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Circus and Robby

Circuses are promoted as providing good family fun – and this is true except when they include performances by exotic animals. Circus animals typically endure grim lives, spending most of their time in small cages or box cars.

I am particularly concerned with the use of chimpanzees in the circus. They resemble us in many ways. They show emotions like joy and sadness, anger and despair. They kiss, embrace, hold hands, tickle each other and laugh. They form strong affectionate and supportive bonds with family and friends. Like us they can be aggressive, but like us they also show compassion and altruism. The anatomy of the chimp and human brain is almost the same (ours is larger). Chimpanzees are capable of thinking and problem solving. They use and make tools and infants learn the tool using behavior of their group by watching, imitating and practicing.

It is because of what I have learned that I am deeply opposed to chimpanzees being exploited in the entertainment industry. (not only the circus but also advertising or movies.) Every chimpanzee performer has been separated from his or her mother at a very young age. The separation is traumatic. In the wild an infant is not weaned from the mother until about five years of age - and even after that will often continue to associate with her and other family members throughout life. And they can live to be 50 or 60 in the wild. Chimpanzees are highly social beings, and social isolation typically causes psychological damage.

As chimpanzees get older they resent discipline, and as they are stronger than we are, their training typically involves physical punishment so that the chimpanzee is suitably subservient to the trainer. Very often they wear an electric collar which will administer a shock at any sign of disobedience.

I write now on behalf of one particular chimpanzee, Robby. I have seen video footage of this male chimpanzee performing in the circus. Quite apart from a consideration of the training that Robby has undergone, Robby is definitely not treated with the respect he deserves. It is my considered opinion that he should be freed from all further such commercial exploitation and retired to an authorized sanctuary that knows how to care for ex performing individuals, such as Stichting AAP.

Dr. Jane Goodall