WATC 004

Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee

Wild Animals in Travelling Circuses (Scotland) Bill

Written submission from Anthony Beckwith, Proprietor, An Evening with Lions and Tigers

I am writing to submit evidence for the draft Bill to ban the use of wild animals in travelling circuses in Scotland on “ethical grounds”. I attended the meeting on Friday the 19th May as a stakeholder, I am a proprietor of a travelling show featuring wild animals (Lions & Tigers). I am also an animal trainer. It will also be worth noting one of our home bases is in Scotland, the draft Bill incorrectly states and uses as a reason for a ban that no travelling circuses with wild animals are based in Scotland, although we are on a different temporary winter base at the moment we still rent, use and have access to our site in Scotland. Our Scottish home in Fraserburgh is a permanent residence we currently have domestic animals kept up there. I found the discussions at the meeting to be proactive and positive but also found aspects of it to be slightly unclear and confusing there was no clear definition of what constitutes as travelling circus by the definition set out by Andrew Voas, the Scottish government’s Veterinary Adviser (the Oxford English dictionary definition) our show does not fall under this definition of a travelling circus and Andrew was unable to clarify if my show would even be banned under this legislation and we may be able to tour Scotland with our big cats freely. There was no clear definition of what is being deemed a wild animal for the purpose of this Bill. It also seems the wider implications have also not been addressed such as the effects on industries such as film, TV and live theatre shows.

It was stated at the meeting on the 19th and in the draft Bill that this Bill is not based any animal welfare issues and is purely based on the “ethics” which is very hard to comprehend as they are two sides of the same coin. You cannot have good welfare without good ethics and you cannot keep an animal ethically without providing good welfare, the two go hand in hand and cannot be separated, you cannot discuss one without the other. This is evident in the policy memorandum were there are references to animal welfare throughout, in fact I have been unable to find a single ethical argument in the draft Bill, every single point raised to support the Bill to ban is either completely incorrect, inaccurate or is a welfare concern not an ethical one. During the meeting on the 19th with the Bill team Andrew Voas was unable to provide me with a single ethical objection to the use of wild animals in a travelling circus. In the policy memorandum it says the ethical reasons are clear and set them out as follows. I will address each one individually.

- The use (performance, display or exhibition) of wild animals whose nature (telos) genetically and behaviourally hardwired to be expressed in their natural wild environment

The above statement is invalid as our animals have no desire to be in the wild as they are not aware of its existence. They are multiple generation circus bred and their behaviour and personality is that of a circus animal and differs greatly from even a zoo or safari park animal, never mind a wild one. This has taken an anthropomorphic approach and has no scientific backing or logic behind it. Despite it incorrectly stating in the draft Bill that there is little scientific data available, well
indeed there is a wealth of scientific data, peer reviewed study’s and independent research spanning the past 30 years is available. All the data suggests that animals not just survive but thrive in a circus or indeed any captive environment and just because we (humans) don’t perceive it has “natural” doesn’t mean it is bad and the environment they live in has no negative effects on the wellbeing either physical or mental. All of which can be backed up with comprehensive scientific data. Also zoos, safari parks, mobile zoos that visit schools with meerkats and racoons, bird of prey shows, parrot shows all use wild animals for display and exhibition purpose so to use the above point as a justification to ban wild animals in the circus environment you would equally need to ban all the industries that display or exhibit wild animals.

- The performance of tricks generally not normally seen naturally, in an artificial environment for the entertainment of viewing public.

The above is a complete postulation, as every single manoeuvre or “trick” actioned by our animals is a completely natural movement that their distant wild cousins would carry out, this renders the above reason invalid Unless the Scottish government/parliament can provide evidence that the manoeuvres preformed are unnatural? There is however comprehensive scientific data available that indicates hands on training and preforming with wild animals in captivity is of significant benefit to them due to the level of mental stimulis it provides. Many zoos or safari parks may look more “natural” but that is purely aesthetics, animals do not have an aesthetic eye and this wild simulation and/or “natural” look is purely for the benefit of the paying public and has no positive effects for the wellbeing of the animals. What is more important than the look of an enclosure is the complexity the enrichment that provides mental stimulation. A study by A. Claxton in 2011 showed that hands on training was a highly effective form of stimulation and animals showed less signs of stress and anxiety in an environment where keepers where hands on rather than a protected environment such as those adopted by most modern zoos. If we take note of this study that would indicate that a circus can provide a more “ethical” environment for captive born wild animals than a zoo can, therefore to ban circuses on “ethical grounds” all zoos, safari parks, bird of prey centres and wildlife centres must also be banned.

- The keeping of animals in temporary and/or mobile animal accommodation that cannot generally provide the sizeable and complex living conditions that many wild animals require to carry out behaviours or functions according to their natures (telos)

There is no evidence or data to back up the above statement however there is a wealth of data to contrary. The above is also a welfare concern not an ethical one. It would be considered poor animal welfare to keep any animal wild or domestic in an environment that cannot provide for its welfare needs and a key welfare need of any animal is to allow it to behaviour in a natural way, animal welfare laws including the welfare of wild animals in travelling circus act 2012, animal welfare act 2006 and the dangerous wild animal act all stipulate the animals must be kept in suitable environments which includes enough space to meet their welfare needs enrichment and complexity. Many conclusive and peer reviewed scientific studies have shown that circus can provide an appropriate environment to meet the welfare needs of the animals equal to any other captive environment. An in depth study of 3000 animal
hours by world renowned animal behaviourist Dr Martha Kylie Worthington on behalf of the RSPCA in the early 90s clearly states that ban on wild animals in travelling circuses would not have a positive impact on the wellbeing of the animals and could not be justified locally or nationally. Dr Kylie Worthington also points out the circus environment is equal to that of a zoo or safari park, this was mirrored in the 2007 Radford report complied on behalf of Westminster. In conclusion to suggest that the circus environment is unsuitable is completely inaccurate and all the scientific data is there to prove it. It comes with great concern that the scientific data is being wholly ignored throughout this draft Bill.

- A significant proportion of the time travelling from one site to another, further significantly curtailing the abilities of wild animals to undertake their natural and instinctive activities

This point is grossly misleading. From experience our animals do not mind to travel, they travel only a short distance once a week, they travel in the evening and generally sleep while traveling. Once we arrive at the new site the animal’s enclosures are erected immediately, this constant changing environment/surrounds while maintaining a familiar enclosure/habitat and keepers creates a great form of mental stimuli, always new terrain or surroundings and smells. Most animals are creatures of habit and find comfort in what they know, these animals are multiple generation circus bred and are habituated to travelling from cubs. Aside from personal experience I must stress again that scientific data has been conducted on this subject of travelling circus animals. Dr Immanuel Birmillin did a comprehensive study that included cortisol tests on several big cats before, after and during travelling to see if travelling caused stress. Dr Ted Friend also conducted similar study’s with circus elephants. All this scientific data is freely available.

- Little or no education or conservation value ad no significant benefit other than maintaining a tradition considered by the majority to be outdated and morally wrong.

Firstly, let me address the “Majority”. 2043 people took the consultation out of the 5.3 Million people that currently live in Scotland, that means only 0.03% of the Scottish public where even interested in the subject. 0.03% on no terms could be considered a majority. 230,000 signed an online petition to ban the sale of fireworks yet that’s not even being considered. However, we also now must factor in that only around 50% of the people that took the consultation even live in Scotland, so that’s 1021 people in Scotland are advocating for the ban on wild animals in travelling circuses, that’s a miniscule amount. During winter 2014/15 when we are parked up for winter in Fraserbough we were not open to the public however due to a right of way and it spreading on social media we had an influx of visitors coming to view the big cats, after about a week and interest from radical animal rights groups who started a petition to ban us we started to collect petition names of our own and in just 3 days, Friday till Sunday we collected about 1000. So we collected the same amount of signatures in favour of keeping us in Scotland from one small concentrated area than has been collected from Scotland nationwide over 3 months that want us banned. I handed a copy of this petition over to Andrew Voas. It would prove to be hard to legally argue that it is in favour with a majority should this go to court. Secondly the educational value it appears very little research has been done when constructing
this draft Bill as our show “An evening with lions and tigers” is not a circus in the traditional sense but is purely a travelling educational training display, we have a long talk on welfare and conservation were we discuss wild numbers and different species how people can make small changes in their daily lifestyles to protect wild tigers such as buying products with less palm oil. We do a training demonstration with the big cats then have a question and answer session at the end, we have also been involved with various colleges and universities.

Animal welfare organisations

From the list of animal welfare organisations, you have consulted only one is a genuine animal welfare group that’s the Scottish SPCA the others Animal Defenders International (ADI), OneKind, Born Free and The People of the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) are all animal rights groups and there is a fundamental and legal difference between the two which simply cannot be confused. Animal welfare is based on the scientific understanding of animals it’s based on facts, data, animal behaviour and research. Animal rights however are an ideology based on beliefs. Since PETA and all the other animal rights groups ethically object to circus animals also ethically object to meat consumption is the Scottish government considering ban in meat consumption on “ethical grounds” it would appear that the draft Bill is being put forward on the opinion of a vocal minority animal rights movement while ignoring the wealth of scientific data. The only conclusion is a ban is to be introduced based on the fact that 1021 people in Scotland are offended by circus animals.

It also comes of great concern that animal rights groups where consulted before the drafting of the Bill yet circus owners, animal trainers and other stakeholders where not consulted until after the drafting of the Bill and none of the scientific evidence has been consulted which has led to lots of misinformation and inaccuracy’s in the draft Bill.

References


Anthony Beckwith

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