

Joint Committee on Environment
Legislative Office Building
Hartford, CT. 06106-1591

To the Environment Committee:

My name is Deborah Robinson; I am the Circus Elephant Specialist for In Defense of Animals, an international animal advocacy organization. I speak today on behalf of our many Connecticut members and as a long-time resident of West Hartford in support of H. B. No. 6555, AN ACT CONCERNING THE HUMANE TREATMENT OF ELEPHANTS.

This bill would ban the use of bullhooks, which are weapons used to hook, stab, and strike elephants to force them into compliance. Bullhooks are weapons, and their use in an underregulated industry is a serious welfare issue. I am sure you will hear today that stories of bullhook abuse are exaggerated, and that used "correctly" they are simply harmless guides. I would like to dispel the notion that it is possible to use a bullhook humanely.

The bullhook is a heavy rod with a sharp steel hook at the end. Handlers routinely hook the elephants in sensitive places -- behind their ears, under their jaws, in their armpits - - to force them to comply with commands.

It's important to remember that physical punishment is inherent to the elephant management method employed by circuses.

Testimony at the ongoing federal trial against Feld Entertainment proves this point. Experts described Ringling elephants covered with scars inflicted by bullhooks. Kenneth

Feld, the owner of Ringling, testified under oath that the elephants are struck with bullhooks frequently and repeatedly.

The fact is that elephants are not only wild but extremely large and powerful animals, and in order for them to reliably submit to human direction, they must be dominated, and taught from an early age that they are punished painfully for disobedience. The bullhook in the trainer's hand constantly reinforces the lesson. Once an elephant is taught about the pain that comes from a bullhook, she obeys out of fear that she will experience that pain again.

The circuses will tell you that the bullhook in careful hands is perfectly harmless, but it is a visual reminder of pain. If the elephant is not being hurt by a wielded bullhook at any given moment, she is being threatened. Life under a constant threat of pain is simply inhumane and Connecticut should refuse to allow it.

There is a more modern and humane system of elephant management known as protected contact and it is utilized by over half of U.S. zoos. Protected contact relies on cooperation and positive reinforcement; safety is maintained by the presence of a physical barrier between elephant and handler at all times.

Circus proponents say that a ban on bullhooks means the end of circuses with elephants. This is inconsistent with their claims that bullhooks are just harmless "guides", which would mean that harmless tools could readily be substituted. But, if the only way to control elephants in circuses is through physical and mental abuse, then elephants simply should not be part of the show.

Yes, circuses with elephants are a tradition. But societal values evolve, and tradition cannot be used to justify a practice that involves abuse of these highly intelligent and self aware animals.

History is replete with examples of entertainment that were once considered acceptable, but were driven out of use by the dictates of taste and morality. Gladiators fighting lions, bear-baiting, freak shows – even the displays in zoos and circuses of people from other cultures – all were once considered appropriate entertainment. No one believes that children today suffer because they can't see these things. '

Standards have continued to evolve. I urge the members of this committee to recommend passage of this humane and sorely-needed legislation.

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