



POSITION PAPER: Use of Big Cats in Entertainment

Big Cat Sanctuary Alliance

Position: Oppose

Position summary:

The use of big cats for entertainment, including in circuses and traveling shows, film, television and advertising, and other entertainment, compromises animal health and welfare, puts the public at risk, and may adversely affect true conservation efforts. The cats are often subjected to intensive confinement, prolonged travel, abusive training, and deprivation of all that is natural to them.

The Big Cat Sanctuary Alliance **opposes** the use of big cats for any type of entertainment.

Welfare of big cats in traveling shows

Big cats, such as lions, leopards and tigers, are found in traveling shows, including circuses, big cat “encounters” at county and state fairs and festivals, and even magic acts. Because of their transient nature, these exhibitions cannot meet the cats’ basic needs, including space to move, enriched physical environments, and the opportunity to engage in species-typical behaviors.

Big cats in traveling exhibitions are often subjected to extensive travel, tightly confined in small transport crates and cages in which they can barely stand up and turn around. Circuses may tour for 10 or more months a year. The cats remain confined during transport and at performance venues, and they may endure inclement weather and extreme temperatures. Handlers use punishment-based methods to train the cats, often employing whips, electric prods, metal rods or other menacing devices to reinforce control over the cats and ensure they perform on cue.

Although big cats naturally roam large territories in the wild and live in quiet and solitude, in traveling shows they are exposed to the constant stress of forced movement, extreme confinement, long hours of travel, human handling, loud noise, impoverished captive environments, and the presence of spectators. Stress is widely known to adversely impact animal health. Abnormal repetitive behaviors – such as big cats repeatedly pacing in cages are ubiquitous in traveling shows.

In a technical report commissioned by the Welsh government to investigate the welfare of wild animals in circuses, the authors concluded, “Life for wild animals in travelling circuses and mobile zoos does not appear to constitute either a ‘good life’ or a ‘life worth living’” (Dorning et al., p. 47).

Public safety threat

Big cats used in circuses and traveling shows have the same genetic makeup as their wild counterparts and they retain their wild instincts and drives—which they may act on when threatened or frightened, or sometimes with no warning at all. Big cats have escaped from circuses, injured members of the public, and mauled and killed their handlers. Some of the animals have paid for these incidents with their lives. Since 1990, there have been more than 300 dangerous incidents involving big cats in the U.S. Twenty-four people have been killed (four of whom were children) and many more have sustained traumatic injuries.

No education or conservation value

Big cat performances and encounters do not promote education or conservation. Instead, these outdated displays distort the public's understanding of wild animals and their imperiled status in the wild. Research suggests that seeing wild animals in an entertainment context can actually hinder serious conservation efforts and may promote exotic "pet" ownership (Ross et al., 2011). A study by Courchamp et al. (2018) suggests that the sheer magnitude of the cultural and commercial presence of wild animals leads the public to perceive that threatened or endangered animals, including tigers and lions, are abundant, when in fact wild populations are in serious jeopardy.

Legislation prohibiting animal acts

Public attitudes toward the use of wild animals in entertainment are quickly changing in the U.S. and around the world. In 2017 Illinois and New York State banned the use of elephants in traveling shows, and New York City prohibited the use of many wild animal species in circuses. That same year, the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus shut down after 146 years in operation, citing changing public tastes. In 2018 New Jersey banned the use of wild animals in traveling acts and Hawaii finalized a regulation that prohibits the same. Countries around the world have passed similar laws and more are expected in the future.

Other "entertainment"

Roadside zoos and traveling exhibitors may offer the public the opportunity to pet or take a photograph with a lion or tiger cub—a practice that is inhumane for the animals and unsafe for the public (for more information, see position paper *Cub Petting and Photos with Wild Cats*). They may also breed white tigers or unnatural hybrid big cats for display and shows. These cats often suffer chronic and debilitating health problems due intensive inbreeding and cross-breeding (for more information, see position paper *Big Cat Hybrids and Breeding Big Cats for Rare Colors*). Big cats are also featured as entertainment at private events such as parties and corporate meetings.

Movies, television and advertising

Big cats used in advertising, movies and television (commercials, TV shows and talk shows) are also subjected to long hours of confinement in cramped cages during transport and while on the set. Trainers use punishment-based training that takes place off set. Training can be brutal since the cats must perform consistently and on cue; wasted time is money when it comes to production budgets. Increasingly, computer generated imagery (CGI) is replacing the use of live wild animals in film and advertising, providing an alternative to the use of live animals.

References

- Courchamp, F., Jaric, I., Albert, C., Meinard, Y., Ripple, W., and Chapron, G. 2018. The paradoxical extinction of the most charismatic animals. *PLoS Biology*, 16 (4): e2003997.
- Dorning, J., Harris, S., and Pickett, H. April 2016. The welfare of wild animals in travelling circuses. Technical report.
https://www.ispca.ie/uploads/The_welfare_of_wild_animals_in_travelling_circuses.pdf
- Ross, S.R., Vreeman, V.M., and Lonsdorf, E.V. 2011. Specific image characteristics influence attitudes about chimpanzee conservation and use as pets. *PLoS ONE*, 6 (7): e22050.

**For information on the Big Cat Sanctuary Alliance, visit www.BigCatAlliance.org.
For media inquiries, please email Media@BigCatAlliance.org.**