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March 27, 2017

Councilmember David Ryu
Los Angeles City Hall

Re: Letter of Support for Motion to Ban Use of Wild Animals for Performances and Amusement

Dear Councilmember Ryu:

I am writing to strongly support your motion to protect public health and safety, as well as animal welfare, by banning the use of wild animals for performances and amusement.

Wild animals used in travelling acts, private events, and other activities pose serious risks to human health and safety. On average captive big cats kill about one person every year in the United States and injure many more. Captive elephants do the same. And yet circuses routinely allow these animals to escape. The largest supplier of elephants in the United States, for example, recently paid yet another penalty for multiple escapes and its chronically unsafe handling of these dangerous animals. Because fines levied by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) for such violations are so low—the USDA’s own Office of Inspector General has found that they are so severely discounted that they are treated as just another “cost of doing business”—they fail to incentivize compliance. Tigers have also repeatedly escaped from circuses, and have injured numerous people. At one circus, a tiger killed a handler in front of 200 children. An elephant at another circus kicked a handler, throwing him about 20 feet and killing him. At yet another circus, at least 15 children were injured when an elephant giving rides was startled.

Captive elephants can also carry tuberculosis, which transmissible to humans—even without direct contact, since it’s airborne. Seven people were recently diagnosed with the disease after being around infected elephants at a zoo, and eight individuals contracted TB from a former circus elephant. Yet elephants with the disease are still routinely exposed to the public. According to experts, tuberculosis is harbored by at least 18% of the Asian elephants in the United States—and 18 to 50% of Americans who work around elephants. Indeed, virtually every American circus with elephants has a history of tuberculosis, and numerous circuses are criss-crossing the country with TB-exposed animals as I write.

Of course, the use of wild animals for entertainment is also harmful to the animals themselves. Undercover investigations, sworn eyewitness testimony, and reports make clear that abuse the rule—not the exception—when it comes to forcing apex predators and other wild animals to perform unnatural tricks. Elephants, lions, tigers, and other wild animals used for entertainment are trained through beatings. These animals are also routinely and denied everything that’s natural and important to them, kept in tiny cages or chains for days, weeks, and even months on end, according to government records.

In addition to its harmful impacts on human health and safety and animal welfare, the use of wild animals for entertainment can also pose serious threats to conservation efforts. Studies have found that exhibiting animals in unnatural settings—and, especially, exhibiting them in close contact with humans, as circuses and similar enterprises do—can make viewers more likely to consider wild populations to be stable and healthy and less likely to donate to conservation.

For all of these reasons, I strongly urge the Los Angeles City Council to do the right thing for humans, animals, and the environment by banning the use of wild animals in performances and amusement. Please don’t hesitate to contact me at dwinders@law.harvard.edu if I can provide any additional information.

Sincerely,



Delcianna J. Winders