

Annex: Elephants in Zoos and Circuses by Lindsay Gillson in Elephants (1998) by Dr W. J. Jordan, Dr J. Poole, D. Sheldrick M.B.E, published by Care for the Wild International.

In the wild elephants live in family groups, led by a matriarch. They are very social animals, which depend on long periods of parental care. They are intelligent and sensitive, with phenomenal memories. They are known to mourn a lost member of their family and weep salt tears when distressed. They spend up to 16 hours per day feeding and cover vast distances in their search for food and water. Each day elephants bathe in mud or dust, to protect their skin, which is surprisingly sensitive.

Some zoos refuse to keep elephants because they know they cannot provide conditions which allow elephants to fulfil their natural behaviour patterns. Others, however, insist that an elephant house is a major attraction and can play an educational role.

The reality is that zoo and circus elephants often suffer terrible distress as a result of their confinement. Many are chained for the majority of their life, leading to the development of stereotyped behaviours. Stereotyped behaviours, such as swaying and head weaving, are repetitive and indicative of chronic stress. Zoo and circus elephants are often kept alone or in pairs, so there is no opportunity for normal social interactions to take place. Elephants do not breed well in captivity and the mortality of young is high compared to that of wild elephants.

Captive elephants can suffer from skin conditions, as it is difficult to provide them with adequate access to water, mud and dust. Circus elephants in the USA have died from TB, presenting a potential health risk to circus audiences. Captive elephants can also suffer from problems with their feet, especially if they are kept on soft or damp substrate material.

Captive elephants who have been passive for years have been known to turn on their keepers, perhaps as a result of the long term stress associated with their captivity.

After watching footage of circus elephants in the UK, Daphne Sheldrick said, "From what I have seen of circuses, I honestly think the baby elephants would better off dead than suffering a lifetime of imprisonment, abuse and being kept in chains."

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Her main research interest is in long-term vegetation dynamics, and the relevance of this to theoretical ecology, conservation biology and habitat management.

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