

Committee on Resources

Witness Testimony

Statement of Andy Ireland
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to the Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans
Committee on Resources
United States House of Representatives
Regarding H.R. 1787, The Asian Elephant Conservation Act
July 31, 1997

On behalf of Feld Entertainment, Inc., the parent company of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey , I would like to thank you for this opportunity to express our support for H.R. 1787, The Asian Elephant Conservation Act. As a world renowned leader in the field of live, family entertainment, Feld Entertainment, Inc. is proud to include among its many entities, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey circus, Walt Disney's World On Ice , and Siegfried & Roy at the Mirage .

At Feld Entertainment, the care and protection of exotic and endangered animals has always been an important element of our corporate vision. The Asian elephant, in particular, is one of our most popular animal performers and perhaps the species most commonly associated with The Greatest Show On Earth.

We at Feld Entertainment believe, as most in the conservation community have concluded, that a successful conservation program for the Asian elephant and other species is built on three important elements: education, captive-breeding and research, and habitat conservation. Through our work with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, the largest and most highly respected circus performing in North America, we recognize the unique opportunity we have not only to entertain, but to educate millions of our patrons each year about the needs and abilities of rare and exotic animal species.

THE CONSERVATION AND EDUCATION VALUE OF PUBLIC DISPLAY

Our role as an educator is one which we take very seriously. The affection and awe that elephants generate among our audiences helps focus attention on the current challenge facing the future survival of the species. In fact, studies have shown that the public display of animals contributes to heightened public awareness of the animals themselves and of man's responsibility for their well-being and protection. This is especially true for children, who not only become more aware of the animals and their special needs and abilities, but also experience first hand the importance of caring for and respecting all animals.

In an effort to quantify the education and conservation value of public display, Ringling Bros. commissioned two studies on the effect of live animal entertainment on education and the effect of education on preservation of endangered species. The Yale University Study, "The Circus as an Educational Experience: Teaching Children About Animal Life," reflects a survey of general academic articles and studies on the educational value of live entertainment. The Roper Organization's poll of teachers and parents focusses more specifically on the link between live viewing of animals in the circus environment and the resulting attitudes of parents, teachers and children toward the need for conservation of endangered species. The results speak strongly in terms of the circus' profound effect on shaping the attitudes of adults and

children alike toward the value of witnessing live animals in a performance setting and the increasing awareness of the need to conserve and protect exotic wildlife. Some of the more compelling evidence is summarized below:

Ninety-six percent of teachers say that seeing animals in a circus adds to the interest students have in learning about animals and makes them want to protect these animals in the wild. (Roper Poll, p. 13)

Live animal acts evoke huge responses from children and are much talked of afterwards. The glamour of the circus experience stimulates a child's interest in animals and makes him more receptive to learning more about animals. (Yale Study, p. 25)

Circus visits provide an opportunity for teachers and parents to enhance learning about animals (and thus conservation needs) through the use of follow up materials. (Yale Study, p. 37)

Seventy-eight percent of teachers have added circus or animals to their curriculum as a result of circus attendance (Roper Poll, p. 17). Eight in ten teachers feel that after a visit to the circus, students will be more likely to protect these animals in the wild as a result of their new knowledge and respect for wildlife. Significantly, the positive educational value of seeing animals in the context of a circus has also been acknowledged by Dr. Marthe Kiley-Worthington, a famed ethologist. Dr. Kiley-Worthington was commissioned by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to animals to carry out an independent, scientific study of animals, in comparison with animals in zoos and other husbandry systems and the wild. Considered preeminent in her field, Dr. Kiley-Worthington was one of the ethologists to live with and study wild African animals and has been an animal behavior consultant since 1971. Dr. Kiley-Worthington confirms that:

Circuses could have an important role to play here [in public education], particularly in relation to the elephants and some of the threatened big cats. I see this role not only in breeding the endangered species (which as in the case of the snow leopard they have already had some success with) but in raising public interest to the plight of species by demonstrating their special cognitive abilities . . .

In this way they [circuses] could have an important role to play in educating the public and heightening the respect for individual animals, their unique intelligences and amazing abilities.

Thus, it cannot be disputed that there exists a strong and compelling educational value to the public in viewing exotic and threatened species. Such knowledge and awareness of endangered and threatened species are the first crucial steps toward conservation. Children who are sensitized toward the needs and plight of endangered and threatened species are more likely to be conservation-minded as they mature. Parents whose children are interested in animals often take on their children's interests and share in the learning process. As adults gain and share their children's awareness, they may act in ways which promote conservation efforts either through the political process or public activism and involvement in conservation causes. There is a positive net effect on conservation and, thus, enhancement of survival of the species.

That conservation begins with a well-informed public could not have been better articulated than by the late Mollie Beattie, former Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at her confirmation hearings, during which she stated, "The children in inner city schools hold the earth in their hands in a few years. If they do not get a chance to learn and marvel about the earth and its creatures, the Service cannot succeed in . . . any aspect of its mission." Importantly, however, the conservation education value of animal exhibitions goes far beyond that absorbed by the general public. Exhibition also provides the opportunity for a strong

educational benefit to professionals who work with these non-native wildlife. The behavior aspects of these animals, as well as information regarding husbandry and breeding, may all be learned by animal care professionals, circuses, zoos and other locations. In turn, this knowledge is shared among professionals and the likelihood of conservation of the species is truly enhanced by this educational experience.

Finally, in addition to the value of public display, Ringling Bros. has also developed educational materials and programs to augment the entertainment experience. These programs include: (1) providing educational materials about our performing animals for use in elementary schools, (2) an audience participation program immediately prior to performances which allows people an up close opportunity to view and ask questions about Asian elephants and other animals, and (3) providing materials at circus performances regarding the need to protect and conserve the various exotic animal species under our care.

A COMMITMENT TO CONSERVATION -- THE RINGLING BROS. CENTER FOR ELEPHANT CONSERVATION

Asian elephants have long been an important and beloved part of the Ringling Bros. culture and history. The first Asian elephant to come to the United States arrived in 1796, and became an instant hit with American audiences. We consider the elephants in our circus family to be "ambassadors" for their brethren in the wild.

To assure the survival of this magnificent species, Ringling Bros. created the Center for Elephant Conservation in Polk City, Florida, dedicated to the breeding, conservation, and scientific study of Asian elephants. With more than 126 years experience successfully living and working with Asian elephants, Ringling Bros. has gained extensive practical and scientific knowledge of elephant behavior, social structure, and veterinary needs. This unique base of knowledge, as well as ongoing input from Ringling Bros. staff veterinarians, animal trainers and animal handlers, guided the construction and design of this 200-acre facility. By creating a safe, comfortable and private environment, the Center is the first facility of its kind to put the reproductive needs of the elephants first and foremost.

The Center is making tremendous strides in the areas of conservation, reproduction and research of the Asian elephant. To date, nine Asian elephant calves have been conceived and delivered under the care of Ringling Bros. Our herd of elephants is the largest and most genetically diverse gene pool of Asian elephants outside of southeast Asia, an important factor in successful efforts to preserve the species. Our large herd also provides an exceptional opportunity for scientific study of Asian elephant breeding and behavior, and we are pleased to share our animal husbandry knowledge with the rest of the scientific community. Our expertise in the field of animal husbandry and veterinary knowledge of Asian elephants is renowned among the zoological, conservation and exhibition community and is shared on a regular basis with the academic community as well. We are pleased and proud of the many roles we play in helping to preserve the future of the Asian elephant through educational exhibition, heightened public awareness and conservation.

THE CHALLENGE OF HABITAT PRESERVATION -- THE ASIAN ELEPHANT CONSERVATION ACT

In our role as both educator and preservationist, we at Feld Entertainment have begun to explore ways in which we can contribute to the long-term survival of the Asian elephant, beyond that of education and captive-propagation. Perhaps the greatest challenge facing the future survival of Asian elephants in the wild is that of habitat preservation. Unlike African elephant populations, which remain predominantly wild and

insular, Asian elephants have long interacted with humans as part of the daily culture and life of the range states. The pressures of population growth, habitat diminution and demand for domesticated animals to work in the logging industry have created a human-animal conflict over land and resources. While protected areas are being established, it requires a great deal of land and financial support to maintain and establish protected habitat.

Although the plight of the African elephant has received much attention in the international community, Asian elephant populations face even greater challenges. Today Asian elephants number fewer than 50,000 - as compared to the African elephant, whose numbers have increased steadily, by about five percent per year, since their listing in CITES Appendix I.

In addition, the recent agreement on resumption of limited trade in ivory as the result of the 10th biennial meeting of the Conference of the Parties at CITES is of concern to the Asian range states, since Asian elephant populations may also be at risk as a result of renewed trade in ivory. Asian elephant ivory is exclusive to the male, and even limited poaching can seriously affect gene pools and the herd's ability to reproduce.

At a recent oversight hearing on the CITES COP, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Interior for the Fish and Wildlife and Parks Department, and head of the U.S. Delegation to CITES, Donald Barry, mentioned the important role of the African Elephant Conservation Act to help African range states meet the challenge of preventing illegal trade and poaching in the wake of the recent downlisting. Given the many perils facing Asian elephants, it is clear that the time is right to support efforts to preserve this important species and its habitat with legislation specifically targeted to Asian elephants.

As a result, we have made a commitment of our corporate resources of time, energy and funding to support efforts within the international conservation community and the United States Congress to assist in the conservation of Asian elephants, including the enactment of legislation for Asian elephant conservation. We commend Congressman Jim Saxton and Congressman Neil Abercrombie for introducing H.R. 1787, and for taking a major step forward in the process of addressing the formidable challenges faced in conserving this species.

We urge the members of this distinguished Subcommittee to report this legislation before you and seek its enactment. As Doug Chadwick, noted wildlife biologist and the author of *The Fate of the Elephant* has said, "to pass an Asian Elephant Conservation Act would be one of the most foresighted and yet practical things we could do for the benefit of Americans, people throughout Asia, and the world we all share."

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