arena floor, and then mauled her.



Disease Risks

Rampages and attacks are not the only dangers associated with wild animals. Some species can carry diseases that can be transmitted to people. For example, primates can spread deadly viral, bacterial, fungal and parasitic infections that pose serious health risks to humans, such as tuberculosis, shigellosis, campylobacter, klebsiella, Herpes B, Simian Immunodeficiency Virus and poxviruses.

While approximately 12.4% of captive elephants in the U.S. have tested positive for *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* (a human strain of TB), many more may actually be infected since TB testing on elephants is unreliable. People have tested positive for exposure to TB after direct and indirect contact with infected elephants, suggesting that arena staff and circusgoers, in addition to circus workers, could be at risk if a TB-positive elephant is on the road.

In 2015, Dallas officials prohibited UniverSoul Circus from exhibiting two elephants during its two-week appearance after the county health department received information that the elephants had tested reactive for TB. The health department warned city officials of potential transmission to members of the public.

During a 2016 USDA inspection, a traveling sea lion show called Sea Lion Splash was cited for failure to follow a veterinarian's recommendation to check for active leptospirosis infections in two sea lions after titers for the disease had previously been found in both animals. Leptospirosis is a contagious bacterial infection of the kidneys that is transmissible to humans through contact with contaminated water, urine or soil. Failure to ensure that the sea lions were free from infection posed a health risk for any member of the public who interacted with the animals on stage, touched them during photo ops, or was splashed with water that may have been contaminated by the animals.

Furthermore, while all mammals are susceptible to rabies, rabies vaccines are not licensed for use in wild animals. People who have been bitten by wild animals used in traveling shows have undergone painful rabies prevention shots. For example, in 2013, a lemur bit a 3-year-old boy at the Minnesota Convention Center. The boy was put on antiviral medication and given rabies prevention shots.

ANATOMY OF A CIRCUS

A circus may own some of its animals, such as elephants, but contract with other animal exhibitors to provide a tiger or bear act. Each exhibitor would need to have their own license from the USDA. Compiling a circus' history of dangerous incidents and federal AWA violations is a critical component of any effort to prohibit performing animal acts and requires research to determine which animal exhibitors a circus is using and/or has used.

Some circuses, such as UniverSoul Circus and Jordan World Circus, do not have a USDA license and contract all their animal acts. The Shriners also do not own a circus or have a USDA license to exhibit animals. Each Shrine temple that hosts an annual circus hires a circus—such as Carden Circus or Tarzan Zerbini Circus—that performs under the Shrine name, or the temple works with a circus producer who arranges for that year's animal acts, as well as jugglers, trapeze artists and other performers. Shrine Circus animal acts will vary from temple to temple and from year to year.

Circuses and animal exhibitors performing for Shrine Circuses have been cited by the USDA for violations such as failure to provide veterinary care, inadequate shelter, failure to provide minimum space, filthy conditions and unsafe handling. Additionally, animals used by Shrine circuses have killed and injured people in the past.

ELIMINATING WILD ANIMAL ACTS FROM CIRCUSES WILL NOT IMPACT THE ECONOMY

Some circuses have threatened economic hardship against localities considering a ban on wild animal acts or cruel training tools. The circuses claim they will refuse to perform in cities that pass laws protecting animals used in traveling shows. But in reality, whatever impact the circus's appearance had on the economy would simply be replaced with an alternative. Circuses do not generate new economic spending in a region—they only redistribute a family's discretionary spending. Most families have an entertainment budget that will be spent in the local economy, whether it's on miniature golf, a ball game, a movie or a circus.

Furthermore, since circus owners and performers do not reside in the towns they perform in, when the show leaves, it takes much of the revenue out of the city. To date, we are unaware of any state or locality that has passed a law restricting circuses that has experienced any economic hardship as a result.

OTHER TRAVELING SHOWS

Traveling zoos and performing wild animal acts may also appear at county and state fairs, festivals, parking lots and even minor league baseball games. Some performing animal acts will alternate between touring with circuses or the fair circuit. The display of wild and exotic animals is at odds with the intent and purpose of state and county fairs, which are intended to highlight and promote agriculture and agricultural activities.

Regardless of the venue, many, if not most, wild animal exhibitors have histories of poor animal care as well as violations of the AWA that include failure to provide animals with veterinary care, proper food and adequate shelter as well as animal handling practices that endanger both the public and the animals. It is not uncommon for these exhibitors to generate negative publicity for a venue. Examples of traveling shows that use species other than elephants, bears and big cats and greatly diminish animal welfare include:

Eudora Farms

Eudora Farms is a traveling zoo that often exhibits at fairs. Between 2001 and 2016, Eudora Farms was cited by the USDA for nearly 120 violations of the Animal Welfare Act, including failure to provide veterinary care to lame and injured animals, maintenance issues that allowed a macaque to escape and kill four lemurs, primates exhibiting psychological distress, and failure to provide minimum space. Eudora Farms has also been cited for mishandling animals showing signs of heat stress while the heat index soared to 109 degrees, inadequate shelter, filthy conditions, and inadequate safety barriers. Additionally, animals with Eudora Farms have injured members of the public.

Sea Lion Splash

Sea Lion Splash is a traveling show that features sea lions who drag themselves across a stage while balancing a ball on their nose, lift their body while supporting their substantial weight on just one flipper, and move their flippers in a manner to simulate clapping, waving and dancing. The show also offers potentially unsafe public contact with sea lions. Sea Lion Splash has been cited repeatedly by the USDA for failure to provide its sea lions with veterinary care and minimum space, failure to maintain water quality, and failure to have staff with adequate training and knowledge as evidenced by staff's inability to recognize the sea lions' serious eye conditions.

Shark Encounter

The Haai Shark Encounter is a distasteful and controversial shark show that keeps three or more nurse sharks up to 7 feet long in a mobile aquarium built into a tractor-trailer. The barren tank denies the animals the rich sensory experiences of their natural environment. As theme music from *Jaws* plays over loudspeakers, a diver enters the tank to mishandle and harass the sharks, who would normally avoid contact with humans. Sharks are afforded no federal protection under the Animal Welfare Act, so acts such as these go virtually unregulated.



What experts say

Experts agree that using wild animals in traveling shows requires inhumane training methods and fails to provide animals with an appropriate environment for their physical or psychological health. Below are a few comments from experts about the use of elephants and other wild animals in traveling shows.

“I observed that the big cats in Ringling Bros.’ Red Unit were treated with aversive stimuli that they were unable to avoid and are managed through fear, coercion, and punishment. ... Circuses do not promote conservation, education, or the advancement of animal welfare or management techniques. They are a cruel relic from human history, and for welfare reasons, big cats should be banned from circus exhibition and placed in more appropriate environments with trained, skilled caregivers.”

— **JAY PRATTE, B.S., M.A., ANIMAL TRAINING, BEHAVIOR, AND WELFARE CONSULTANT**

“Elephants are self-aware, empathetic and are capable of higher-level emotions such as love, anger and grief. They have a complex system of communication, can remember other individuals after more than a decade of separation and have an understanding of death. Elephants also experience long-term psychological wounds caused by trauma and abuse. ... Bullhooks and similar devices used to control and confine elephants in traveling shows and circuses are inappropriate and inhumane.”

— **JOYCE H. POOLE, PHD, CO-FOUNDER, CO-DIRECTOR, ELEPHANTVOICES**

“I have spent the majority of my life working around and caring for captive elephants, including in circuses and zoos where I helped train and manage both old and young elephants. I have used on elephants all of the commonly used training tools, including but not limited to bullhooks, electricity, axe handles and pitchforks. ... Unfortunately most people do not know what goes on behind the scenes. ... Once dominance-based management is removed you can ... begin to see the elephants for who they really are: sensitive, intelligent, caring and uniquely forgiving and empathetic individuals.”

— **SCOTT BLAIS, CEO, GLOBAL SANCTUARY FOR ELEPHANTS**

“To the uninformed, (the Banana Derby), may seem harmless and perhaps humorous, but there are several critical factors of which you should be aware. Capuchin monkeys are a highly intelligent and emotionally complex primate species. They have complex social relationships, demonstrate advanced tool-use, and require dynamic environments to meet their emotional and behavioral needs. For all these reasons, capuchins used in entertainment acts create serious concerns for animal welfare.”

— **KEVIN J. BELL, THEN-PRESIDENT AND CEO OF LINCOLN PARK ZOO, AND STUART D. STRAHL, THEN-PRESIDENT AND CEO OF CHICAGO ZOOLOGICAL SOCIETY, WHICH OPERATES BROOKFIELD ZOO**

“Because of their strength, unpredictability, or ability to produce venom, certain domestic, exotic, or wild animals should be prohibited from exhibition settings where a reasonable possibility of animal contact exists. Species of primary concern include certain nonhuman primates, certain carnivores (e.g., lions, tigers, ocelots, wolves and wolf hybrids, and bears), and venomous species (e.g., some reptiles and invertebrates).”

— **THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF STATE PUBLIC HEALTH VETERINARIANS, JAVMA, VOL 251, NO. 11, DECEMBER 1, 2017**

“The simple fact is that captive elephants, and performing elephants in particular, cannot cope with the consequences of the standard of care and living conditions governed by the use of the bullhook.”

— **PHILIP K. ENSLEY, DVM, DIP. ACZM, ASSOCIATE VETERINARIAN (RETIRED) AT THE SAN DIEGO ZOO**

What's the law?

Existing state and federal laws fail to protect wild animals used in traveling circuses from abuse and neglect.

FEDERAL LAWS

With the exception of horses, ponies and reptiles, the federal AWA covers most species used in circuses. The AWA requires that any owner of animals used in circuses must obtain an exhibitor's license and comply with the provisions of the Act. The AWA mandates minimal standards of animal care in the areas of housing, handling, sanitation, nutrition, water, veterinary care and protection from extreme weather.

The AWA is enforced by the USDA, and in addition to animals used in exhibition, the law regulates research labs, animal dealers and breeders such as puppy mills. There are only about 112 USDA inspectors responsible for inspecting more than 13,000 diverse facilities—clearly an insufficient number of inspectors to conduct regular inspections and follow-up. In addition, inspectors may not be knowledgeable about exotic species. Enforcement actions are rare and typically result in mere warnings, small fines or short license suspensions. The USDA rarely revokes licenses or confiscates animals.

The law itself is weak, as its very minimal guidelines fail to incorporate modern animal husbandry practices. For example, the AWA does not prohibit the use of bullhooks, whips, electric prods or other standard industry devices used by animal trainers. The AWA permits wild animals to live their lives in cages and tethered on chains, so long as they can make normal postural adjustments and adequately be able to get up and lie down. It is common for USDA licensees to keep animals in grossly inhumane and unsafe conditions, yet still be in compliance with the AWA.

Licensees are typically inspected once a year, although they may be inspected more frequently if there are chronic problems or complaints. Catching the most egregious abuse is rare since behind-the-scenes training sessions are completely unmonitored by authorities.



This wild-caught African elephant was hauled around the country for years by a traveling zoo that performed at fairs and festivals, despite suffering from angular limb deformities in three legs, degenerative joint disease and periodic lameness. She was eventually euthanized when she was only 19 years old, far short of an elephant's average lifespan.

Starting in 2017, USDA enforcement declined dramatically. While enforcement has improved slightly in recent years, enforcement actions remain at historic lows. With the USDA failing to protect animals regulated by the AWA, there is a greater need now more than ever for stronger local laws.

STATE AND LOCAL LAWS

Eight states and nearly 200 localities in 37 states have passed various restrictions governing the use of wild animals in circuses and traveling shows. These laws typically ban the use of bears, big cats, elephants, nonhuman primates and other wild animals in traveling shows.

As of 2023, animals commonly used in traveling shows are prohibited in Colorado, New Jersey and Hawaii, while the use of elephants in traveling shows is prohibited in Illinois and New York. In 2016, Rhode Island banned the use of bullhooks on elephants in circuses, and California banned the use of bullhooks altogether. In 2019, California went a step further by banning the use of animals



other than dogs, cats or horses in circuses. Kentucky revised its regulations in 2022 and now bans the use of endangered species in circuses as well as the use of bears, big cats, elephants, primates, and other wild animals in traveling shows. Fifteen states prohibit the public from having direct contact with certain wild animals.

As the public grows increasingly aware of the cruelty and abuse taking place behind the scenes, a growing number of communities are passing ordinances that restrict the use of wild animal acts.

It is important to note that although state and local animal cruelty statutes do apply to wild animals in circuses, violations of these laws can be challenging to prosecute due to the transitory nature of

circuses. For example, in 1996, while appearing with a Shrine Circus in New Jersey, Florida-based elephant exhibitor Frank Murray was charged with four counts of animal cruelty for “inflicting unnecessary cruelty towards a living animal and not providing proper sustenance to a living animal.” A warrant was issued for his arrest, which he evaded for 16 years. Also, it is often difficult to witness cruel treatment since so much of the abusive training takes place behind the scenes and away from public viewing.

Moreover, if a serious case of cruelty or neglect is discovered by a local agency, authorities may be reluctant to confiscate an animal such as an elephant or tiger since they are ill-equipped to house and care for these species, even on a temporary basis.

Gather information

It is important to be able to speak with authority about this issue and how it impacts members of the community. Learn which circuses and traveling shows perform in or around your state or locality and the problems associated with the exhibitors and the species of wild animals they use.

RESEARCH

Before you get started, identify the name of the circus and animal exhibitors performing in your area and, if possible, the names of any elephants performing with the circus that can help to identify the exhibitor. If wild animal acts come to neighboring communities but not your city or county, you can still pursue an ordinance and suggest that, since wild animal acts perform in the region, legislation is needed to prevent them from coming to your community in the future.

Some helpful hints and questions:

- Search online for “circus” and the name of your city, county and state.
- Is there a county fair or city festival that is held every year? There may be wild animals performing at these events. The exhibitors are often listed on the fair or festival’s web site, and they may be mentioned in local media promoting the event.
- Does a Shrine Circus perform in your area?

Also, determine if your city, county or state already has any laws regulating wild animal acts. For example, some cities or states require circuses to obtain a permit, comply with caging restrictions, be subject to inspections, etc. In 2017, Hawthorn Corp. was cited when a circus truck transporting tigers broke down in Kentucky, and authorities discovered that the circus had failed to obtain a permit to transport exotic animals through the state and failed to pay a motor carrier tax.

REACH OUT TO THE HSUS

Contact the HSUS, and we can provide you with information about particular circuses or animal exhibitors, including a list of AWA violations, dangerous incidents and a list of communities that have passed legislation addressing traveling shows, as well as give you guidance in addressing this issue in your community and provide you with draft language for your legislation.

IDENTIFY LOCAL ADVOCATES AND ORGANIZATIONS WHO CAN HELP

Developing a broad base of support will greatly increase the chances of ending wild animal acts in your community. Potential allies may be all around you. Look first in the most likely places: your family, friends and neighbors, as well as animal and environmental advocates that you know.

Next, research what other groups in your city, county and state may support your efforts. Look for local humane societies, animal shelters, law enforcement, veterinarians, zoos accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, wildlife rehabilitation organizations, wildlife sanctuaries, civic groups, wildlife experts, people who are outspoken on animal issues, and well-known and/or influential individuals.

KNOW YOUR OPPOSITION

It is essential that you become knowledgeable about the various people and entities that will oppose your efforts. You should identify and understand potential objections to the proposal and be able to present well-thought-out counterarguments. Find out who owns the property where the circuses perform and if any civic groups or fraternal organizations use circus fundraisers, as these groups will likely oppose efforts that place restrictions on circuses. This information will help when you go before lawmakers and talk about the importance of ending circus acts with animals in your community and why your viewpoint should be adopted over the opposition’s. Make sure you are well versed on all the arguments as to why wild animal acts are harmful to animals and the public.

Take action

Now that you are well versed on the issue and how it impacts your community, there are several different approaches to addressing the issue of wild animals in traveling shows. Depending on your time and resources, there are a few things you can do to help end wild animal acts. Whatever approach you adopt, always be polite and professional.

SUBMIT LETTERS TO THE EDITOR OF YOUR LOCAL PAPER

Letters to the editor are an important tool for influencing public opinion, as it is typically the most widely read section of the newspaper. The more letters submitted to the same publication that express similar viewpoints, the greater the likelihood that one or more letters will be published, so encourage others to write as well. It can also help shape news coverage if editors recognize this as an important issue to readers. The average letter to the editor is only about five or six sentences—keep it short and direct. Most papers publish their word count limit, so please make sure your letter follows the guidelines. Your main point (i.e., circuses are cruel and dangerous) should be clearly stated in the beginning of the letter to grab the reader's attention. Timing is also important, so submit your letter before the circus arrives. This guide contains a few examples of letters to the editor that you can adapt.

CONTACT SPONSORS, PROMOTERS AND VENUES

If you see online ads, posters in storefronts advertising the circus, or stores or schools distributing free circus tickets, let them know why circuses are problematic for both the animals and the community, and encourage them to establish a policy against promoting circuses with wild animal acts. Over the years, major corporations, including General Mills, Ford Motor Company, Burger King, Harris Teeter, Lukoil Americas, MasterCard International and Sears, Roebuck and Co. have dropped sponsorships of various circuses in response to concerns from the public. Encourage schools to reject free or discounted circus tickets, and ask that they not organize field trips to the circus. Online petitions can be used to both educate people and help urge entities to drop circus promotions. Urge festival organizers and venues, such as fairs, to adopt a policy prohibiting

wild animals (see sample above). This guide contains a few examples of letters to sponsors and promoters that you can adapt for your needs.

SPREAD THE WORD ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Encourage others to express their opposition to wild animal acts by spreading the message on social media platforms. Anytime you learn that a traveling wild animal show is coming to town, you can post on social media sites urging your networks to not attend the show and to submit letters to the editor, contact the sponsor or venue and get active in your campaign.

ATTEND A TOWN HALL MEETING IN YOUR COMMUNITY

A good way to raise awareness is to attend a town hall meeting where your local elected officials or other lawmakers will be present. Typically, there is an opportunity to present public comment or ask a question. This is an ideal opportunity to discuss why wild animal acts should be prohibited and put the issue right before the decision-makers for a comment.

PURSUE STRONGER LAWS

You can make long-lasting change by working with your elected officials to pass a stronger law in your community. Laws that address the mistreatment of animals in circuses typically ban the use of big cats, bears, elephants, nonhuman primates and/or a broader list of wild animals in traveling shows.

An animal's strongest advocate to influence and change laws is you. As a constituent, you have the most power to influence your local and state officials. It does not take any special skills or exceptional abilities. You just need patience, commitment, and the determination to communicate with those who represent you on the local and/or state level.

The following information will help get you started on passing a local ordinance. Please see our guide for detailed tips on pursuing legislative advocacy. Local ordinances make a difference and can serve as building blocks for statewide legislation.

Prepare your materials

Now that you have done all your research, convert that information into concise fact sheets to use in your efforts to pass an ordinance. You will need a short (no more than one or two pages) fact sheet explaining the problem and why a stronger law is needed. Include general information as well as specific problems about traveling shows that tour to your community. This guide contains sample fact sheets that you can adapt for your needs.

The HSUS can provide you with the most up-to-date information to help create fact sheets. Also, ask the HSUS for a list of dangerous incidents in your area and the most recent list of communities that have passed legislation addressing traveling shows. It will strengthen your case if you can point out other local communities that have passed similar ordinances.

Learn the process

The process for enacting local legislation varies around the country, so take the time to become familiar with how things work in your community. An official or employee in your local government may be able to help you. Attend a few meetings of the governing body you hope to influence. Listen to the kinds of questions they ask and the issues they take most seriously. By understanding their general concerns, you will be able to craft your arguments accordingly.

Find a friend in office

Public officials tend to take constituents' interests seriously, so try talking to your own council member, county commissioner or alderman first. As much as we would like the people we vote for to agree with us, this may not always be the case. If your own council member is not interested, do not despair. Try to find another official with an interest in animal issues and pitch your idea to them. Often, your local animal control bureau or nonprofit humane society can point you toward a sympathetic decision-maker.

Helpful tips for your meeting

Before any meeting with a lawmaker, research the person you'll be meeting with as much as you can, develop an agenda and prepare the materials you developed to leave with them. Consider including a short, one-minute video in your presentation that shows behind-the-scenes training and dangerous incidents.

Dress professionally and be cordial. Practice your presentation ahead of time. If you do not know the answer to a question, tell the official you will find out and get back to them. Do not be discouraged if the official agrees with only a portion of your proposal. Compromise is often necessary in legislative advocacy. Be candid on what entities will likely oppose the ordinance.

Promptly follow up by sending a letter or email thanking the official for their time, briefly restate your position, and respond to any unanswered questions that came up during the meeting.

Develop a proposed ordinance

Next, you will need a model ordinance to present to the city or county officials, but there's no need to reinvent the wheel; the HSUS can help you draft an ordinance for your city or town code. It is important to make sure that you and experts on the issue thoroughly review the language that you submit. A clear ban on specific species used in traveling shows is the easiest language to understand and to enforce. This guide provides sample language.

Ordinances should also prohibit the use of wild animals in county and state fairs, festivals and other traveling shows, which present the same concerns as circuses. In fact, a number of animal exhibitors that travel with circuses also perform in other venues.

For example, a 2016 incident captured on video at the Pensacola Interstate Fair in Florida showed a tiger attacking trainer Vicenta Pages during a show. Another trainer charged in, leaving the performance cage door wide open, and started beating the tiger. Between both trainers, the tiger was struck with sticks 30 times. Two tigers were in the cage at the time and could have easily bolted through the open door and confronted a group of horrified children watching the incident. Prior to joining the fair circuit, Pages and her tiger act toured with Ringling Bros. for several years.

Bills that include many species and impact several entities tend to draw more opposition. Consider whether you would have better success if you limit the scope of the ordinance.

Ordinance versus resolution

An ordinance is a law. A resolution is an official opinion on a policy or issue and cannot be enforced as law. An ordinance protecting wild animals in circuses is preferable to a nonbinding resolution. However, since some state statutes may prevent municipalities from passing ordinances on certain issues, resolutions may be used to provide guidance to an agency or, if many localities in the state pass similar resolutions, state lawmakers may be encouraged to address the matter. If for any reason an ordinance is not likely or possible, consider starting with a resolution, which may eventually lead to an ordinance, more jurisdictions dealing with the issue, or a stronger state law.



Build a coalition

Getting a local ordinance enacted takes real effort and requires meeting with lawmakers, testifying at public meetings and garnering support from others. Even in big cities, it can be common for very few people to get involved in local government (which means a small group of people are often influencing laws and policies). Getting active community support can make or break the legislation you are trying to pass.

Take the list of individuals and groups you researched earlier (see the “Gather Information on Your Community” section) and start reaching out to them to garner support for your ordinance. Let them know of your efforts. Secure letters of support and commitments to meet with their elected officials. Attend and/or testify at hearings, and reach out to other community residents.

Prepare for opposition

While every community is different, the odds are that someone in your area will oppose the ordinance. Be sure to prepare the sponsor of the ordinance with information about the opponents’ concerns and the data, facts and talking points to address them, well in advance of a public hearing. Creating a short fact sheet with common arguments and answers could be very helpful to your sponsor.

Generate support using social media

Social media is a great tool to spread the word, garner support, post alerts and keep followers updated on developments such as upcoming hearings and votes. It can also be used to reach out to lawmakers and urge their support for pending legislation.

Incorporate the use of a hashtag (#) in your postings. Be mindful that using too many hashtags can clutter a post and make it more difficult to read. Keep it short, for example #YesOn317 or #BanCircusCruelty.

Submit letters to the editor and opinion pieces (also called op-eds), and request to meet with the local newspaper’s editorial board to encourage them to consider supporting your position. Cultivate a relationship with local reporters and keep them updated on developments.

Final steps

Once a public hearing has been scheduled, confirm that you have the votes you need for the ordinance to pass. Ensure that you have met with every council member or commissioner, provided your information packets and responded to their concerns. Don’t be afraid to ask if you have their vote. Encourage as many residents as possible to write to and call their legislators. Reach out to your coalition partners, including the HSUS, to help publicize the issue and call for action through alerts and letters. The key is to obtain a majority of the council members to vote in your favor. Elected officials are typically responsive only to their own constituents, so avoid alerts that ask people from outside of the community to

contact officials who don’t represent them. It could backfire if a lawmaker is bombarded with calls and emails from people around the state, or even around the country, as the lawmaker may feel harassed rather than persuaded to support the proposal.



Key provisions of an ordinance should include:

- Clear definitions of the animals to be covered.
- Definitions of the traveling entities that are impacted. Ideally, this language should be quite specific, thereby eliminating the need to add any exemptions. A list of exempted entities can quickly grow, will significantly weaken the intent of the bill, and can establish unfavorable precedents for future animal-related bills.
- The date the ordinance goes into effect. (Be flexible; to address concerns about existing contracts, it should accommodate any scheduled circus dates.)
- Enforcement provisions and a penalty clause.



Be prepared to explain:

- The high level of public awareness about the miserable lives endured by animals used in traveling shows. A 2015 Gallup poll found that 69% of Americans are very or somewhat concerned about the treatment of animals in circuses. In response, some circuses, such as Ringling Bros. and Circus Vazquez, have new shows that eliminate animal acts. Other animal-based circuses have simply closed, and numerous circuses thrive using enthralling human performances.
- Using wild animals in circuses endangers public safety. Children have been injured during elephant rides and bitten by other animals used in circuses.
- Local law enforcement officials face many grave dangers in their daily work—a rampaging elephant or tiger running amok should not be one of them.
- Since 2014, more than 75 laws have passed protecting wild animals in traveling shows, including five laws at the state level.
- The proposed ordinance does not ban circuses, it simply limits some of the species that can be used.
- There will be no impact on the economy if a circus chooses not to perform in your community because of stronger laws. Families will still spend their entertainment budget on other local activities. And there are many alternatives available to replace circus fundraisers and other entertainment options that rent facilities from arenas and fairgrounds. It is far more likely that a circus will adapt its show to comply with new regulations rather than refuse to perform in a particular community.



Public hearing

Once your elected officials call a public meeting to discuss your proposal, you will need to organize your coalition. Identify who will testify at the hearing and get others to attend. Work closely with the ordinance sponsor on how best to present your case to lawmakers. The sponsor may recommend limiting the number of speakers or focusing on certain talking points. Plan ahead to make sure that everyone does not speak on the same points (a common problem at public hearings). You likely will have limited time (usually only three to five minutes per person), so dividing talking points among a handful of speakers can ensure that all of your key arguments are heard. It is especially influential if you can get those who will be enforcing the ordinance—animal control officers, sheriff's deputies or other law enforcement officials (this varies by community)—to testify in favor of the ordinance. Professionals in uniform add an additional air of importance and mainstream acceptance to an issue.

Also, it is a good idea to make sure the elected officials can readily identify those in attendance who are in support of the ordinance. Create bright stickers or buttons for people to wear or matching T-shirts with messages that state support for the ordinance.

After the public hearing

Oftentimes, an issue is not voted on at the time of a public hearing. During the hearing, take careful notes on who speaks in opposition to the ordinance, what their arguments are, and how the elected officials respond to them. Also note what questions the elected officials ask. This will help you provide information to lawmakers following the hearing to help alleviate any specific concerns that may arise during the hearing. Check in with the sponsor of the legislation to debrief about the public hearing and decide on next steps.

If a vote is taken and you win, celebrate! But bear in mind that the campaign may not yet be over. Make sure to plan your next move, such as guarding against any legal or legislative challenge to your successful measure. If the ordinance passes, inform relevant law enforcement agencies of the change.

If you lose, take all you have learned during the campaign and put it to good use when you try again. It can often take several attempts before a proposed ordinance passes, so do not be discouraged if your first effort fails. Talk to council members who opposed the bill and discuss what changes could be made to garner their support for a future bill. Remember that regardless of the outcome, you educated many people with your message. Public education is critical to the success of any animal welfare campaign, and over time, an educated public can push for positive changes in the lives of animals.

Sample fact sheets

BAN THE USE OF WILD ANIMALS IN TRAVELING SHOWS

Wild animals used in circuses and other traveling shows are subjected to violent training, constant confinement and neglect. Such shows present a public safety risk, are detrimental to animal welfare, undermine conservation efforts and are dwindling in popularity. Some circuses, such as Cole Bros. Circus, have closed. Others, including Ringling Bros. and some Shrine circuses, have stopped using wild animals.

Abusive training

Wild animals don't perform confusing and often physically grueling circus tricks because they want to—they perform because they're afraid not to. Trainers use violent training methods, including beatings and electric shock, to force animals to perform difficult tricks on command. Tools of the trade include bullhooks—an outdated elephant training device that resembles a fireplace poker—as well as electric prods, sticks, whips and chains.



Constant confinement

Animals used in traveling shows spend most of their lives in extreme confinement. Elephants are often chained or confined to small pens. Big cats spend the majority of their time in cramped transport cages that, on average, measure approximately 4 feet by 7 feet. Deprived of adequate exercise, appropriate social groupings and opportunities to express natural behaviors, wild animals often exhibit signs of severe and chronic stress. Life in an unhealthy environment on the road also means that sick animals may not have access to immediate and expert veterinary care.

Public safety concerns

Wild animals are dangerous and unpredictable, and their use in circuses puts the public at risk. There have been countless instances of tigers escaping from cages, elephants rampaging and even zebras bolting through traffic. And when an animal such as an elephant or a tiger rebels against a trainer's physical dominance, trainers cannot protect themselves, let alone the general public. Since 1990, scores of people, including dozens of children, have been injured by bears, big cats, elephants and primates used in circuses and other traveling shows. For example, [list a few recent incidents or incidents that occurred in your state].

No impact on economy

Circuses do not generate new economic spending in a region—they only redistribute a family's discretionary spending. Most families have an entertainment budget that will be spent in the local economy, whether it's on miniature golf, a ball game, a movie or a circus. Since circus owners and performers do not reside in the towns they perform in, when the show leaves, it takes most of the revenue out of the city.

Traveling exhibitors in [State]

Many circuses and traveling shows that tour in [State] have histories of federal Animal Welfare Act violations and dangerous incidents. Instead of providing entertainment, many of these exhibits attract unwanted controversy. **[Briefly list problems with shows that travel to your area or state.]**

PROTECT ELEPHANTS USED IN TRAVELING SHOWS

Using elephants in circuses, for rides at fairs and in other traveling shows subjects these highly intelligent, social animals to cruel treatment and a miserable life on the road where they are deprived of exercise and the ability to express natural behaviors. When chained and confined in small spaces, handled with electric prods and bullhooks and kept in socially deprived conditions, elephants become dysfunctional, unhealthy, depressed and aggressive. Citing in part a shift in public opinion, Ringling Bros. Circus eliminated elephant acts in 2016 and launched an animal-free show in 2023.

Stronger laws needed

While the federal Animal Welfare Act, which is enforced by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, regulates circuses, no agency monitors training sessions where the most violent abuses occur. Furthermore, because the AWA establishes only minimum guidelines and fails to incorporate modern husbandry practices, a facility can be in compliance with the federal law, yet the animals can still be subjected to grossly inhumane conditions. And due to inadequate resources, the weak standards of the AWA are poorly enforced.

Public safety concerns

Countless elephant rampages and attacks demonstrate the dangers of putting a stressed, wild, 8,000-pound animal in a traveling show. Elephants have trampled trainers before horrified spectators; bolted out of circus tents with frightened children clinging to their back; and run amok, causing significant property damage.

Abusive training

Circus tricks, such as headstands, hind-leg stands, lying down and sitting up, place a great deal of stress on an elephant's muscles and

joints. No elephant would perform these grotesquely exaggerated maneuvers on command—over and over, hundreds of times a year—without the constant threat of punishment. Trainers use a purposely cruel and outdated tool called a bullhook to force elephants to perform. A bullhook resembles a fireplace poker, consisting of a long rod, sharp metal hook and spiked tip, and is used as a weapon to inflict pain and punishment on elephants. The use of bullhooks results in trauma, suffering, lacerations, puncture wounds and abscesses.

Unhealthy confinement

Elephants are confined to trailers, sometimes for days at a time, during nearly year-round transport. At venues, elephants are confined to small pens or are chained by two legs, restricting movement to a step forward or backward. Prolonged immobilization and standing in their own excrement results in problems such as degenerative joint disease and foot disorders—which are the leading causes of euthanasia in captive elephants—as well as urine burns, rotting and cracked foot pads, and cracked and infected nails. Chaining is associated with neurotic behaviors, such as head-bobbing, rocking and swaying, which are all indicators of poor welfare commonly seen in elephants used in traveling shows.

Tuberculosis (TB)

While approximately 12.4% of captive elephants in the U.S. have tested positive for *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* (a human strain of TB), many more may be infected with this deadly bacterial lung disease since TB testing on elephants is unreliable. People have tested positive for exposure to TB after direct and indirect contact with infected elephants, suggesting that not only circus workers, but arena staff and circusgoers, could be at risk if a TB-positive elephant is on the road.





SHRINE CIRCUSES

Of the circuses still using animal acts in the U.S., many are sponsored or hosted by local Shrine chapters. Shrine Circus does not own the animals in its shows or possess a USDA exhibitor license. Instead, the Shrine chapters contract with circus producers who contract with exhibitors to lease animals. The Shrine temples produce their own circuses, so animal exhibits will vary from chapter to chapter and year to year.

Shrine exhibitors fail AWA standards

While the federal Animal Welfare Act, which is enforced by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, regulates circuses, no agency monitors training sessions where the most violent abuses occur. Furthermore, because the AWA establishes only minimum guidelines and fails to incorporate modern husbandry practices, a facility can be in compliance with the federal law, yet the animals can still be subjected to grossly inhumane conditions. Shrine circuses commonly work with exhibitors that have failed to meet even these minimal standards, including: Tarzan Zerbini Circus, Carden Circus, Jordan World Circus, Franzen. Bros. Circus, Circus Hollywood and Royal Hanneford Circus. The USDA has cited Shrine circus exhibitors for failure to provide veterinary care, nutritious food, clean water and adequate shelter from the elements. These exhibitors have also been cited for failure to protect the public and for failure to handle animals in a manner that prevents trauma and harm. Furthermore, numerous dangerous incidents involving wild animals at Shrine Circuses have caused injury to children and other attendees.

Trending toward a modern, humane model

Numerous Shrine circuses have eliminated wild animal acts or announced plans to eliminate them in future circuses. The Wawa Shriners in Saskatchewan, Canada, featured a circus without exotic animals with their representative stating, “The last couple of years we have been concerned with the opinion of people, and we’re cognizant of that and feel the same. These animals weren’t meant to be in that world.” Just months before the Minneapolis City Council voted unanimously to pass a measure prohibiting the use of

bullhooks on elephants in traveling shows, Zurah Shriners CEO Ross Hjermstad said he believes using elephants, tigers and lions in circuses will become a thing of the past, stating, “It’s something that is going to be inevitable at some point. There is a growing trend to get away from those animals.”

Many others have also acknowledged that animal-free circuses are inevitable. There’s no better time for Shriners to take the bold and decisive act to ensure its chapters’ fundraisers are humane, safe and appealing to today’s audiences.

Fundraising

Many Shrine chapters do not use circuses to raise funds, but those that do are typically raising money for the local temple’s administrative expenses, not the Shriners’ Children Hospitals (which are largely funded by the hospitals’ \$9 billion endowment). The

Shriners Hospitals for Children is a separate entity from Shriners International. Shrine circuses are used as fundraisers to primarily benefit the local fraternal organizations of Shriners International.

According to a May 2016 Shriners *Temple Financial Manual*, “It is natural to associate the fez with Shriners Hospitals for Children. Because of this, meticulous attention must be given to all fundraising activities, including circuses, to make certain [...] that a contributor is not led to believe that his money will be used for the Hospitals when all or a portion thereof will be used otherwise.” The same manual explains that “fundraising activities consisting of circuses, food sales ... and other miscellaneous activities” support Temple activities, while “fundraising events consisting of paper crusades ... [and] other miscellaneous events” are held for the benefit of Shriners Hospitals for Children.

Regardless of any charitable purpose by civic or fraternal organizations, wild animal acts need not be used to advance that purpose. There are many humane, animal-free alternatives available.

Sample social media outreach

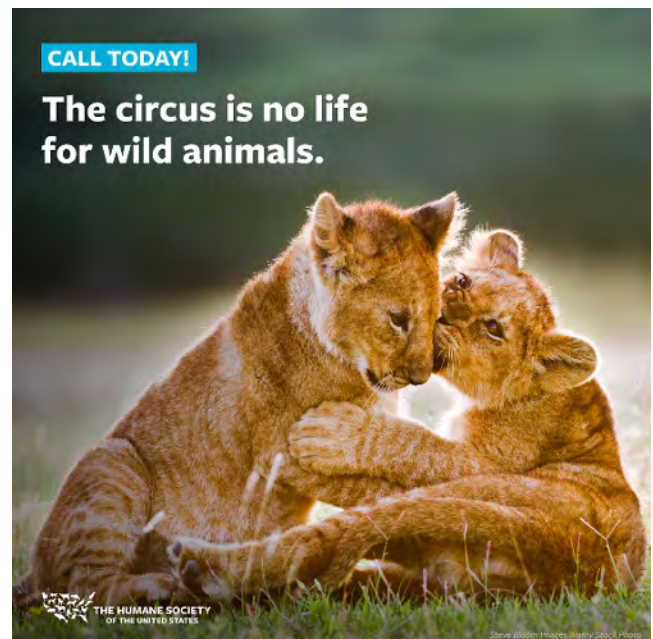
SAMPLE FACEBOOK/INSTAGRAM POSTS

- Wild animals are not ours to use for entertainment. Let [LEGISLATOR/OFFICIAL] know that circuses and traveling animal acts are not welcome in [CITY/STATE].
- Wild animal acts and displays are relics of the past. Please urge your city council to vote YES on [ORDINANCE/BILL #].

SAMPLE X POSTS

- Circuses and traveling animal acts are cruel, dangerous, and beyond outdated. Pass [ORDINANCE #]! #BanCircusCruelty
- Keep cruel wild animal acts and displays out of [CITY]! Support [ORDINANCE #]. #CrueltyFree

SAMPLE SOCIAL MEDIA GRAPHICS



Cruelty is not entertainment

Wild animal acts belong in the history books.
Take action to end these acts in [community]

Sample letters to the editor

Letters to the editor and newspaper opinion columns are a time-honored way of getting the word out to the public about circuses. But increasingly, more and more people are getting their news online, and often commenting and interacting with news topics in real time. You can help steer consumers away from wild animal acts by being a voice in online social and news communities.

These samples of letters to the editor can be used for inspiration, but are not intended to be copied and submitted verbatim. Newspapers prefer to print letters that are unique submissions to their publication.

BAN WILD ANIMALS IN TRAVELING SHOWS

The use of wild animals in circuses and other traveling shows is outdated and inhumane. Trainers use violent methods to force animals to perform confusing and physically grueling tricks on command. Animals are subjected to prolonged confinement as they are hauled from city to city in poorly ventilated trucks and trailers. They are denied basic necessities, such as adequate exercise and access to clean cages, food, water and veterinary care. Using wild animals also poses public safety risks. Rampaging elephants have bolted out of circus tents with frightened children clinging to their backs, and big cats and primates have run amok and injured children. The public's enthusiasm for animal-based circuses has been dwindling for decades. Many circuses are responding to the public's distaste for the use of wild animals in circuses by choosing to modify their shows, while others are simply closing due to declining ticket sales. We urge [city/county] to pass an ordinance ending the use of wild animal acts. It is high time to end these outdated acts once and for all.

BAN ELEPHANTS IN TRAVELING SHOWS

With all that is now known about the rich and varied lives that elephants naturally lead, it's become apparent that life in circuses or other traveling shows is nothing but misery for them. They are denied everything that is natural and important to them, are trained through punishment and pain, bullied to perform unnatural and silly tricks, and endure extreme confinement while chained in trucks and trailers during months of grueling travel each year.

Elephants don't perform confusing and often physically grueling circus tricks because they want to—they perform because they're afraid not to. Trainers use bullhooks to strike, hook and jab sensitive areas to force elephants into physically difficult and painful positions for tricks. The public has become increasingly opposed to the use of elephants in exhibitions. A growing number of states, counties and cities have responded by passing legislation that addresses this issue. It's time to end the use of elephants in [city/county].

OPPOSE BIG CATS IN TRAVELING SHOWS

I'm disappointed to learn that this year's [insert fair name] is featuring [exhibitor]. [Exhibitor] is nothing more than a circus act and has a history of serious U.S. Department of Agriculture citations for violations of public safety and animal welfare regulations. [list some specifics about the violations]

Safety aside, hauling majestic tigers around the country in trailers to provide us with a few minutes of entertainment is no longer acceptable. Few people find pleasure in watching big cats reluctantly lie down, roll over and sit up while being poked with sticks and threatened with whips. It's time to end these heartbreaking displays.

Sample letters to sponsors/venues

Add a paragraph about problems with specific circuses/exhibitors coming to your area.

LETTER TO SPONSOR/HOST OF A CIRCUS

I urge you to withdraw your [sponsorship/permission to use venue] for the [name of circus] and establish a policy prohibiting future wild animal displays. With the wealth of scientific information currently available, it is clear that life in a traveling show cannot possibly meet the complex needs of elephants, tigers, bears and other wild animals, or come close to providing the rich and varied lives they naturally lead. Inhumane training practices, long and exhausting transport periods, intensive confinement and chaining, and the unnatural, painful tricks animals are forced to perform all take an immense physical and psychological toll.

Performing animals are beaten, whipped, jabbed or shocked with an electric prod to force them to perform unnatural and often confusing tricks. Wild animals used in traveling shows and circuses spend most of their time confined in small cages, trailers or trucks, or chained—the animals are forced to eat, sleep, urinate and defecate all in the same cramped area.

The animals also pose a threat to public safety by bringing people dangerously close to unpredictable, powerful and stressed wild animals. There are countless examples of elephants rampaging, tigers escaping and similar tragedies that resulted in property damage, injuries and even death.

A growing number of state and local governments are passing restrictions governing the use of wild animals in response to public concerns about how the animals are mistreated.

[Sponsoring/promoting/hosting] such an event sends the message that abusing wildlife for our amusement is acceptable. I respectfully urge you to sever ties with future traveling shows or circuses that use wild animal acts. Thank you for your time and consideration.

LETTER TO FAIR FEATURING WILD ANIMALS

I am writing to ask that you consider establishing a policy against allowing dangerous wild animal displays at [fair name]. You may have heard about an animal trainer who was attacked by a tiger during a show at the Pensacola Interstate Fair in Florida in 2016. The incident occurred in front of a group of schoolchildren, and the trainer was rushed to a hospital where she underwent surgery for her injuries. Unfortunately, such tragedies have happened before and will happen again, as long as powerful, wild and unpredictable animals such as big cats, bears, elephants and primates are used in traveling shows.

In addition to the danger associated with these types of exhibits, the animals suffer from a lack of basic care, prolonged confinement as they are transported from venue to venue, and abusive training methods commonly used to force wild animals to perform.

Many wild animal exhibitors appearing at fairs have a history of violating the federal Animal Welfare Act, including a lack of safety barriers, unsafe handling, inadequate veterinary care and filthy cages.

Dangerous wild animal exhibits present tremendous public safety risks and potentially devastating liability for your fair. By glossing over the animal cruelty and exploitation inherent in such attractions, they also distract from your fair's educational objectives and cheapen the wholesome family entertainment you work so hard to provide by glossing over the animal cruelty and exploitation inherent in such attractions. I urge you to establish a policy that prohibits dangerous wild animal displays at the [fair name].

Thank you for your consideration, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sample meeting request

TIPS FOR SCHEDULING A MEETING WITH YOUR ELECTED OFFICIAL

- You can attend the meeting by yourself or invite other constituents (i.e., your friends, family, neighbors) to participate in the meeting.
- Select dates that are at least a week or two away.
- Be flexible with your availability.
- Plan for the meeting to last about 15-20 minutes.
- Be aware that you may actually meet with a legislative aide rather than your elected official. That is perfectly normal. Legislative aids can be significant allies.
- Call or email to confirm the meeting two or three days before the scheduled meeting time.

[Email Subject Line] Constituent Meeting Request

Dear Council Member **[Legislator's Last Name]**,

My name is **[your name]**. I am a constituent and would like to schedule a meeting with you or an appropriate staff person to discuss an ordinance to protect wild animals used in circuses. Would you be available on any of the following dates **[list dates]**?

[If others are attending] I expect several other constituents to attend the meeting and will forward their names prior to the meeting date.

I am hopeful that **[city name]** will join more than **[current tally of ordinances from HSUS factsheet]** other localities in **[#]** states that have passed various restrictions governing the use of wild animals in circuses and traveling shows in the interest of animal welfare and public health and safety.

Thank you for your time. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

[your name]

[address]

[phone # and e-mail]

Sample letters to lawmakers

Add a paragraph about problems with specific circuses/exhibitors coming to your area, such as Animal Welfare Act violations and dangerous incidents.

BAN WILD ANIMALS IN TRAVELING SHOWS

I urge your support for an ordinance prohibiting the display or performance of wild animals in [city]. With the wealth of scientific information currently available, it is clear that life in a traveling show cannot possibly meet the complex needs of elephants, tigers, lions and other wild animals, or come close to providing the rich and varied lives they naturally lead. Inhumane training practices, long and exhausting periods of transport, intensive confinement and chaining, and the unnatural and sometimes painful tricks these animals are forced to perform all take an immense physical and psychological toll. Many experts, including scientists, conservationists, welfare experts and veterinarians agree that wild animals have no place in entertainment.

Trainers use pain and punishment to train wild animals to perform circus tricks. This involves beating, poking, whipping or even shocking animals with electric prods. In traveling shows, animals spend most of their lives in cages, trailers or chains. This intense confinement, lack of exercise and inability to express natural behaviors causes immense physical and psychological suffering among all species. They commonly develop neurotic behaviors and suffer physical ailments. Elephants, for example, often develop chronic foot disease, lameness and arthritis.

Traveling shows also pose a threat to public health and safety by bringing people dangerously close to incredibly powerful, unpredictable and stressed wild animals. There have been numerous cases of wild animals in circuses running amok or attacking trainers or members of the public. Wild animals also have the potential to transmit various diseases. For example, approximately 12.4% of captive elephants in the U.S. have tested positive for *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* (a human strain of TB). Many more may actually be infected since TB testing on elephants is unreliable.

Current laws are not enough to protect animals in circuses and traveling shows. The federal Animal Welfare Act sets minimal standards for the handling, care, treatment and transport of animals in traveling shows. These standards are insufficient and poorly enforced by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Even facilities with multiple serious infractions under the AWA are frequently given multiple chances to correct violations and rarely face fines or license revocations.

This ordinance would not adversely impact the local economy. Economists agree that circuses do not generate new economic spending, but rather redistribute a family's discretionary spending. Most households have a budget that they will spend on entertainment, whether that entertainment is bowling, miniature golf, a movie or a circus. Since the owners and workers associated with traveling shows do not live in [city], most of the money generated from these performances leaves town with the show.

[Add a paragraph about problems with specific circuses/exhibitors coming to your area, such as Animal Welfare Act violations and dangerous incidents.]

I respectfully urge you to support an ordinance that would significantly improve animal welfare and protect public safety by prohibiting the display or performance of wild animals in [city]. Thank you for your consideration.



BAN ELEPHANTS IN CIRCUSES

I urge your support for an ordinance prohibiting the display of elephants in circuses and traveling shows, which cannot meet the complex physical, psychological and social needs of these cognitively and socially complex animals. Inhumane training practices, long and exhausting periods of transport, intensive confinement and the unnatural, painful tricks that elephants are forced to perform all take an immense physical and psychological toll. Many experts, including scientists, conservationists, welfare experts and veterinarians, agree that elephants have no place in entertainment.

Elephants in circuses and traveling shows are subject to violent training and handling methods. Bullhooks are devices that resemble a fireplace poker and are used to train, dominate and punish elephants. The use of bullhooks regularly results in trauma, suffering and physical injury. Countless videos document elephants vocalizing in distress and displaying signs of fear and pain while being punished with bullhooks, and painful, bloody lacerations or abscesses are far too common.

In the wild, elephants are on the move for 20 hours per day as they forage, care for young and socialize. In contrast, elephants used in circuses and traveling shows are kept chained or confined to small pens except for the few minutes when they perform. Prolonged confinement causes chronic foot disease, lameness and arthritis, which are the most common reasons for the euthanasia of performing elephants.

Elephants also pose a threat to public health and safety. Circuses and traveling shows bring people dangerously close to an incredibly strong, stressed and unpredictable wild animal. There have been numerous instances when elephants have run amok, sometimes causing property damage, injury or even death. Furthermore, elephants can carry a strain of tuberculosis that is contagious to humans. Approximately 12.4% of captive elephants in the U.S. have tested positive for *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* (a human strain of TB). Many more may actually be infected since TB testing on elephants is unreliable.

Due to their transitory nature and substandard management practices, circuses cannot and do not provide elephants with the space and freedom needed to engage in critical natural behaviors. This has enormous consequences not only for an elephant's health and well-being, but also for the health and safety of circus workers and the general public.

I respectfully urge you to support an ordinance that would significantly improve elephant welfare and protect public safety by prohibiting the display of elephants in traveling shows and circuses. Thank you for your consideration.

Sample ordinances

Some municipalities may want to include a preamble (or findings) that provides background on the issue and justification for the introduction of an ordinance or a resolution.

WHEREAS, conditions inherent to traveling performances, including constant travel, temporary and collapsible facilities and the prolonged confinement and physical coercion of animals, subject wild animals to compromised welfare and chronic stress, and present public and worker health and safety risks; and

WHEREAS, wild animals are forced to perform unnatural tricks requiring extreme physical coercion, including, but not limited to the use of food and water restrictions, electric shock devices, bullhooks, metal bars, whips and muzzles, among other abuses; and

WHEREAS, wild animals used in traveling performances suffer severe and extended confinement, and, deprived of natural movements, free exercise and natural behaviors, are prone to chronic stress, behavioral, health and psychological problems; and

WHEREAS, traveling performances that use wild animals bring people dangerously close to unpredictable wild animals by displaying animals in inappropriate, uncontrolled areas that are not suited for the exhibition of such animals; and

WHEREAS, traveling wild animal performances use collapsible, temporary, mobile facilities, which risk escape and serious harm to animals, workers, and the public; and

WHEREAS, the frequent mobility of traveling performances using wild animals complicates oversight such that agencies and authorities cannot properly monitor, evaluate or follow through regarding the condition of animals or facilities, or their history of potential injuries, incidents, illnesses, violations or other issues, and therefore cannot properly protect animals, workers or the public; and

WHEREAS, using wild animals as commodities for traveling performances adds nothing to the understanding and conservation of such animals and the natural environment, and actually undermines conservation efforts necessary to protect threatened and endangered species.

WHEREAS, the Council of the [name of city, town, or county] deems it advisable for the welfare of the city and the prevention of animal cruelty to prohibit the performance of wild animals for public entertainment or amusement within the City.

Now, Therefore, the Council of the [name of city, town, or county] enacts as follows:

Sample ordinance language

We can help you draft an ordinance for your community that aligns with state and local law—please email wildlife@humanesociety.org. If an ordinance is drafted by your city/county legislative counsel, it is important that you, along with experts, thoroughly review the language prior to introduction. Always review ordinances for language that is unclear or weakens the ordinance or creates loopholes that render the ordinance ineffective. Please contact us for assistance. Below are recommended provisions to include in an ordinance that bans wild animal displays at circuses, fairs and similar attractions. Be mindful that some jurisdictions may limit what can be included.

Sec 1. Definitions.

As used in this Article, the following words and phrases have the following meanings:

“Department” means the [enforcement agency, such as the Department of Health and Human Services]. “Director” means the director of the [enforcement agency, such as Department of Health and Human Services].

“Covered animal” means any live animal from any of the following scientific classifications:

- a) Artiodactyla (including hippopotamuses, giraffes, camels and llamas, but excepting cattle, swine, sheep and goats)
- b) Elephantidae (elephants);
- c) Felidae (including tigers, lions, jaguars, leopards, cheetahs, and cougars, or any hybrid thereof, but excluding domestic cats);
- d) Marsupialia (including kangaroos);
- e) Non-human primates (including apes, monkeys, and lemurs);
- f) Perissodactyla (including rhinoceroses, tapirs, and zebras);
- g) Pinnipedia (including seals, sea lions, and walruses);
- h) Ursidae (bears);
- i) Elasmobranchii (including nurse sharks and lemon sharks)

“Mobile or traveling housing facility” means a transporting vehicle such as a truck, trailer or railway car, used to transport or house animals while traveling for exhibition or other performance.

“Performance” means any exhibition, public showing, presentation, display, exposition, fair, animal act, circus, ride, trade show, petting zoo, carnival, parade, race, or similar undertaking in which animals are required to perform tricks, give rides, or participate as accompaniments for the entertainment, amusement, or benefit of a live audience.

“Person” means individuals, corporations, partnerships, associations, or other legal entities, and agents of those entities.

“Traveling animal act” means any performance of animals where such animals are transported to, from, or between locations for the purpose of such performance, in a mobile or traveling housing facility.

Sec 2. Prohibited acts.

Notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall allow for the participation of a covered animal in a traveling animal act.

Sec. 3. Administration and enforcement.

The director is hereby charged with the responsibility for the administration and enforcement of the provisions of this article under the direction of the county executive.

Sec. 4. Violations of article.

Any person who violates any provision of this article shall be subject to punishment for a [insert a penalty that reflects local law]. Each day a violation continues to exist shall constitute a separate offense, as shall each covered animal exhibited.

Sample testimony

There is normally a time limit of about three minutes for oral testimony, so keep your remarks brief.

BAN WILD ANIMAL ACTS

Good morning, committee members. My name is [name], and I have lived in [city/county] for [#] years. Thank you for the opportunity to address you today. I respectfully urge you to support [ordinance number], an act to prohibit the use of wild animals in circuses and other traveling shows.

With the wealth of information that is now available about the rich and varied lives that elephants, lions, tigers, bears and other wild animals naturally lead, it's become apparent that life in a traveling show is nothing but misery for them. Animals in circuses and other traveling displays are trained with pain and the fear of punishment; bullied to perform silly tricks; caged and chained in trains, trucks and trailers; forced to endure months of grueling travel each year; separated from their companions; and routinely denied natural behaviors and adequate exercise.

Relying on federal government inspections of performing wild animals does not ensure animal welfare or public safety. The federal Animal Welfare Act establishes only very minimal guidelines, is vaguely worded and is poorly enforced by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Licensees can—and do—keep animals in inhumane and unsafe conditions, yet still be in compliance with the AWA.

Careful research reveals that shows and displays that feature wild animals all too often have miserable records of animal care and commonly fail to comply with animal protection laws, yet they continue to be licensed by the USDA.

These types of animal displays also pose a threat to public safety by bringing people into dangerously close proximity to incredibly powerful, unpredictable and stressed wild animals. Wild animals used in circuses and other travelling exhibitions have attacked people or run amok, sometimes causing death, injury or property damage. Animal handlers cannot protect themselves, let alone the general public, when an elephant or big cat decides to rebel. In 2016, a tiger attacked an animal trainer in front of horrified children during a show at the Pensacola Interstate Fair in Florida.

[Add a few brief sentences about problems with specific circuses/exhibitors coming to your area, such as Animal Welfare Act violations and dangerous incidents.]

A prohibition on circuses will not have an adverse impact on the local economy. Economists roundly agree that exotic animal displays do not generate new economic spending in a region. They simply redistribute a family's discretionary spending because most households have an entertainment budget that will be spent in the local economy, whether it's on miniature golf, museums, a ball game, a movie or a circus. Since the owners and others associated with traveling animal shows do not reside in [your city], when the show leaves town, most of the revenue leaves with them.

The shifting tide of public opinion has prompted action from local governments and impelled many circuses to modify their shows.

I urge you to pass an ordinance prohibiting performing wild animals in circuses and traveling shows. Doing so will send a message that [municipality name] cares deeply about the humane treatment of animals. Thank you for considering this important issue.

Talking points

Here are a few general quick facts to help you prepare for meetings, media interviews and other efforts to educate the public.

- Laws protecting animals in traveling shows are inadequate and poorly enforced. The federal Animal Welfare Act establishes only minimum guidelines, and even these meager standards are often ignored. No government agency or humane society monitors training sessions, where abuse occurs behind the scenes. A growing number of local and state governments are filling the void left by insufficient federal oversight by passing stronger laws.
- Animals used in traveling shows live a dismal life of domination, confinement and violent training. It is standard practice to beat, shock and whip them to make them perform ridiculous tricks that they cannot comprehend.
- Animals used in traveling shows spend most of their lives in extreme confinement, depriving them of the ability to express natural behaviors.
- Big cats, bears and primates are forced to eat, drink, sleep, defecate and urinate in the same cramped cages. Elephants often suffer crippling injuries from constant chaining and performing physically difficult tricks.
- Animals in traveling shows are hauled around the country in poorly ventilated trailers for up to 50 weeks a year in all kinds of extreme weather conditions. Access to the basic necessities of food, water, exercise and veterinary care is often inadequate.
- Wild animals are dangerous and unpredictable, and their use in traveling exhibitions puts the public at risk. There have been countless instances of tigers escaping from cages and elephants running amok, and numerous children have been injured by wild animals used in circuses.
- When animals rebel against a trainer's physical dominance, the animals sometimes pay with their lives. Rampaging elephants have been gunned down in city streets, and caged tigers have been shot to death in retaliation for causing injuries.
- In the wild, bears don't ride bicycles, tigers don't jump through fiery hoops and elephants don't do handstands. Wild animal shows present a distorted view of wildlife.
- There are many alternative forms of entertainment that are fun, exciting and family-friendly that don't involve forcing abused animals to perform demeaning tricks.
- Wildlife experts agree that the use of wild animals in traveling shows causes a great deal of suffering to animals who have specialized and complex needs that cannot be met in a traveling show.

FAQs

Why is legislation necessary?

Animals in circuses and other traveling shows suffer lives of unending misery, deprivation and long-term confinement. They are trained with pain and punishment, bullied to perform unnatural and silly tricks, caged and chained in trains and trailers, and forced to endure months of grueling travel each year. Government documents confirm that wild animal shows and displays all too often have miserable records of animal care and commonly fail to comply with animal protection laws. Changing public attitudes about the use of performing wild animals is prompting citizens to call for legislation to prohibit wild animal acts.

How common/popular are circuses?

Animal-based circuses have been dwindling in popularity for decades, while contemporary circuses that dazzle crowds solely with skilled human performers, such as Cirque du Soleil, have soared. According to a November 2016 article in Forbes magazine, circus attendance in the United States has dropped an estimated 30% to 50% over a recent 20-year period, and gross revenue from circuses in the U.S. fell almost 9% between 2007 and 2012.

When Ringling Bros. Circus eliminated elephant acts from its shows in 2016, and then in 2017 announced the closing of the circus altogether, it acknowledged that changing public sentiment against the use of elephants in circuses and subsequent declining attendance was one of the factors behind those decisions. Ringling premiered a new, non-animal circus in 2023.

What government agency monitors the training of performing animals?

No agency monitors the training of animals used for performances, yet training sessions are where the most severe abuse commonly occurs. A simple internet search will produce numerous videos showing the true extent of the violence and abuse trainers inflict on elephants, big cats and other animals during behind-the-scenes training sessions.

What government agency monitors the care and handling of performing animals?

Circuses and other traveling shows are regulated by the federal Animal Welfare Act, which is enforced by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. However, because the AWA establishes only minimum guidelines and fails to incorporate modern husbandry practices, a facility can be in compliance with the federal law, yet the animals can still be subjected to grossly inhumane conditions. And due to inadequate resources, the weak standards of the AWA are poorly enforced. In fact, even agency audits confirm that the USDA is unable to effectively enforce the law. To address deficiencies in the AWA, an increasing number of localities have passed legislation restricting the use of wild animals in circuses.

Where have restrictions on the use of performing wild animals been passed?

To date, more than **[current tally of ordinances from HSUS factsheet]** U.S. municipalities have passed legislation to restrict the use of wild animals or to prohibit cruel methods of training. These include **[list similar communities or those communities in your state]**. In addition, Colorado, New Jersey and Hawaii prohibit wild animals commonly used in traveling shows, and Illinois and New York ban the use of elephants in traveling shows. Rhode Island banned the use of bullhooks on elephants in circuses. California first banned bullhooks and then went a step further by banning the use of animals other than dogs, cats or horses in circuses. Kentucky now bans, by regulation, the use of endangered species in circuses as well as the use of bears, big cats, elephants, primates and other wild animals in traveling shows. Fifteen states prohibit the public from having direct contact with certain wild animals.

How have circuses responded to laws that restrict the use of performing wild animals?

Although circuses may threaten not to perform in cities that consider laws prohibiting wild animal acts, it's been shown that many, in fact, choose to modify their shows. For example, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus said it would not perform in Los Angeles if the city banned outdated elephant training tools. Yet,



shortly after a ban passed, the circus announced that elephants would be removed from all its shows.

In 2018, Kelly Miller Circus decided it would not feature exotic animals in its shows. A year earlier, when Ramos Bros. Circus decided not to feature any animals except for a dog act, Oliver Ramos, general manager and CEO of the circus, explained, “Times are changing. People were always concerned with the well-being of the animals and ... we didn’t want that to be a burden on our show.” Circus Vargas, which eliminated elephants, tigers and other exotic animals from its shows more than a decade ago (and also stopped featuring horse and dog acts in 2010), has seen its attendance numbers grow 3% to 6% over the past few years.

Numerous Shrine circuses have eliminated wild animal acts altogether. The Wawa Shriners in Saskatchewan, Canada, featured a circus without exotic animals. Their representative stated, “The last couple of years we have been concerned with the opinion of people, and we’re cognizant of that and feel the same. These animals weren’t meant to be in that world.” Just months before the Minneapolis City Council voted unanimously to pass a measure prohibiting the use of bullhooks on elephants in traveling shows, Zurah Shriners CEO Ross Hjermstad said he believes using elephants, tigers and lions in circuses will become a thing of the past, stating, “It’s something that is going to be inevitable at some point. There is a growing trend to get away from those animals.”

What about existing circus contracts?

As has been done in other municipalities, the implementation date

of any proposed legislation can be adjusted to allow existing circus contracts to be fulfilled.

Won’t money and jobs be lost if circuses no longer visit the city/county/state?

The proposed law will not have an adverse impact on the local economy. Wild animal displays do not generate additional economic spending in a region. Families have a fixed amount of entertainment dollars that will be spent locally, whether it’s on movies, museums, ball games or a circus. Similarly, local jobs will not be affected. If circuses choose not to comply with the new law, the venues that previously hosted animal circuses will simply book other entertainment options. Further, before passing an ordinance banning cruel elephant training tools, the City of Los Angeles determined that all exhibitors using elephants combined, including Ringling Bros., appeared to have minimal impact on tax revenues and permit fees.

Don’t Shrine circuses raise funds to help sick children?

The Shriners Hospitals for Children is a separate entity from Shriners International. Shrine circuses are used as fundraisers to primarily benefit the local fraternal organizations of Shriners International.

According to a May 2016 Shriners *Temple Financial Manual*, “It is natural to associate the fez with Shriners Hospitals for Children. Because of this, meticulous attention must be given to all

fundraising activities, including circuses, to make certain [...] that a contributor is not led to believe that his money will be used for the Hospitals when all or a portion thereof will be used otherwise.” The same manual explains that “fundraising activities consisting of circuses, food sales, onion sales and other miscellaneous activities” support Temple activities while “fundraising events consisting of paper crusades donations, football games, golf tournaments and other miscellaneous events” are held for the benefit of Shriners Hospitals for Children.

Some Temples offer more transparency than others with regard to their circus fundraisers. A spokesperson for the Irem Shriners in Pennsylvania stated that proceeds from its 2017 circus “pay for all of our insurances, our uniforms and all expenses for things like our string band.” A poster for the El Zagal’s 2018 Shrine Circus in North Dakota clearly states, “Proceeds from this Shrine Circus benefit Shrine Temple operations only.” Similar disclaimers are published by numerous other Shriners advertising their circuses.

But in registering opposition to proposed bans on wild animals in traveling shows, the Anah Temple Shrine in Maine and the Syria Shrine in Pennsylvania in 2017 and 2018 respectively declined to provide circus fundraising tallies to support claims to reporters that ticket sales benefit the hospitals.

Regardless of any charitable purpose by civic or fraternal organizations, wild animal acts need not be used to advance that purpose. There are many alternative fundraisers available, such as carnivals, galas, auctions, golf tournaments, raffles, haunted houses, scavenger hunts, magic shows and lifelike dinosaur shows, etc.

Why doesn’t the legislation prohibit using domestic animals, such as dogs and horses, who are commonly used in circuses?

To date, public concern has focused on the use of wild animals in circuses because it’s become apparent that species such as elephants, tigers and bears, who are quite large and naturally active, are denied everything that is natural to them when they are forced to spend their lives in extreme confinement and are trained through pain and fear.

In addition, domestic animals do not pose the same level of danger to the public that wild species such as elephants and tigers do. A circus environment may be less stressful to domestic animals since they are more acclimated to being around people. Local animal protection laws can likely better protect domestic animals used in traveling shows because law enforcement agencies are far more familiar with domestic species and therefore are better able to identify violations concerning the care of dogs or horses than wild species. Additionally, it is feasible to provide dogs or horses adequate opportunity to exercise during lengthy periods of travel.



Our mission

We fight the big fights to end suffering for all animals.

Together with millions of supporters, the Humane Society of the United States takes on puppy mills, factory farms, the fur trade, trophy hunting, animal cosmetics testing and other cruel industries. Through our rescue, response and sanctuary work, as well as other direct services, we help thousands of animals in need every year.

We fight all forms of animal cruelty to achieve the vision behind our name: a humane society.

For assistance, contact wildlife@humanesociety.org.

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