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DEMO AT 11am SUNDAY 16th NOVEMBER 2014

I'd like to thank all the people who have organised and are participating in the demonstration outside the Circus High School at Cairnglass Croft in St Combs. I'm sorry I could not be there but it is very important that the event was organised by locals and that it is locals who are saying no to what is happening to the lions and tigers spending the winter in Aberdeenshire.

Those taking part are not professional protestors sent in by remote organisations with an axe to grind. They are ordinary folk, many from rural and farming communities, who simply know that the way these big cats are being treated is very, very wrong.

What might shock people is that the conditions the big cats are living under at St Combs are probably as good as it gets for circus animals. Aberdeenshire Council have told me that all relevant laws are now being adhered to and there is no evidence of cruelty against the animals. Indeed I have seen circus animals in far worse winter quarters in Scotland in the past.

However video taken at St Combs show that the lions and tigers are being kept in small cages on their beast wagons and have periods of access to the training cage which is about as big as the space available in the big top. All the cats have been filmed expressing stereotypic behaviour by repetitive pacing and turning in their small cages. I have seen this many, many times in animals kept in circuses and old-fashioned zoo enclosures. It is a type of madness caused by the conditions they are kept in.

What even the very best travelling circuses can provide for their animals is limited by what they can fit in the back of a lorry. To express any of their natural behaviour captive lions and tigers need at least permanent access to very large enriched enclosures or safari park environments. You cannot pack that into a forty tonne trailer. You don't have to beat an animal or break any laws to be cruel to them. Forcing them to endure a life in totally unnatural conditions is cruel in itself.

In the 1980s Animal Concern co-ordinated the Scottish Animal Rights Network (SARN) which consisted of autonomous local groups from all over Scotland. Together we persuaded many local authorities to refuse to give entertainment licences to circuses with performing animals. However one circus took a council to court and argued that as animal act circuses are legal no council could refuse them a license on moral grounds. The circus won (Gerry Cottle's Circus Ltd v City of Edinburgh District Council 1990 SLT 235).

We then persuaded many councils to refuse to lease council owned land to animal act circuses. Aberdeen City Council still has a version of that policy while Aberdeenshire Council does not. The policies of both councils are shown below.

I hope that the big cats at St Combs will be the last circus animals to be treated in this way in Scotland. Their plight has highlighted one of many inadequacies in Scots Law when it comes to protecting animals.

The Scottish Government is currently reviewing submissions to a consultation earlier this year on the use of wild animals in circuses. I am fairly sure this will result in a ban but it should go further and ban the use of all animals. Any new law must also outlaw keeping exotic animals under the conditions we see at St Combs.

The Scottish and U.K. Governments must legislate to liberate lions and tigers from the deprivations imposed upon them by life in the circus. When that happens, the best zoos and safari parks can offer retirement homes to animals from circuses and those rescued from failed zoos and the exotic pet trade. It would make a hell of a lot more sense than artificially inseminating pandas or trying to breed polar bears.

One interesting aspect of all this is that I have discovered that many people think the use of animals in circuses is already illegal. A few years ago I met a Government worker drafting new animal welfare legislation. He thought giving goldfish as prizes was illegal. I told him it was not. It is now!

Let's use the plight of these big cats to remind our politicians that exploiting animals in circuses is still legal and it is their job to make it illegal now.

Cheers,

John

Below are the Aberdeen area policies on animal welfare as regards circuses. I will be asking Aberdeenshire Council how the keeper of the lions and tigers is meeting the fourth and fifth of the five freedoms.

ABERDEEN CITY COUNCIL: As a condition of lease, the Council will not permit on Council land any circuses or other activities which include performing acts by captive wild animals.

Reasons: The Council believes that there is no educative value in the use of captive wild animals in performing acts for entertainment.

ABERDEENSHIRE COUNCIL: When considering the leasing to Circuses of Council owned or maintained land, the following will be taken into account:

The type of animal used, e.g. domestic animals such as horses and dogs, or rare or endangered "wild" species such as tiger.

Whether the five freedoms are observed throughout the animal's life.

The five freedoms are:

1. Freedom from thirst, hunger and malnutrition - by ready access to fresh water and a diet to maintain full health and vigour
2. Freedom from discomfort - by providing an appropriate environment including shelter and a comfortable resting area.
3. Freedom from pain, injury or disease - by prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment
4. Freedom to express normal behaviour - by providing sufficient space, proper facilities and company of the animal's own kind
5. Freedom from fear and distress - by ensuring conditions and treatment which avoid mental suffering