

# The Plight of Elephants in Circuses

***PETA***

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A REPORT BY PEOPLE FOR THE ETHICAL TREATMENT OF ANIMALS

THE PLIGHT OF  
ELEPHANTS IN CIRCUSES

# What's Wrong With Elephants in Circuses?



If you have ever watched elephants in the circus “perform” their tricks and then be led out of the big top, have you ever wondered how such big and forceful animals can be trained? Or how they are kept? Or what happens when an elephant tries to escape circus life? The truthful answers to these questions make the circus industry very uncomfortable. Society is starting to address some of the problems regarding elephants in circuses, including cruel treatment, the threat of tuberculosis, and public safety implications when elephants go on a rampage.

## Did you know?

- More than 60 people have been killed and more than 130 others seriously injured by captive elephants since 1990. As a result, lawsuits totaling in the many millions have been filed.
- Many “circus elephants” are carrying a strain of tuberculosis contagious to humans.
- Elephants are repeatedly beaten in order to train them. These intelligent, social mammals often live their whole lives in travel trailers, sometimes in the blazing heat or the freezing cold. The majority of the time, they are chained by two feet, unable to take even one step forward or back.
- Circuses that use elephants are controversial and may offend members of the community who are concerned with the humane treatment of animals.

This booklet provides an overview of concerns and hazards associated with elephants in circuses. It is a “must read” for anyone considering sponsoring or attending a circus or considering legislation to prohibit elephants in circuses.

# Cruel Treatment

Elephants in circuses are but shadows of their natural selves. When you see them, heads down, taking commands, performing silly tricks, in shackles, or prodded back onto the train, it is hard to remember that these once-magnificent beings are highly social animals who, when roaming free, live in close-knit family units that walk approximately 30 to 50 miles a day.

“Circus elephants” are denied almost everything important to them, including family relationships, privacy, mental stimulation, physical exercise, and emotional outlets. When they are not performing, which is approximately 98 percent of the time, their lives consist of chains, transportation in boxcars and trailers in the blazing heat or freezing cold, thirst (water is withheld to prevent unsightly messes in parades and performances), and being beaten.

In August 1997, Albuquerque police officers opened a parked King Royal Circus trailer after noticing that it was rocking. Inside, they were horrified to discover Heather, an African elephant, dead on the floor. Two other elephants and eight llamas were also crammed into the trailer, the interior temperature of which was estimated to be 120 degrees. This trailer, like most circus trailers, was poorly ventilated. In two precedent-setting decisions, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) permanently revoked King Royal Circus’ exhibitor’s license and fined the owner \$200,000, and the city of Albuquerque successfully petitioned to gain full and permanent custody of the survivors.

Wrongful deaths occur at the bigger circuses as well. In January 1998, Kenny, a 3-year-old baby elephant with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, died after being forced to perform in two shows despite the fact that circus workers knew he was sick. Ringling employees reported that Kenny was “wailing” and “wobbly on his legs.” Ringling paid \$20,000 to settle the case with the USDA after being formally charged with violations of the federal Animal Welfare Act as follows: “On two separate occasions on January 24, 1998, the respondent failed to handle a juvenile Asian elephant known as ‘Kenny’ as expeditiously and carefully as possible in a manner that did not cause behavioral stress and unnecessary discomfort, in that, after determining that the elephant was ill and needed to be examined by a veterinarian, respondent made the elephant perform before it had been examined by a veterinarian, in willful violation.”

While traveling through Texas in July 1999, another Ringling baby elephant named Benjamin drowned as he attempted to escape from a handler who was poking him with a bullhook. Benjamin had been prematurely removed from his mother before she could teach him to swim. In the wild, male

Heather was found dead inside a sweltering, filthy truck crammed with 10 other animals.

Photo: Albuquerque Animal Services

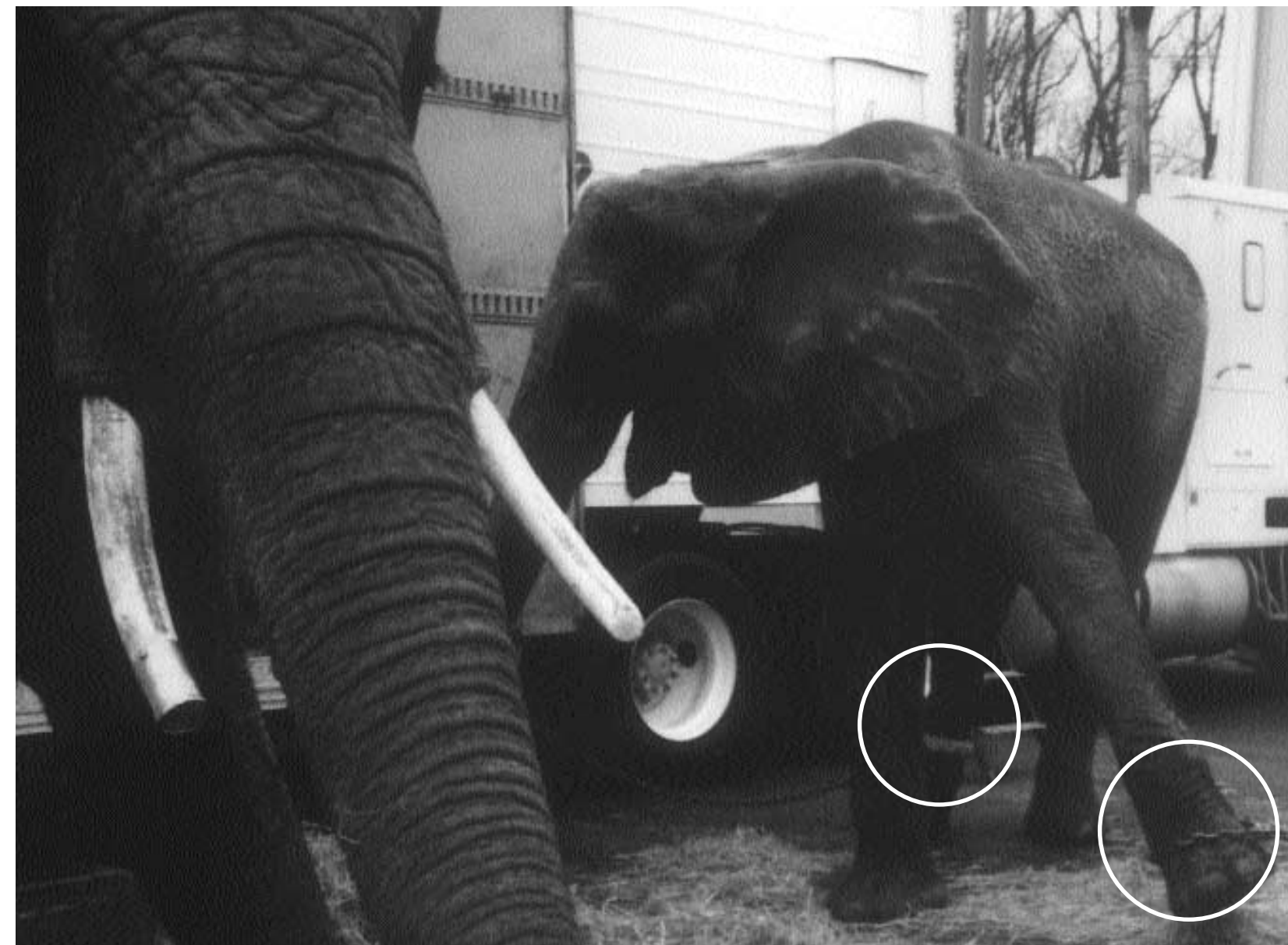


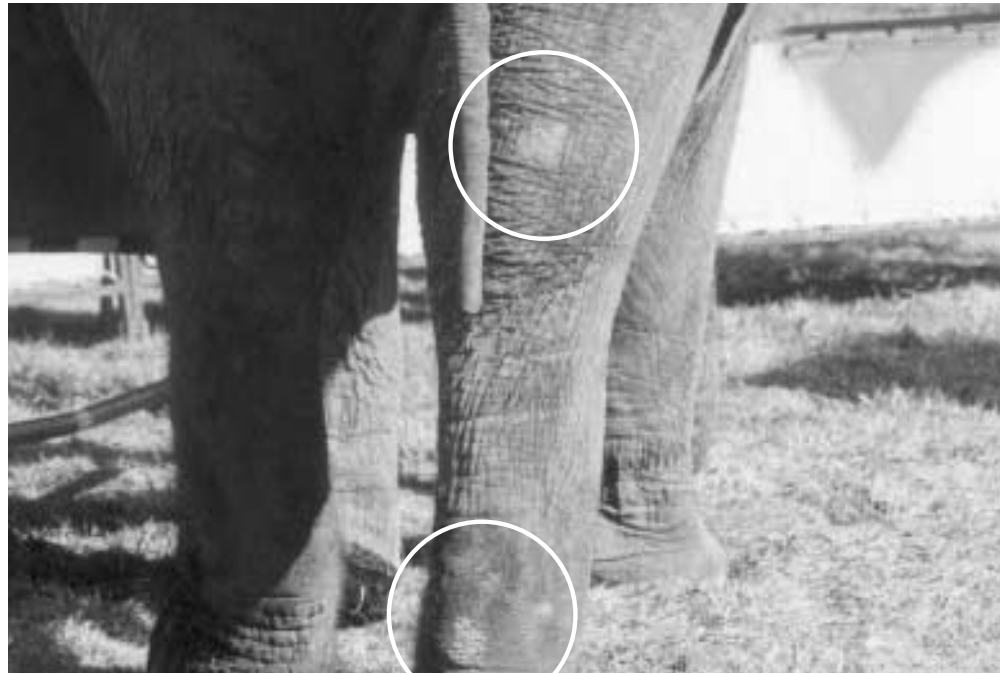
elephants spend at least 10 to 15 years with their mothers and are taught by them how to swim, but Benjamin did not have this opportunity.

**Chained elephants often display symptoms of psychological distress, such as repeated swaying and head-bobbing.**

Most elephants in circuses were captured as babies in the wild. To “break” captured elephants, their captors bring them to their knees, immobilize them by chaining all four legs, and show them who’s boss by beating them daily for as long as a month. Elephants born in captivity experience similar mistreatment. In February 1999, a USDA inspector found painful, raw rope burns and scars on the legs of two Ringling baby elephants, Doc and Angelica. The babies had been tied with ropes and isolated from their mothers to begin training for the circus. The USDA warned Ringling that “the handling of these animals caused trauma, behavioral stress, physical harm and unnecessary discomfort” in violation of the Animal Welfare Act.

Trainers use a tool called a “bullhook” to punish and control elephants. This purposely cruel device resembles a fireplace poker and has a sharp metal hook on one end. Although an elephant’s skin appears to be





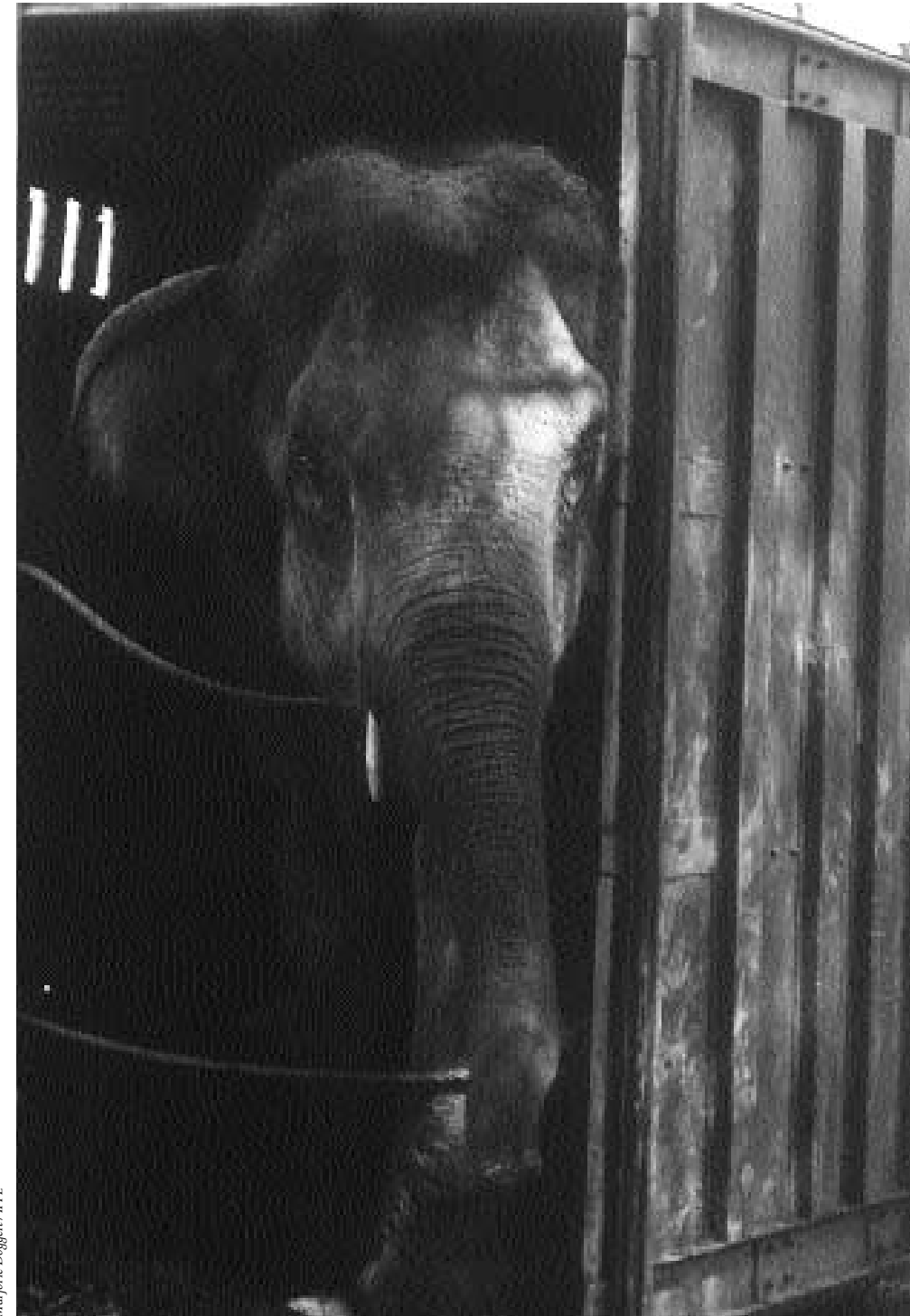
tough, in reality it is extremely sensitive. Elephants can easily feel the pain of an insect bite. Trainers often embed the hook in the soft tissue behind the ears, inside the ear or mouth, in and around the anus, and in tender spots under the chin and around the feet. Trainers use a light, gray powder called Wonder Dust™ to conceal bloody bullhook wounds. If you get the chance, look closely at the old scars and fresh sores caused by bullhooks.

In 2002, PETA released an undercover videotape of elephant training at Carson & Barnes Circus. Tim Frisco, the circus's animal care director, was caught on tape viciously attacking elephants with a bullhook and an electric prod. The elephants scream as a sharp metal bullhook rips through their flesh. Frisco instructs student elephant trainers, "Hurt 'em. ... Make 'em scream. ... Sink that hook into 'em ... When you hear that screaming, then you know you got their attention." Frisco also cautions that the beatings must be concealed from the public and that the elephants not be punished "in front of a thousand people." Frisco learned the trade from his father, a former Ringling trainer.

Sometimes trainers are careless and punish elephants in front of witnesses. When caught, these training practices, which are standard throughout the circus industry, often violate local cruelty statutes. An elephant handler with the Sterling & Reid Bros. Circus was found guilty of three counts of cruelty to animals in October 2002. Eyewitnesses testified that they saw the handler strike an elephant repeatedly with a steel bullhook, leaving the animal suffering from bloody wounds while the circus performed in Norfolk, Va.

In February 2000, the Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. Circus paid a \$10,000 penalty to settle USDA charges of abusing elephants after inspectors found bullhook wounds. The injuries were observed under the chin, on the neck, back, ear, tail, and legs, and near the eye.

Lighter, gray spots are applications of Wonder Dust, used by circuses to conceal bloody bullhook wounds.



Marjorie Daggert/IPPL

Although, in nature, elephants live in large, caring family groups, captive elephants are prevented from normal social interaction with their own kind.



Former San Diego resident Ed Stewart filmed elephants lined up after being unloaded from a hot boxcar. His film shows Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey's world-famous animal trainer Gunther Gebel-Williams whipping an elephant in the face. You can hear her cry.

D.J. Schubert witnessed the sensitivity of elephants during his Peace Corps service in West Africa. He wrote:

"The baby elephant was lying on his side ... his aunts and mother surrounded him, shading him from the hot sun. He would try to stand but would fall back on his side with a heart-wrenching scream. The mother would follow with a louder, seemingly more painful scream. She tried everything to help ... she would drop to her knees and lift the baby with her trunk ... each time he fell back ... the baby would scream, the mother would scream. I saw the elephants stroke the mother's back reassuringly with their trunks. They would intertwine trunks and gently touch each other in and around their mouths in what humans might describe as a kiss.

"At dusk I returned. ... The baby had died and been covered with dirt, grass, and leaves. The mother had positioned herself over her child and rocked back and forth over him for hours. Occasionally, another elephant came up and stroked her back affectionately or intertwined trunks ... I saw the love, attachment, compassion, and camaraderie that these incredible animals display toward each other."

In *The Natural History of the African Elephant*, Sylvia K. Sikes tells us that it's unusual to see wild elephants cry but that it's common among captive elephants.

Elephant trainer George "Slim" Lewis recounted tragic tales of elephant mistreatment in *I Loved Rogues*. "One day, when we had them in the ring barn urging them through one of their tricks, Sadie just could not grasp what we were trying to show her. In frustration, she attempted to run out of the ring. We brought her back and began to punish her for being so stupid. We stopped suddenly, and looked at each other, unable to speak. ... Sadie was crying like a human being. She lay there on her side, the tears streaming down her face and sobs racking her huge body."

For sick, older, or worn-down elephants, the strain of travel can be too much. Lewis tells of arriving with Ringling Bros. in the cold winter months at Madison Square Garden in New York City: "When we went to unload the elephants, though, we found the long trip and the cold had been too much for one of the oldest, Queen. She was lying dead inside a car."

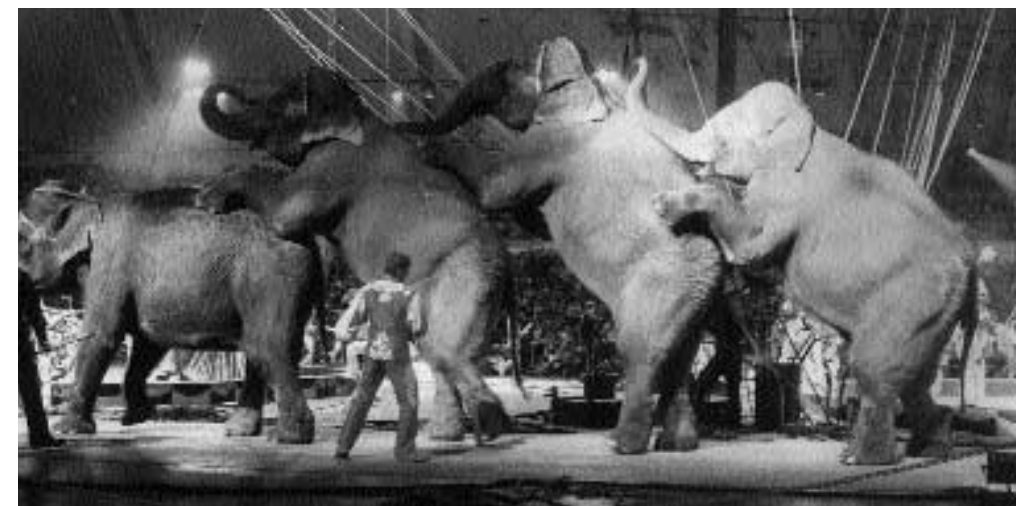
Even world-famous animal trainers like Ringling's Gunther Gebel-Williams have been caught on videotape beating elephants.

# Elephant Acts: A Public Danger

The number of elephants who are snapping under the strain of life in captivity is on the rise, and circusgoers are directly in their paths. Sometimes, these massive animals rebel against years of confinement, chains, and bullhooks and run amok, causing property damage and injuring—or even killing—humans. Since 1990, more than 60 people have been killed and more than 130 others seriously injured by captive elephants trying to escape their mistreatment.

Palm Bay, Fla., police officer Blayne Doyle knows this all too well. Doyle was forced to shoot and kill Janet, an elephant who charged out of the Great American Circus arena carrying a box full of children on her back. Before she was killed, Janet injured 12 people and threw a police officer to the ground. Officer Doyle has sent a letter to police departments across the country urging them not to endanger their communities by using captive elephants at fundraising events. Warns Doyle, "I think these elephants are trying to tell us that ... circuses are not what God created them for. But we have not been listening."

The Palm Bay incident was echoed in Honolulu when Tyke, a 21-year-old African elephant, deliberately trampled her trainer to death and injured 15 spectators as she broke out of the Neal Blaisdell Center while performing for Circus International. Tyke escaped into the streets of downtown Honolulu during the afternoon rush hour. Over the next hour, Tyke charged after pedestrians and smashed vehicles throughout several blocks before she finally died in a hail of gunfire. One year before she was killed, Tyke injured one of her handlers—breaking two of his



Behind the pomp and pageantry is a world of suffering for elephants.



ribs—as she tried to escape from her trainer at the North Dakota State Fair, yet she continued to be used in the circus.

Sadly, these incidents are not unique. In Fishkill, N.Y., an elephant crushed a man to death by pinning him against a trailer in a circus elephant pen. In Lafayette, Ind., nine people were injured when elephants with the Tarzan Zerbini International Circus collided during a performance at a local shopping center and toppled a barricade. When two elephants with the Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. Circus broke away from their handlers during a performance in New York, causing frightened spectators

to flee the circus tent, 12 people were injured, seven hospitalized. Two months earlier, elephants with the same circus had stampeded during an appearance at a shopping mall parking lot in Pennsylvania. They had smashed several cars and the windows of a nearby store, causing thousands of dollars in property damage. In February 1998, Tonya, an elephant used in the Hubler International Circus, panicked, opened the door of a high school gymnasium, and ran down the streets of Mentor, Ohio. She damaged school property and a police car before being caught.

Often the littlest circusgoers—children—are put in harm's way when elephants come to town. For example, three Michigan children were hurt when an elephant carrying them at a Shrine-sponsored circus fell. A 3-year-old girl in Riley County, Kan., was injured when an elephant wrapped his trunk around her neck and pulled her into the King Royal Circus arena. The elephant's trainer had been arrested two months earlier for beating the elephant during a performance. Another 3-year-old child was injured in Syracuse, N.Y., in August 1998 when the elephant she was riding knocked down and stepped on her trainer. While giving rides to children at the Jordan Circus in Salt Lake City, Utah, an elephant attacked and injured two animal trainers.

The threat of a captive elephant's injuring or killing spectators is real. In March 2000, the American Zoo and Aquarium Association advised its member zoos to discontinue elephant rides because of public safety risks. The only way to protect circusgoers from such incidents is to prohibit elephant acts from coming to town. The danger has become so critical that communities across the country are enacting ordinances banning the use of elephants and other exotic animals in traveling shows. Rep. Sam Farr (D-Calif.), who introduced the Captive Elephant Accident Prevention Act, asked, "Why do we continue to murder endangered species with semiautomatic weapons in the middle of our major metropolitan areas when we can simply address the problem by removing elephants and these tragedies waiting to happen?"

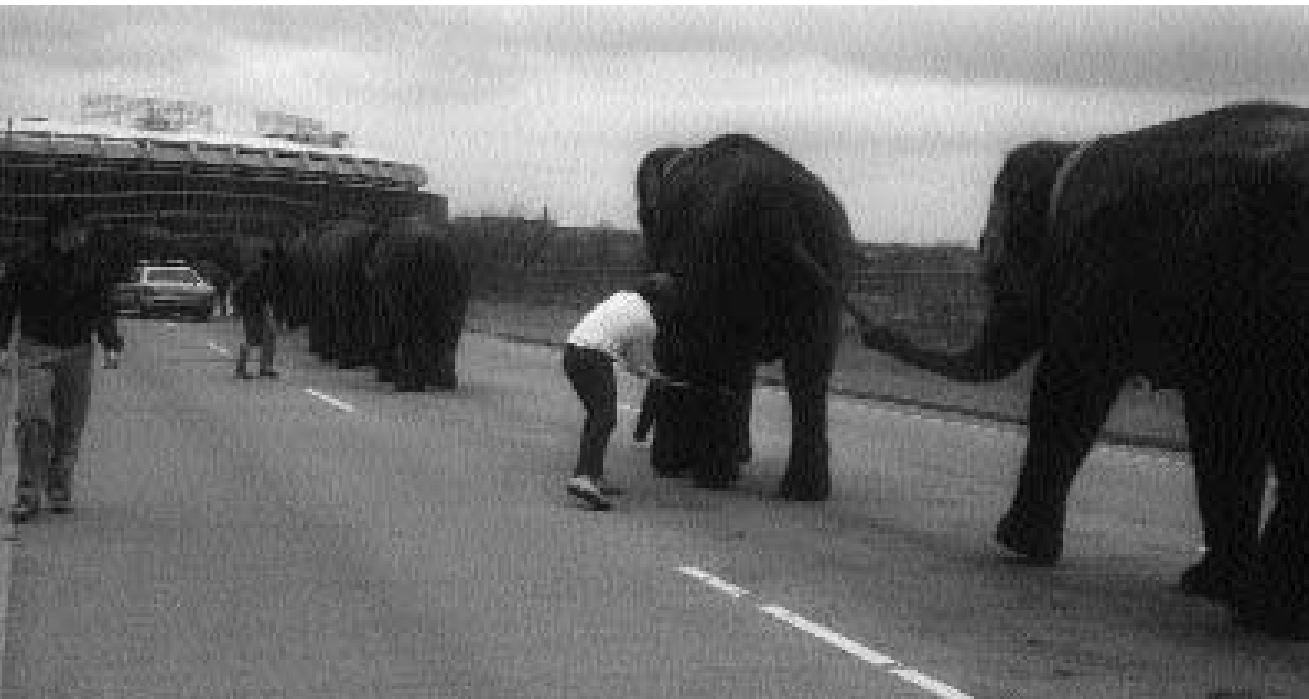
Forced to perform confusing and repetitious "tricks" under threat of punishment, some elephants snap under the strain.

# Who Is Liable for Elephant Attacks?

Tyke, an elephant who went on a rampage in Honolulu, was killed in a rain of gunfire after killing her trainer and injuring dozens of spectators.

When elephants attack, it's not just a tragedy for the elephants and their victims—it can also end up costing those who participate, however indirectly, in bringing the circus to town. In past rampages, storefronts





Although captive elephants often strike out against their trainers, with whom they associate beatings, bystanders can also be injured in rampages.

have been smashed, cars flattened, and bystanders seriously injured or killed. Yelena Aleynikov, a Russian interpreter for the Moscow Circus when it appeared on the *Regis and Kathie Lee* show, won a \$1.65 million lawsuit after being smashed against a wall by an

elephant and suffering a fractured skull, broken ribs, and a punctured lung.

*“I think these elephants are trying to tell us that ... circuses are not what God created them for. But we have not been listening.”*

—Palm Bay, Fla., police officer

Blayne Doyle

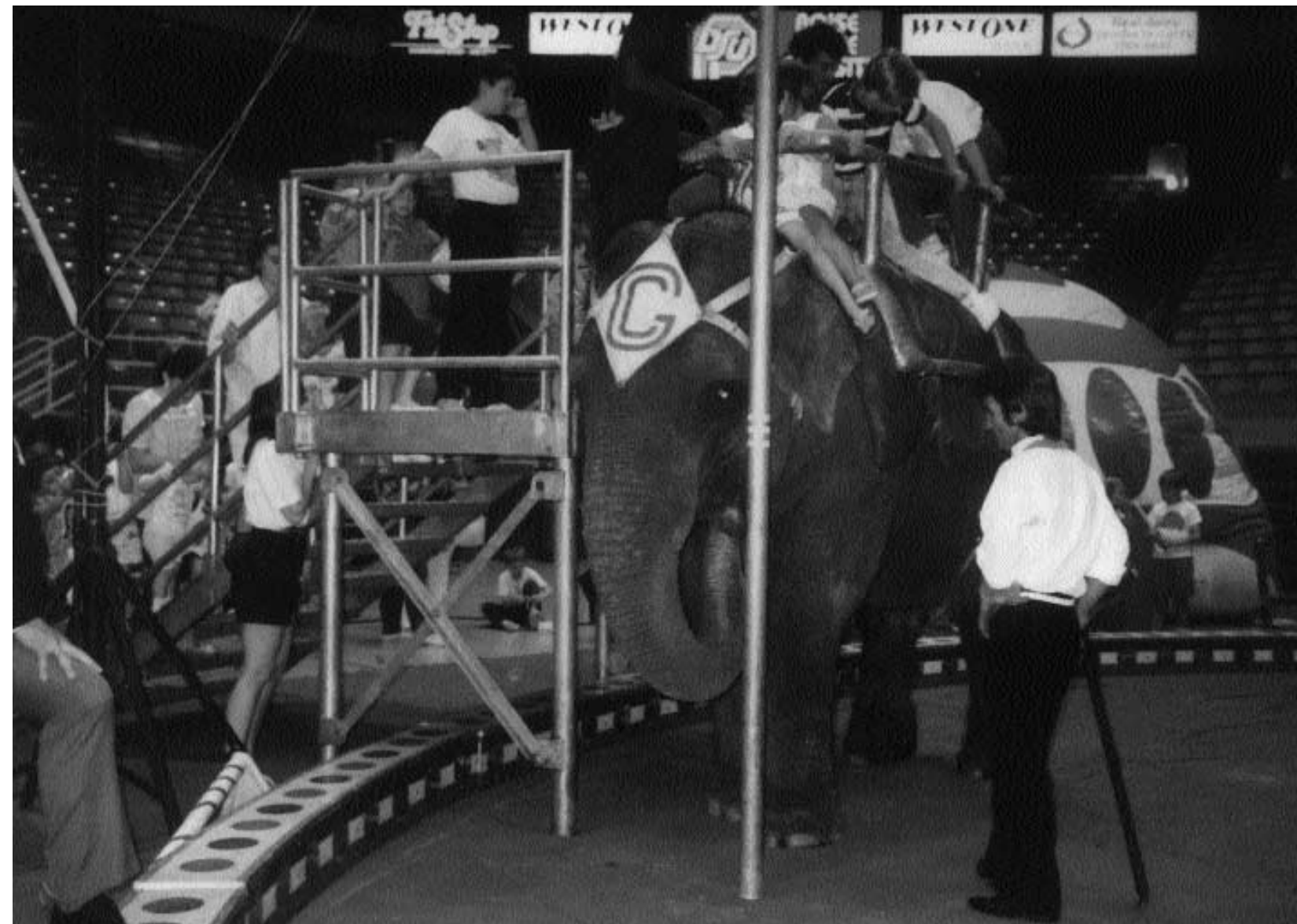
Those injured by elephant attacks understandably look for someone to blame—and that can include not only circuses, but city governments, venues, and sponsors as well. Often, circuses are hired as fundraisers for charities. Unfortunately, they can end up being more of a liability than an asset. One Shrine temple learned that it had been provided with a fraudulent certificate of insurance by a circus’s insurance agent on a policy that did not even exist after an attendee

was injured at a Shrine-sponsored circus. Both Lions Clubs International and Kiwanis International have advised chapters to avoid using animal circuses as fundraisers.

# Contagious Tuberculosis

An outbreak of a human strain of tuberculosis (TB), called *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*, is infecting and killing captive elephants in the United States and putting circusgoers at risk. Since 1996, this highly contagious bacterial lung disease has been diagnosed in at least 18 captive elephants and numerous elephant handlers. Because there is no test that can determine if an elephant is harboring TB, the number of infected elephants is unknown.

Tuberculosis is highly contagious and easily passed from elephants to humans. Children are among the most susceptible.



Tuberculosis remains one of the deadliest diseases in the world. In 2001, nearly 16,000 human cases were reported in the United States. According to Dr. John Lewis of the International Zoo Veterinary Group, “If tuberculosis is diagnosed in an elephant, there are clear public health implications as the disease can be spread by close contact with infected animals and people.”

Circuses routinely allow members of the public to feed, pet, and ride elephants. Babies, young children, and the elderly are especially at risk because they often have weak immune systems. It is not known how many circus visitors become infected because TB transmission from elephants to members of the public has never been studied.

*“If tuberculosis is diagnosed in an elephant, there are clear public health implications ...”*

—Dr. John Lewis

Elephants used in circuses are particularly susceptible because the crowded, humid, unventilated boxcars, trailers, and warehouses in which captive elephants are often kept create a fertile breeding ground for TB. They are transported around the country and commingled with other elephants, spreading the disease.

In 1996, the USDA began receiving complaints that two elephants traveling with Circus Vargas, Joyce and Hattie, looked noticeably lethargic and sick (Joyce lost 1,000 pounds within six months)—two telltale signs of TB—but kept the elephants working.

After months of sickness, Joyce collapsed and died. Three days later, Hattie collapsed as she was being unloaded from a truck. Instead of calling a vet, Circus Vargas officials simply pushed her into a trailer, and she died all alone while being shipped back to winter quarters in Gray’s Lake, Ill. Tests showed that both elephants had died of TB. Both Joyce and Hattie had given rides to children up until the day before their deaths.

After the Circus Vargas incident, Florida health officials prevented the Hawthorn Corporation, owner of Hattie and Joyce, from taking two more elephants, Lota and Liz, into their state because they had been exposed to TB. In January 1997, all 18 of the corporation’s elephants were quarantined for TB treatment. The animals were left chained in a warehouse-type building for more than six months. Hawthorn was also caught attempting to ship one of the TB-exposed elephants, 3-year-old Nickolaus, to perform in Puerto Rico; health officials intervened and forced Hawthorn to return the elephant. Hawthorn continued to rent out animals to circuses, violating a 21-day suspension imposed on it by the USDA.

In January 1999, the USDA confirmed that tuberculosis had struck Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey elephants, and in April 2000, three Royal Hanneford elephants were removed from travel after one tested positive for TB. In July 2002, three elephants with the Tarzan Zerbini Circus were quarantined and deported from Canada after the USDA alerted Canadian authorities

that the elephants had been in prolonged contact with another TB-positive elephant. The elephants had been performing for Shrine circuses and giving rides to children.

Unfortunately, the circus industry and the agencies that regulate it have been far from vigilant about protecting animals and circusgoers. Most circuses have been cited by the USDA for failure to comply with TB testing requirements for elephants and handlers, yet they rarely issue actual penalties.



This extremely thin elephant, Lota, was diagnosed with tuberculosis in 1997. A photo taken in May 2001 shows a child petting her at a circus. A few months later, Lota was taken off the road and again given tuberculosis treatment.

# How You Can Help

Elephants do not belong in circuses for many reasons. The use of animals in entertainment has been restricted or banned in several countries, including Sweden, India, Finland, and Costa Rica. In England and Ireland, circuses with animal acts are often denied access to public grounds. More than 30 localities in Canada have passed ordinances restricting or banning circuses with animals. In the United States, several local governments, including Corona, Encinitas, Pasadena, and Rohnert Park, Calif.; Richmond, Missouri; and Port Townsend and Redmond, Wash., have banned exotic animal acts. Animal-free circuses are growing in popularity while attendance at circuses featuring animal acts is plummeting. The May 1, 2000, edition of *Amusement Business* reports that the majority of callers seeking a circus request contemporary circuses that dazzle audiences solely with skilled human performers. If you are considering using a circus as a fundraiser, call PETA for our list of animal-free circuses, or visit [Circuses.com](http://Circuses.com). Approach your local political leaders and ask that an ordinance be enacted to stop circuses traveling with elephants from coming into your community. If you are a political leader, you can create change. Share this information with your friends, family, and business associates. Remember, circuses have a financial interest in making you believe that the animals are well cared for and that the public has nothing to fear. The facts belie those comforting myths. Please, get involved.

There are no sad, chained captives like these in animal-free circuses such as the Cirque du Soleil.

