

Wild animals in EU circuses



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Key facts

- Scientific research has concluded that **“there is no evidence to suggest that the natural needs of non domesticated animals can be met through the living conditions and husbandry offered by circuses. Neither natural environment nor much natural behaviour can be recreated in circuses.”ⁱ**
- The Federation of Veterinarians of Europe (FVE) recommends the prohibition of the use of wild mammals in travelling circuses.ⁱⁱ
- Both animal and public health and safety can be severely compromised by the use of wild animals in circuses.
- 23 countries around the world have banned the use of wild animals in circuses; **six of these are European Union (EU) member states.**
- **A further twelve EU Member States** have implemented partial bans on certain species of wild animal.
- ENDCAP members believe that **the complex welfare needs of wild animals cannot be met in the travelling circus environment** and therefore advocate a complete ban on the practice in all EU Member States.

This briefing document seeks to set out the current situation with regard to the use of wild animals in circuses across the EU and makes the case for member states to take action to prohibit the practice on grounds of animal welfare and public safety, as well as to mitigate risk of disease spread. An increasing number of countries, both within the EU and worldwide, have already taken the step of prohibiting the use of wild animals in circuses and ENDCAP members, supported by public and expert veterinary opinion, encourage all remaining Member States to do the same.

Wild animals in European circuses

Wild animal species currently used in circuses within the EU include (but are not limited to): elephants, tigers, lions, sea lions, zebras, crocodiles, bears, primates, giraffes, hippopotamuses, rhinoceros, penguins, snakes, kangaroos and emus.



Animals in circuses are usually kept in cramped, inappropriate conditions (© FAADA, Spain)

Welfare concerns for wild animals in circuses

Welfare concerns for wild animals used in circuses include: inadequate and unnatural social and physical environments for the animals; inappropriate and unnatural contact with people; and climate conditions which may differ significantly from the animals' natural environment.

Demanding and sometimes abusive training methods used to oblige animals to perform further compromises their welfare. For those circuses which travel, there is the added welfare concern of regular movement and the potential for animals to be confined for long periods, both during journeys as well as whilst loading and unloading. According to Schwammer *et al*: *"For some species, frequent transport causes a degree of anxiety that is so pronounced as to warrant classification as cruelty to animals".*ⁱⁱⁱ

Lifelong welfare problems are presented for wild animals used in circuses. In order to "tame" a wild

animal – a process which involves changing the animal's behaviour, but not their genetic make-up – the animal is often removed from its family group from a young age to facilitate the process. Animals might be deliberately hand-reared in order to habituate them to human contact. This not only presents welfare problems for the baby, who might naturally stay with their mother for the first few years of their life, but also for the mother, who suffers as a result of the loss of her offspring. Research has

shown that the species of wild animal used most commonly in circuses are those least suited to such a life.^{iv}

Public safety concerns

Wild animals such as lions, tigers, cetaceans and elephants are unpredictable and very dangerous to humans. Some not only pose the threat of injury to people, but the significant potential for disease transmission between animals and people (zoonotic diseases).



In the wild, hippopotamuses live in lush forests in Africa (© InfoCircos, Spain)

The combination of the temporary nature of accommodation during travel (or at temporary sites in the case of travelling circuses), the close proximity of animals to people during performances and the practice of “parading” animals such as elephants through towns where circuses are performing or as part of other types of live event, leads to serious risk of accident or escape. This, in turn, leads to serious risk to public health and safety. There are numerous documented instances of escape or injury caused by wild animals around Europe. Since 2005, there have been at least eight documented big cat accidents or escapes, twelve elephant accidents or escapes as well as bear and crocodile escapes in the circus industry. Some of the incidents resulted in serious injury, or even death, for people or the animals themselves.

Potential for disease spread

Circus with wild animals pose a threat of zoonotic disease transmission between animals and humans. Public records show that many circuses have a history of tuberculosis in their elephants, which can infect humans with the bacterial disease. Many primates can also carry diseases that are easily transmittable to humans; for example, Herpes B virus is carried in a high percentage of macaque monkeys and is almost always fatal to humans. Reptiles can carry and transmit a number of predominantly bacterial diseases, including *Salmonella*, *Mycobacterium*, *Campylobacter*, *Aeromonas*, and *Escherichia coli*. Often these infections do not make animals appear ill but can cause serious illness in humans.^v

Expert opinion

In June 2015, the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe (FVE) published a policy statement recommending that “all European and national competent authorities prohibit the use of wild mammals in travelling circuses across Europe since there is by no means the possibility that their physiological, mental and social requirements can adequately be met”.



An Asian elephant in apparent poor health (© LAV, Italy)

Public opinion

Public opinion polls carried out in various countries in the EU have pointed toward a desire to end the use of wild animals in circuses. For example, a poll carried out in Ireland in 2014 showed that only 28% of people thought it acceptable to use wild animals in circus shows. A 2010 public consultation carried out in the UK showed that 95% of respondents supported a ban on the use of wild animals in circuses. Similarly, 64.4% of German citizens would like to see a ban on the use of wild animals in circuses^{vi} and 57% of French citizens are against the presence of animals in circuses.^{vii}

International legal status

As at October 2015, there were 23 countries which had implemented full nationwide bans on the use of

wild animals in circuses with some of these countries, such as Bolivia and Malta, having implemented bans on the use of all animals in circuses. In addition, a further 22 countries have regional bans in place or bans on certain species or classes of animals. Within the EU, six countries have implemented outright bans on the use of all animals or all wild animals in circuses. One country (Denmark) has an outright ban but with the potential for circuses to be granted full exemptions and a further twelve have partial bans in place.

A number of countries, including all countries in the UK, the Republic of Ireland and Estonia, are in the process of considering their position on the issue. England has promised a ban on wild animals in travelling circuses and Wales has suggested that it will take the same measures.



Harsh training regimes are often used to train wild animals to perform unnatural behaviour (© Animal Equality, Germany)

Recommendation

ENDCAP members, supported by expert and veterinary opinion from around the world, believe that the complex welfare needs of wild animals cannot be met in a travelling circus environment and therefore advocate prohibition of the practice in all EU member states.

Current restrictions on wild animal use in circuses

Country	Full ban	Partial ban	Commitment to ban	Full ban with ability for full exemption	No ban
Austria	●				
Belgium		●			
Bulgaria		●			
Croatia	●				
Cyprus	●				
Czech Republic		●			
Denmark				●	
England			●		
Estonia		●	●		
Finland		●			
France					●
Germany					●
Greece	●				
Hungary		●			
Ireland					●
Italy					●
Latvia		●			
Lithuania					●
Luxembourg					●
Malta	●				
Netherlands		●			
Northern Ireland					●
Poland		●			
Portugal		●			
Romania					●
Scotland					●
Slovakia					●
Slovenia	●				
Spain		●			
Sweden		●			
Wales *			●		

* Wales has committed to join with England if a ban is introduced there

- i Iossa, G., Soulsbury, C. and Harris, S. (2009). Are Wild Animals Suited to a Travelling Circus Life?, *Animal Welfare*, 18, pp.129-140
- ii Source: http://www.fve.org/uploads/publications/docs/fve_position_on_the_travelling_circuses_adopted_final.pdf
- iii Schwammer, Pechlaner, Gsandter and Buchlkrammerstatter, *Guidelines for keeping of wild animals in circuses*, Vienna 1997
- iv Iossa, G., Soulsbury, C. and Harris, S. (2009) See above
- v "Zoonoses Associated with Reptiles & Amphibians", IACUC, Source: <http://www.iacuc.wsu.edu/zoonoses.aspx?ID=1107>
- vi http://www.peta.de/web/zwei_drittel_der.3299.html
- vii May 2012. Elsass/France in DNA.