

Reports and Comments

Wild Animals in Travelling Circuses: The Report of the Chairman of the Circus Working Group

In June 2006 an independent Parliamentary Circus Working Group was established. Its remit was to provide and consider evidence relating to the transportation and housing needs of non-domesticated species of animals in travelling circuses and to evaluate which species welfare needs could not be satisfactorily met in these establishments. This was in response to a number of Parliamentary statements that the UK Government was intending to introduce a ban on such species. Further guidance was given to the Working Group that any evidence it considered should have a sound scientific base, and preferably be based upon the findings of peer-reviewed studies, and that anecdotal or photographic or video evidence should not be taken into account.

In October 2007, the report presenting the conclusions of the Chairman of the Working Group, and the findings of an Academic Panel that had considered the evidence submitted by the members of the Working Group — who were drawn from those working with animals in travelling circuses and welfare organisations opposed to this practice, was published. In his foreword, the Working Group Chairman Mike Radford stated that the conclusions drawn in the report were unlikely to satisfy supporters of either point of view. Nonetheless they are of interest, both because they have implications for the continuing use of non-domesticated animals in circuses across Europe and because they demonstrate how the scientific approach to animal welfare can inform legislation, specifically with respect to the duty of care and other provisions in the recently introduced UK Animal Welfare Bill.

The major finding of this report is that the Academic Panel, advising the Group, concluded “that there appears to be little evidence to demonstrate that the welfare of animals kept in travelling circuses is any better or worse than that of animals kept in other captive environments”. Given this, the report concludes that the scientific argument for change had not been made and that, therefore, any move towards banning the use of non-domesticated species would, accordingly, be unlawful, falling foul of “the principle of proportionality”. However, the Chairman also points out that “the *status quo* is not a tenable option” either, as Ministerial statements have already indicated that some regulation of circuses is intended and that the circuses themselves have accepted the need for further legal clarification of their status. Radford argues that if a lawful ban or statutory regulation of the area is to be achieved in England then further primary legislation is required, as existing legislation does not appear to suffice given the findings of the Working Group. This also likely to be the case for Wales and Scotland. In this instance, he concludes, science cannot provide guidance on policy, and any future regulation in this area will have to be based entirely upon political considerations.

For anyone with an interest in how science can inform legislation, and specifically its role in shaping secondary legislation under the Animal Welfare Bill and its limitations, this report makes for recommended reading.

Wild Animals in Travelling Circuses: The Report of the Chairman of the Circus Working Group. October 2007. Published by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and available from Defra, Nobel House, 17 Smith Square, London SW1P 3JR and at the Defra website: <http://www.defra.gov.uk/animalh/welfare>

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Welfare Quality®: Project Update

Welfare Quality® is a European research project concerned with integrating animal welfare into the food quality chain: from public concern to improved welfare and transparent quality. The scheme, which began in 2004 and involves the participation of 44 institutes and universities, hopes to have achieved the following aims by the end of 2009:

- to develop practical strategies/measures to improve animal welfare
- to develop a European on-farm welfare assessment standard
- to develop a European animal welfare information standard
- to integrate and interrelate the most appropriate specialist expertise in the multidisciplinary field of animal welfare in Europe

Four principles form the basis of the animal welfare measurements used within Welfare Quality®: ‘good feeding’, ‘good housing’, ‘good health’ and ‘appropriate behaviour’. Currently the testing of nine different assessment systems is underway for: sows and piglets, fattening pigs, dairy cows, beef cattle, dairy heifers and calves, veal calves, laying hens, broiler chickens and buffalo. It is hoped that the systematic approach to the development and testing of these species-specific assessment systems will result in reliable, repeatable and sensitive animal welfare assessment methods for all of these animals. Although carrying out each assessment during the trial phase is currently requiring a full day’s work it is expected that the final systems will take a manageable two-to-four hours and will be useful in a number of situations, including: as a research tool to evaluate the welfare of animals housed under various conditions, to help define a minimum level of animal welfare that is acceptable for voluntary or compulsory labelling and, as a self-assessment management tool for farmers or processors to help identify welfare problems or risks.

The project is also working towards implementation studies on pig, poultry and cattle farms across Europe, enabling farmers to see how the welfare of their animals relates to their own systems and practices. It will also provide farmers