Combatting the Selective Use of Science
the extraordinary case of elephants in captivity

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Abstract

It is not uncommon for scientists to find their work, in its entirety or in part, becoming enmeshed in highly politicised issues. In the 21st Century, given the ease with which we can source information and the rapidity of the changes in the information flow it becomes simple for non-specialists to knit vaguely related ideas together to create what might appear to be a plausible story or narrative. The aim can be to borrow legitimacy from science to give credence to a cause. This thesis explores the question: Can science communicators combat politicised discourse and narratives where the science is being ignored, smothered, or at least used selectively, by those involved?

One area for study in this regard involves captive elephants. By focusing on two distinct groups within this discourse, animal rights on one side and elephant advocates within zoos and circuses on the other, this thesis presents some of the narratives which could be better informed if the relevant science became part of the discourse. Central to this debate is the role of the bullhook or ankus in elephant management; central because it is at the core of many decisions facing the zoos and circuses, and demonstrates how emotion may have obscured or sidelined the science.

Evidence is also presented on the value of encounters with animals and the animal-human connection that evolves as a result. The available evidence suggests that these encounters may be instrumental in changing attitudes and guiding the future action of the people experiencing such encounters. These encounters can occur in many situations, however the educational programmes provided by zoos offer one very accessible environment in which they can occur. While critics suggest there is no evidence to support the effectiveness of zoo educational programmes, in this thesis evidence is presented to the contrary, and prompts the question: ‘Why are zoos not effectively promoting this important component of their work?’
In conclusion, this thesis proposes that effective communication techniques must be authentic and transparent, and delivered through a clearly devised plan. The examination of the current narrative and discourse regarding the use of the bullhook or ankus provides an opportunity to evaluate that particular narrative and discourse, the related science involved and leads to suggestions as to how that science might be heard in the discourse through revised and targeted narratives.
He who controls the lines of communication controls the battle.
~ Napoleon Bonaparte

Burma, a 31-year-old Asian elephant at Auckland Zoo, star of It’s All About Burma.
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Chapter 1:

Thesis Framework

It is not uncommon for scientists to find their work in its entirety or in part becoming enmeshed in highly politicised issues. Once the results of scientific endeavour are published it is available to people with interests well beyond the realm of science. It is open to interpretation by anyone who may find within it an angle or suggestion that may assist in the selling of a cause or the denigration of another’s ideology. Frustration, disbelief and even despair can arise for scientists when results are subject to interpretations that go well beyond any intended conclusion by authors. In the 21st Century with the ease of sourcing of information and with the rapidity of information flows, it becomes simple for non-specialists to knit vaguely related ideas or even wholly disparate ideas together to create what at first glance might appear to be a plausible story or narrative. The aim can be to borrow legitimacy from science to give credence to a cause. Often such narratives and the discourse they sit within don’t hold up under any close or detailed analysis. However, in an age where social media and the internet carry a wild array of discussion/rants/opinion purporting to be ‘fact’, solid science can be consigned to being an interpretation within someone else’s strategy.

As science communicators, understanding how this swirling cloud of interpreted truths is created and why it is created becomes essential if we are to ensure the relevant science gets heard. Ideally that science becomes incorporated in the flow of discourse and narrative in a form that has integrity and value.

To achieve this, science communicators must develop an ability to observe, analyse and interpret within highly politicised and charged environments. When passions and emotively driven arguments take hold, often truth and science are the losers. The best defence for science communicators is to
understand how communication in a multi media society works. That demands an understanding of how and why narratives are created and how they are sustained in the discourse surrounding a topic. That in turn requires the science communicator to come to terms with the strategies and tactics used to put narratives in place and to sustain them in the discourse.

We must learn to recognise discourse and how it is built layer upon layer. We must understand what is useful, valuable discourse and what weak or fabricated discourse looks like. Science communicators must develop the ability to distance themselves from complex and heated issues in order to observe and assess what lies behind, below and beyond the discourse flow.

A second skill is required. We must learn to recognise that discourse is a web made up of strands of interwoven and directed live narratives. The observer and analyst needs to stand back and assess what the important and persistent narratives are, who is developing them to what end, and what value they have.

With those two aspects of communication understood, a science communicator can then get to the core of their work, developing strategy and tactics to be able to enter the fray and be successful within it. However, understanding the dynamics of strategy is no easy task. It begins with good intelligence; that is; basing your plans on the best information available. It relies on excellent observation skills and an ability to resist getting caught up and drawn into the debate and taking a position which could result in the loss of the ability to objectively assess what is actually going on. The contribution that science communicators can make is to bring strategic communications skills to the aid of scientists who could otherwise be overpowered in a world about which they have little understanding, and where they often do not recognise opportunities to advance their work and understanding of the world when they do occur. When an argument or controversy develops many scientists find themselves surrounded by passionate proponents of a position, inaccurate information, political maneuvering and wild assertions. These are all difficult to deal with and present challenges not usually encountered in their chosen field of work, and working in this environment
may take them well outside their comfort zone. It is up to the science communicator to be the navigator and guide for scientists as they venture into this unfamiliar territory.

The final area for science communicators to master is the use of tactics to achieve an end. While strategy is a conceptual field focused on what comes next, tactics are action focused; what has to be done to achieve a specific outcome. The coordination of several tactical plans becomes a campaign or programme. For the science communicator it is vital to be able to recognise the tactics that are being used by the different sides of a debate or issue. With that knowledge their own tactics can be developed that might aim to defeat or overwhelm other tactics being employed and open the way for the science to be heard.

The question to be addressed by this thesis is therefore: can science communicators combat politicised discourse and narratives, and the strategies and tactics used to put them in place, especially in situations where science is being used selectively by those involved?

**Thesis Design**

**Orientation**

This brief orientation is designed to identify the major issues and combatants that are central to the discussion to be undertaken by this thesis.

Macro Level – Elephants in captivity

Elephants in captivity are a rich area for enquiry as one cannot go any distance into a study of elephants before realising science is often subsumed by politics. It is a space interlaced with deep passion, deeply entrenched narratives, and polarised views where antagonists on each side see themselves as the ones who love the animals most.
Scientists can be found on both sides of the captive elephant debate, arguing for one point of view or the other. The atmosphere is often highly charged, in part due to the connection many people feel for animals. This means relevant and valid science can be ignored, obscured or sidelined by a more dominant narrative and politically directed discourse. Impediments placed in the way of the communication of the relevant science indicate the need for science communicators to develop better strategies to allow all of that science to be heard and evaluated.

Micro Level – Bullhook Discourse

One specific element of the broader debate has been chosen for a more detailed microanalysis in the thesis. That one discourse concerns the use of the ankus or bullhook in managing captive elephants.

The bullhook/ankus discourse was chosen because it touches every corner of the captive elephant debate. Therefore a full examination of that one area will allow key elements to be identified – the narratives that drive it can be detailed, the strategies that groups are using can be deconstructed, and the tactics being employed can be recognised.

The aim of choosing a micro study on the bullhook within a larger evaluation of issues surrounding captive elephant management and politics, is to have one issue to focus strongly upon to reduce the risk of becoming tangled in the many discourses within the captive elephant debate.

It is also hoped this both broad and narrow approach specific to elephants may have value in assessing issues surrounding other captive animal species.

**Broad and Narrow Approach**

The thesis will advance on two levels: one broad exploration of issues surrounding captive animal management, that includes the value of encounters between animals and humans, animal charisma, public education about animals, and the relationship between conservation and captive
animals. This evaluates some of the science that relates to captive animals and the perceived value of that captivity. The second micro exploration focuses on the use of discourse, narrative, strategy and tactics within captive elephant management and politics while at the same time attempting to focus the discussion on the impacts on science where possible.

**Animal Activists vs Zoos/Circuses**

To confine the study, the thesis focuses on two of the many groups that are involved in the captive elephant debates – the two most polarized: 1. animal rights activists and, 2. elephant advocates within zoos and circuses – ie zookeepers, zoo managers, circus managers and circus elephant trainers.

The most intense debate, conflict and disagreement occurs between these two groups. Both groups are intensely interested in elephant welfare and both believe their approach to the future of captive elephants is the correct one. As a result issues relating to elephant captivity can be identified and explored through the positions held by these two groups.

**Snapshot of the Elephant Debate**

a) Animal Rights View

Those who strongly desire to uphold the rights of animals see no place for any animal in captivity. When they refer to zoos and circuses the language used is about abuse, cruelty, fear, beatings and dominance as they claim dominance is the only viable means of managing a wild animal. Their narrative is that wild animals should not be kept in ‘prison’, and that elephants in particular are too intelligent to be ‘held captive’. They believe the answer lies in animal sanctuaries and the protection of their natural habitat.

Elephant sanctuary owners tend to concur with this position.
b) Zoo/Circus Advocates (Elephant Advocates)

On the other side of this polarized argument are the zookeepers and zoo managers, circus owners and trainers and those of the general public who enjoy the zoo and circus experience. There are also conservationists in this camp that argue that through direct contact with animals people develop a deeper affection for and understanding of animals and are more likely to be involved in their conservation.

Some in this grouping question whether the wild exists anymore and whether it is even a safe place for animals at all with greater human encroachment into animal habitats, wildlife animal trading, and international trade in animal parts, legal hunting and illegal poaching.

They are also critical of animal sanctuaries, where the philosophy is to remove animals from human observation and exhibition. They see this as being a lost opportunity in terms of the animal’s conservation claiming that such sanctuaries have become the private play areas for a wealthy few who become ‘rescuers’ and who want to have the experience of being close to wild animals while keeping others from having that same experience.

Targets in the Debate

Between these two extremes are community decision-makers. They are increasingly being tasked with making difficult decisions about the future of captive animals, but are rarely exposed to the science that should inform their decision-making. Three examples involving recourse to community decision-makers noted below highlight the nature of the current discourse.

1. Toronto City Councillors went through a lengthy decision process about the future of three African elephants that had lived at Toronto Zoo for more than 30 years – one a 31-year-old born at Toronto Zoo who knew no other home. While the zoo itself agreed to close the exhibit and move the elephants elsewhere, the disagreement was about where that place should be. Those opposed to zoos applied significant political pressure on the council
demanding the removal of the elephants from the zoo to an elephant sanctuary in California. They claimed this institution’s philosophy made it a better option than the alternative preferred by zoo staff which was the National Elephant Centre (NEC) in Florida. NEC is a retirement home and breeding facility supported by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA). In October 2013, the elephants were transported to the sanctuary in California.

2. A judge in Los Angeles ruled against the Los Angeles Zoo in a civil case accusing it of cruelty to its elephants. The judge’s decision included an injunction prohibiting the defendants from using bullhooks and electric shock prods in the management, care, and discipline of the elephants at the Los Angeles Zoo.

3. The Los Angeles City Council voted unanimously for a total ban on the use of bullhooks in elephant management in the city from 2016. In an unusual move, this hearing did not involve any input from captive elephant experts, either from zoos or from circuses, while those wishing to ban the bullhook were given time to present their case.

In all these cases one narrative was being successfully communicated to these decision makers – and yet the science would indicate that another perspective on and understanding of these issues needed to be voiced – but wasn’t heard.

**Paradoxes and Contradictions**

The elephant world is full of contradictions, paradoxes and passions. There is much to learn about elephants, and much already known, thanks to research involving both wild and captive elephants. From that body of knowledge has grown an army of people who want to save elephants from a future scenario which is almost certainly extinction. Even though the goal is the same, the way people are choosing to go about this mission is significantly different. On the one hand, there are those who want to continue to improve the environment in which elephants are managed in captivity. They want to successfully breed elephants, to ensure there are elephants everyone can have
the opportunity to see, enjoy and appreciate, and so secure their future. On the other hand, there are those who take an extreme position and believe elephants are better off dead than captive bred.

Some of the information each side uses to justify their position in the debate is related to science, some is ‘felt’ at some instinctive level, and some is misunderstood. But almost certainly, everyone involved in the debate has been touched by an elephant at some point in their life.

Not everyone has the opportunity to see elephants in the wild, in their range countries within the African and Asian continents. For many, the only place to see them is in zoos or circuses or similar facilities.

Thesis Structure

Chapter 2 identifies the hows and whys of narrative and discourse

Chapter 3 provides a basis for discussion around encounter value and how science is subverted by narrative.

Chapter 4 examines the discourse and narrative surrounding zoos.

Chapter 5 examines the discourse and narrative surrounding circuses.

Chapter 6 examines the discourse and narrative surrounding sanctuaries.

Chapter 7 will analyse how my film endeavours to combat the politicised narrative as it relates to zoos.

Chapter 8 suggests the strategies that might be put in place to get the relevant science embedded in the discourse with a view to changing the narrative.
Chapter 2

Discourse, Narrative and Strategy

This chapter focuses on discourse, narrative, strategy and tactics within the captive elephant debate. Of particular interest is how narratives and discourse are affecting the way zoos, circuses and sanctuaries are perceived. It also looks at how different groups within our two main areas of interest – animal rights groups and elephant advocates within zoos and circuses – use communication strategy to advance their cause.

Communication About Elephants

Communication happens whether it is controlled or not. The skill for any communicator is in how to manage or direct messages in a manner appropriate to the cause or desired outcome. Within the context of this discussion it is important to consider two concepts: discourse and narrative. Both are intertwined but are subtly different.

Entire theses have been written on the meaning and influence of discourse and/or narrative. It is not necessary to delve that deeply here, however, in the context of the captive animal debate, and in particular the captive elephant debate, discourse and narrative become important. In any analysis it is necessary to consider who is participating in the various discourses and what the strands of narrative are that are influencing people and the decisions they make about what they support. From a science communication point of view it is helpful to analyse how they are being constructed and for whose benefit.

A Discourse on Discourse

The word ‘discourse’ derives from the Latin discursus which means ‘running to and fro’ (or in medieval Latin ‘argument’). For the purpose of this thesis
discourse is defined as a discussion that either invites or responds to other points of view. The aim of academic discourse is to enter into a discussion as a means of advancing or promoting one’s own narrative as important or dominant. It is primarily a two-way process involving multiple participants. I am not suggesting debates around the future of elephants in captivity are being conducted entirely in an academic environment. In fact, in the many cases that I detail, discourse and narrative around elephants are anything but analytical. Whatever the quality of the discourse, it is having an impact and needs to be evaluated.

For the purpose of this thesis, narrative is defined according to the Webster dictionary as ‘a representation of a particular situation or process in such a way as to reflect or conform to an overarching set of aims or values’. Generally, narrative is a one-way process designed to get other people believing in and passing on a selected story. From my own professional experience in strategic communications, I understand the techniques used to direct and manipulate narratives to achieve a desired end.

The way discourse and narratives are shaped can have a significant impact on how we perceive what is around us. For example Haraway (1992) suggests the animals of science bear little or no relation to the animals of fiction, such as Bambi or Dumbo, which may have had a formative impact on our views of animals and nature. Likewise, the way animals are treated in law often doesn’t relate to the way people psychologically see their pets, or the way animals raised for food are viewed (ibid).

John Shy and Thomas Collier in their book Revolutionary War describe discourse in terms of words being weapons and language being used to ‘isolate and confuse, rally and motivate, and enlist the support of wavering bystanders’. In the milieu of passion that surrounds elephants, the use of words as weapons in a war, either to remove elephants from zoos and circuses or to retain them for conservation, education or entertainment, is well developed.

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11 I have a Bachelor of Communication Studies majoring in Public Relations. I have been a journalist and magazine editor, and worked in strategic communications over two decades as director and shareholder in a public relations consultancy.
In *The Discourse Trap* Michaels (2013) describes discourse as the language used to discuss issues and assign meaning to them. However, he also cautions that discourse can become a trap with unintended consequences. The problem arises when a dominant discourse is wrong, and is without substance regardless of how well it has been told. There can also be a problem when an existing dominant narrative loses its validity. It requires effort and possibly even the adoption of new terminology to bring new meaning to an existing idea (ibid).

It also pays to ‘be careful what you wish for’. Animal rights groups throughout the world have swayed the discourse about captive elephants presenting sanctuaries as the answer to the problem. Activists on social media assert that all elephants should be taken out of captivity and placed in sanctuaries where they will be allowed to run free. Those on the other side of the debate ask: Where are these sanctuaries that can take all of these elephants? The two that exist in the United States can take no more elephants, and may be financially unsustainable as they depend on benefactors and fundraising. It seems likely that if laws were changed to ban elephants from zoos or circuses the ‘sanctuary answer’ may be found wanting. The sanctuary discourse sets up a view of elephants in a sanctuary where they can “roam free” in the company of other elephants for the rest of their days. However, there are factual and scientific elements that don’t emerge in this discourse. The two main US sanctuaries have both Asian and African elephants and the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) recommendation is that the two are kept separate. They also have elephants with tuberculosis in a form which is transferrable between elephants and humans (Michalak, 1998; S. K. Mikota, 2000; S. K. Mikota, Larsen, Scott R., and Montali, Richard J., 2000).

Not all elephants get on together so management of individuals requires that the ‘herd’ is divided still further based on which elephants can be in the same space together (Roocroft, 2013). Often the sanctuary elephants are in pairs in fenced paddocks.
Elephants in the wild don’t travel large distances because they enjoy it, they travel because they are in search of food and water (Maple, 2010). So in sanctuaries, where they are fed by humans, they tend to gather around places where food is distributed (Roocroft, 2013).

**Words as Weapons**

A useful example of the use of words as weapons in discourse is the naming and use of a tool commonly used by elephant handlers – the bullhook – so named because in bygone days this was the tool used by ‘elephant men’ who worked with bull elephants. It is also known as an elephant hook or an elephant goad, but these terms now appear to be in less common use. In Asian countries the bullhook is known variously as an ankus, ankusha, or takaw. According to elephant handlers, the bullhook’s use is primarily as a guide in the way that a shepherd’s crook is used. But just like a kitchen knife, a bullhook has the potential to be misused, and, again just like the kitchen knife, the bullhook has been known to have been misused.

Animal rights groups appear to have gained a tactical communications value from their focus on the bullhook. The reputation of bullhooks that developed in the 1800s (Nance, 2013) has created the opportunity for narratives to be developed that can be used against them. Something so named has assisted with the development of a narrative within the discourse about captive elephants that says the use of the bullhook is cruel, abusive and part of a strategy to dominate the elephant. The impact of questions about the use of bullhooks posed by the visiting public has seen New Zealand’s Auckland Zoo elephant handlers re-design what they refer to as an ankus by making them from clear perspex or coloured plastic weighing a few hundred grams. This was done with some success as a way to minimizing the questions posed and criticisms made by the public who did not understand its role (Coers, 20 February, 2013). Other facilities may want to continue to use the bullhook and defend that name because they consider it is, as it has always been, a guide with an effective design and weight that has been used for centuries.
An Ankus in Asia

The bullhook has an interesting history. It is based on the traditional Asian ankus or takaw used for thousands of years by mahouts and has cultural meaning beyond its superficial use. The Hindu god Ganesh, who incidentally takes the form of an elephant, holds a takaw in many images, and therefore people in some Asian countries recognise it within the context of their historical and spiritual iconography.

The takaw takes various forms. In some parts of India and in Nepal this guiding tool is a long pole used to manage elephants. In some jungle areas mahouts carry machetes or bush knives to hack their way through trees and undergrowth and to cut food for their elephants. When logging, the bush knife is essential as if logs slip down a hill the knife can be used to slash the ropes holding the harness to the elephant to protect the elephant from injury. Rather than carrying two guiding tools, a bush knife can serve a dual purpose (Lair, 2005).

Source: ASPCA et al vs Feld evidence
**Westerners Apply Pressure**

In recent decades western perceptions have impinged on the world of Asian working elephants. There continues to be widespread objection to, what to western eyes appears to be, unkind animal treatment in the way mahouts manage their elephants. When animal rights advocates identified the Asian ankus as an offensive weapon, westerners were introduced to a sharp instrument capable of inflicting pain and wounds. In the eyes of many Asians, an ankus is entwined and associated with their elephant deity and is involved in the daily practicality of earning a living (Lair, 2005). A call from foreigners to no longer use an ankus may well prove mystifying. It would be self-defeating for mahouts, who rely on their elephants to earn their living, to mistreat their main asset. Working elephants can be considered similar to a truck for an owner-driver. Removing an ankus from a mahout might be considered to be akin to removing a steering wheel from a truck driver’s truck.

Indian-based elephant research scientist Surendra Varma points to situations where an incident of perceived elephant cruelty is aired with pictures showing a sharpened ankus. The perception can be gained that that is a common occurrence when the fact that a prosecution is taking place should perhaps indicate that a system of animal protection is working (Varma, 2013b).

This 21st Century misconception regarding the function of the bullhook has created to a number of issues for circuses and zoos. What westerners often misunderstand is mahouts, zookeepers and circus elephant trainers use an ankus like the reins on a horse or the lead on a dog. The difference is that the elephant can weigh several tonnes. The touch of an ankus on specific cue points (see illustration) tells the elephant which way to turn or which instruction to follow, whether that be to pull a load or go forward or backwards. It is an extension of the mahout’s reach either on foot or when riding and given the size of elephants it needs to be a certain length to be effective. An ankus is generally lightweight and allows a mahout to pull or tug or touch cue points on the elephant’s body. Ankus commands may be
more easily understood by an elephant than the verbal, rein or knee commands used with horses. And of course elephant handlers have no bridle to guide them. All a mahout or zookeeper or circus handler has to work with is a piece of metal or plastic that may be anything from 20 centimetres to half a metre long depending on the size of the elephant and the height that needs to be reached.

Tony Ratcliffe with his circus elephant Jumbo holds a bullhook/ankus which fits in his pocket.

A consequence of not being able to use a bullhook or ankus, such as the ban in the City of Los Angeles, effectively means a ban on circuses because the bullhook is an essential tool for safely managing elephants. It is what elephants and their keepers understand.

A Bullhook in the West

In the West the ankus is now often perceived as instruments to inflict pain and injury. That appears to have come about partly because of the way elephants were presented to the public in the context of a circus. Just as whips and chairs became images associated with lion tamers in circuses, dramatic-looking bullhooks became props associated with elephants from the
1800s. Many of the perceived problems that deter some people from attending circuses today may have their roots in promotional methods used in the past by circuses to attract audiences. Historically, many elephants were billed as bull (male) elephants even if they were female. For example Cole Brothers and Clyde Beatty Circus promoted their herd of 37 elephants but did not mention only one was male – although they had names like Sid, Louie, Tommy and Tony (Alexander, 2000, p. 143). To be fair, to the untrained eye it isn’t easy to tell the difference between male and female elephants unless the male is urinating or in the sexually aroused state of musth.

Trainers were also billed as macho men who could tame the wild brute. Nance (2013, p. 120) points to how publicity around elephant trainers using punishment to train elephants perpetuated the myth of the dangerous nature of the killer elephants in their care. They used whips and bull hooks as props and also to demonstrate how much control they had over them. Circus is largely theatre. Both male and female elephants are large and powerful, so it was easy for circuses to fool the general public regarding their gender to enhance the excitement of the performance and drama involved.

However, as attitudes changed through the decades and circuses began to be considered undesirable places for elephants the bullhook became associated with abuse and cruelty, and that connotation remains today. A once useful narrative for circuses has been taken and used in a new negative narrative that is affecting circuses in a negative way.

No Match For An Elephant

The ankus now has a perceived potential to cause pain and injury. As a result it has become a target for animal rights groups. In reality, given its size and strength, an elephant that wants to ignore the cue point instructions given via the ankus, can. An illustration of the impotence of an ankus against an elephant that doesn’t want to be controlled was given by a Thai elephant sanctuary worker. She related an incident where a Thai mahout tried to use an ankus to stop an aggressive bull elephant from killing a man on the ground who had been inspecting its feet. When the bull suddenly slammed
the man on the ground with his trunk and rapidly and repeatedly gored him, the mahout first put the point of the ankus into the elephant’s auditory canal with the aim of drawing its attention away from the victim. When that failed and the attack was continuing the mahout tried to stab the ankus into the elephant’s right eye. But in less than fifteen seconds, the man on the ground was dead (Narkiewicz, 2013). The ankus had proved to be useless in that circumstance as a means of controlling the elephant.

In short, when used properly the ankus is a far more subtle and versatile guiding tool than some may perceive it to be, and clearly, as the example above demonstrates, while it could inflict pain, in reality a short piece of perspex or steel can inflict nothing that would stop a determined elephant. The size, speed and power of elephants mean that any form of ankus is only ever going to be able to guide the elephant and is only capable of being used as a control mechanism if the elephant chooses to accept the cues given.

**Ankus/Bullhook in Discourse**

The negative discourse surrounding the ankus may be questionable in terms of its substance, but it appears to have established a narrative that would require a considerable effort and careful strategising by zoos and circuses to counter.

It is common for any activist discourse to be attached to emotional hooks. For example, this unattributed comment found on social media, and backed by shock videos, represents a section of the discourse around bullhooks:

> “bullhooks are weapons of terror for elephants. They’re not ‘guides’ as the abusers call them; they’re used to strike, beat, and hook elephants in their most sensitive areas like their ears and genitals to force them to obey”.

Those who defend the use of their training tool are referred to as “bullhook lovers”. However, this discourse extends beyond the unattributed and anonymous comments made on social media.
Drury University, a private liberal arts college in Springfield, Missouri, USA, has offered a minor in animal studies for two years. The program has received US$2 million from celebrity animal rights activist Bob Barker. It is led by Professor of Animal Rights Patricia McEachern who is openly critical of how elephants are treated in circuses and zoos. She is quoted as saying

“circus elephants are trained and controlled through the use of a bullhook, also called an ankus, a sharp-edged device like a fire-poker. Elephant handlers call it a “guide,” and jab an elephant in a sensitive area, typically behind the ear, to control it. To train a baby elephant to perform unnatural tricks such as standing on her head, or riding tricycles, you have to beat them into submission with a bullhook. Once that elephant’s spirit is broken, all they have to do is show the bullhook.” (Pokin, 2013)

One of McEachern’s students is also quoted as saying she no longer visits zoos.

“The animals that are held there, the cages are not big enough. An elephant is supposed to walk 25 to 30 miles a day. They are in a confined space with people always looking at them. It is very stressful to them.” (ibid)

A further layer of complexity has been added to this discourse as legal decisions have been reached. The negative perceptions driving the bullhook discourse appear to have been accepted by some courts. In a ruling in the Superior Court of California Judge Segal referred to the bullhook in this manner:

“a bullhook, for which the more contemporary and perhaps euphemistic name is an ankus …”. (“Leider v Lewis, City of Los Angeles et al,” 2012)

2 Bob Barker hosted The Price Is Right for decades but has now retired. He is a major benefactor for PAWS sanctuary in San Andreas, California.
Another voice adding to the discourse comes from ElephantVoices, the website of internationally renowned wild elephant researcher Joyce Poole. She explains the use of bullhooks on an elephant’s sensitive areas thus:

“bullhooks are successful in ‘correcting’ or ‘guiding’ an elephant only because the animals have learned to be fearful of the consequences of not following instructions. The fearfulness is based on the experience of pain being inflicted. The fear of being jabbed, however lightly, ensures that an elephant obeys commands or follows a guide, if you will. In this process, however, the independent will, choice, autonomy and purpose so important to the life of an elephant are destroyed.” (Poole, 2013)

These comments create a layered discourse. The social media comment, while unattributed, will be carried to a wide audience. It has the ability to enhance the animal rights discourse through reach. The two layers that are an endorsement of the animal rights discourse by academics and researchers carry the authority of position in the case of the academic McEachern and of reputation in the case of Poole. The ability of McEachern to influence the discourse through her teaching of her ‘captive’ audience could be far reaching depending on the spread and communication skills of her students following their graduation. The comments of the judge may indicate someone who has been effectively persuaded by the current discourse regarding the use of ankus/bullhooks.

It appears from the research that none of the individuals quoted above have been involved in the practicalities of managing elephants in captivity. That may need to be taken into consideration when evaluating their contributions to this discourse.

**Forms of Discourse Traps**

Michaels (2013, pp. 9-11) describes three different types of discourse trap – blowback, bandwagoning and marginalization.
Blowback

A common strategy used by pressure groups is to attempt to sway the discourse in a manner that will ultimately undermine a specific policy, but it is a strategy not without danger and can turn back on the originators with negative consequences. As an example, lobbyists from Save Animals From Exploitation (SAFE) gained support from Dunedin City Council in New Zealand to ban Jumbo the circus elephant from council-owned land. As a result the circus owners, having no other viable alternative i.e. a nearby location where they could manage and feed the elephant, had to keep Jumbo tethered in a nearby gravel parking lot outside a tavern (Hargreaves, 2009). This could be construed as a win for the lobbyists, but a loss for the animal involved.

Another example of blowback is the story of Limba, an aging elephant in a private zoo in Bowmanville, Ontario, Canada:

Limba died in late 2013, but for a long time she was a lone elephant and had lived at Bowmanville Zoo since 1989. Every year she had appeared in the town’s Christmas parade, dressed as Santa. In the year before she died animal rights advocates aired their concerns about Limba being in the parade citing exploitation and public safety as reasons why she should not appear. They also threatened a protest. The parade organisers announced that in the interest of safety they had asked Bowmanville Zoo to leave Limba out of the Christmas parade. However, the local community took exception to the parade organisers being swayed by animal rights activists and offered help to ensure public safety was not an issue. After an intensive social media campaign by both sides, Limba took part in the parade. (Chris Hall, 2013)
Strategically the campaign by animal rights activists in this instance was a failure. It had the effect of creating a lobby opposing their position and hardened attitudes within the community against what was seen as a politically correct decision – but not a socially acceptable one. It is likely politicians involved in the decision to ban the elephant would have learned that they had misinterpreted the mood of their constituents which might make it harder for animal rights activists to persuade these elected officials again in the future.

**Bandwagoning**

Bandwagoning is a means of creating leverage. This is achieved by aligning a discourse with organisations or individuals who can achieve greater public reach.

Celebrities are often involved in bandwagoning causes. US actress and comedienne Lily Tomlin, for example, recently won an award for her highly
emotive documentary ‘An Apology To Elephants’. She has joined the anti-zoo/anti-circus cause. Alec Baldwin is another who features prominently in PETA (People Against the Ethical Treatment of Animals) video ‘No Fun For Elephants’. Cher has taken up a campaign to free Billy, a lone male elephant in Los Angeles Zoo. Bob Barker, host of The Price Is Right for decades and now retired, is publicly associated with PAWS (Performing Animal Welfare Society) sanctuary in California and supports it financially, as he does the Drury University Animal Studies minor.

In some circumstances when high profile celebrities get involved and increase public support even for a short time, policymakers may feel a discourse can’t be criticised even if it is not fully endorsed or is seen as counter-productive. Bandwagoning celebrities who attract the media may also intimidate decision makers whose role is to ask the difficult and searching questions and come to decisions based on the evidence presented – not on the basis of who presents it.

**Marginalisation**

Marginalisation is where alternative discourses may be marginalised by the dominant discourse – sometimes unintentionally, sometimes deliberately. Groups driving the dominant narrative within the discourse, for example, will endeavour to marginalise information that either contradicts their narrative or advocates an alternative which is not in their interests. In this scenario, when promoting policies, options need to be framed within what is considered to be a politically acceptable discourse. Options that fall outside that politically correct discourse are ruled out as unacceptable or struggle to be recognised as legitimate. This can result in some pre-censorship on the part of decision makers to ensure that they are not perceived as politically incorrect. Another approach involves framing the discussion in such a way that it is difficult or impossible for other information or contrary points of view to be considered. Carefully controlled discourses are advantageous for activists and for policymakers as they limit the discussion but they also have the potential to constrain or misdirect logic, science, or inhibit the common sense of decision makers.
Discourse Ethics

One of the differences between publicly owned organisations and activist organisations is the difference in their approach to the use of data and information. This is particularly important when it comes to the communication of science. Nordmann (2011) in Successful Science Communication: The ethos of science vs ethics of science communication says science communication must follow four norms – “be clear and comprehensible, say what is correct or true, adhere to what is rightful or adequate to the situation, and convey sincerity and honesty”. However, what one side of the debate believes these norms mean is often different to what the other side believes. That often comes down to language and relies on each side of a debate telling the ‘truth’ and understanding the other. When one side is governed by rules of public governance and rules of communication that often preclude rebuttal or the defense of accusations, then the other side can maximize the communication space and reinforce its own ‘truth’.

Narrative

Documentaries have an influence on a given narrative. The recent cinema release of ‘Blackfish’ about the life of a captive orca named Tillikum before and after he killed a trainer at SeaWorld, has given rise to debate in social media.

Some typical comments from the Blackfish Facebook page:

Robyn Porter

“My husband and I have always talked about going to SeaWorld on vacation. Now after watching Blackfish, SeaWorld will never receive my money. Such a moving documentary that needs to be seen by all.”

Skyler McCurine

Watched this amazing movie last night and was stirring around all night. The injustice and lack of compassion and regard for life, human and animal is so painful. I am from San Diego and know that these AMAZING creatures are trapped just miles away. SeaWorld San Diego SHAME ON YOU!
In contrast, SeaWorld’s Facebook page almost completely ignores any debate and focuses on other activities and animals at the park. However, one posting of a theme park blog review and a photo of orca performing drew similar comments to those found on the Blackfish Facebook page, including a reply to one of the more favourable SeaWorld comments:

Post: Joanna Hernandez … it’s sad that we are considered animal abusers because we do look up facts and not just believe a movie that is based on old parks sooo sad. Also how can you tell an Orca has gone insane? One more thing these Orcas are trained like most dogs and that is by a reward system, like with most animals if they don’t want to do it they won’t.

Reply: Sacha Cetran First, BlackFish is not a "movie" like you just said. If you look up facts like you say, please use correct words Joanna. Blackfish is a documentary. Documentary definition is “consisting of, concerning, or based on documents”.

Of interest is the fact that of the 92 comments and replies to comments on this post, none is an official response from the page administrator. Of those 92 comments, 42 were anti-SeaWorld and promoting Blackfish. Only 17 were pro-SeaWorld or neutral. The remaining comments were generally criticisms directed at other posters.

By not entering the discourse with an alternative narrative SeaWorld left itself open to postings like this:

Emma Jones I imagine that if Blackfish contained lies SeaWorld would be taking the makers to court, something that they don’t appear to be doing.

One effect has been that several bands cancel their scheduled performances at SeaWorld (Werner, 2013). This type of action may have a detrimental financial impact on the SeaWorld business. According to stock market news and financial analysis site, Seeking Alpha, Blackfish has been viewed almost
half a million times on Netflix and has been shortlisted for an Oscar. It has also played in film festivals and in theatres since early 2013 (Alpha, 2013).

Tweets:

Kellan Lutz (1 million followers): Finally watching @blackfishmovie. This is so tragic and depressing. I’m never going to a zoo or aquarium again. Free the animals! Be Humane.

Kevin Smith (2.5 million followers): Finally watching @BlackFishMovie. Holy Shit. This is depressing. I’m never going to a zoo or aquarium again.

Aaron Paul (1.5 million followers): Watched the most heartbreaking doc on the enslavement of whales at #SeaWorld on #Netflix. Everyone should see this. So sad. #BlackFish.

Those three tweets alone, then, reached a potential audience of 5 million people. Seeking Alpha suggests this public and animal rights group pressure may expose SeaWorld’s business. Since initially ignoring claims made in the documentary, it appears to now be receiving criticism from its core market of young people. Schools have pulled out of scheduled visits, a five-year-old boy has made his own YouTube video ("Blackfish - our five year old son Cash reacts after watching," 2013) imploring people not to go to SeaWorld on his birthday 22 December. Around 100 people protested outside SeaWorld on that day as a result (Winkley, 2013).
SeaWorld remains relatively silent but has, however, published an open letter in some major US newspapers (Christie, 2013) and posted a letter on its website. But is that enough?

Without in-depth analysis of SeaWorld’s media strategy, the power of the documentary is such that the word ‘blackfished’ meaning ‘being attacked by propaganda’, has become part of the vernacular among pro-zoo/pro-circus activists.

There are similarities between captive orca and captive elephants.

**Caroline Van Note** The issue is not Sea World itself. It’s the orcas and dolphins in captivity being exploited for entertainment. It is not natural. All the other things Sea World does are wonderful. PLEASE see that and encourage Sea World to release their orcas and dolphins - that are healthy - to sanctuaries. [my emphasis]

When narratives are repeated frequently enough they can begin to sound true, and narrative told through documentary can be powerful, particularly when presented by celebrities and featuring prominent researchers. In the award-winning documentary ‘An Apology to Elephants’ (Schatz, 2013) narrated by actress Lily Tomlin, sanctuaries are promoted as a “place for elephants to heal and live in peace” suggesting the elephant was broken or damaged when it went there.

Other comments stated as fact within the documentary are:

a) Chaining elephants for 19 hours a day is legal in California.
b) Elephants are way too forgiving
c) What’s the problem with the elephant in the room? The room!
d) Elephants need to walk. If they don’t walk they suffer from foot disease.

e) You can fix a zoo but not a circus

f) Free Contact establishes a dominant relationship and uses the bullhook for discipline

Each of these statements carries implications, each has some basis in truth, each will sway public opinion especially for those who will accept what they hear from a famous spokesperson in a documentary without question. However, each statement deserves more analysis.

(a) Chaining elephants for 19 hours a day is legal in California

This may be true but the implication from the statement is that elephants are chained for 19 hours a day. In fact, they are not in zoos or circuses. However, should chains be required for restraint of an elephant for whatever reason – surgery, aggression or threat to another elephant – then laws dictate this must not be for a period longer than 19 hours in any one day. The negative effect of chaining elephants is well documented (Brockett, Stoinski, Black, Markowitz, & Maple, 1999; Friend, 1998; Gruber et al., 2000) and is no longer a common practice in zoos. Circuses, on the other hand, must restrain elephants for travel and while in a picket line, or for safety reasons since their elephants are more accessible to the public.

(b) Elephants are way too forgiving

This anthropomorphic statement implies that elephants have something to forgive. The title of the documentary ‘An Apology To Elephants’ suggests humans have done bad things to elephants and in some circumstances that may be true. However, as research continues and more is learned about elephants both in the wild and in captivity, their welfare in human care improves. And as has been pointed out previously, there is no practical alternative for these elephants except to continue doing the best that is humanly possible
for them as there are few viable alternatives for captive elephants. In the wild, humans are poaching African elephants for their ivory and perhaps an apology is due but on the other hand other humans daily risk their lives to save those same elephants.

(c) What’s the problem with the elephant in the room? The room!

All facilities where elephants are under human care such as circuses, zoos and sanctuaries fall short of how an elephant would live in its wild state. However, elephants in zoos and circuses are also not exposed to poaching, work in logging camps, and problems to their safety caused by the raids they sometimes carry out on human crops. As esteemed elephant researcher Raman Sukumar points out, doing away with captive elephants exposes elephants in Asia to being seen only as a dangerous agricultural pest (Sukumar, 2011).

(d) Elephants need to walk. If they don’t walk they suffer from foot disease.

The implication here is that elephants don’t get to walk in captivity. Again, this has some basis in fact but may have exaggerated a potential problem. Space is an issue in any captive situation, but there is no real agreement about how much space is enough. Inactivity leads to one of the leading health problems and one of the potential killers for elephants in captivity, poor circulation, which can lead to foot disease (Veasey, 2006). For many years, concrete floors were the norm in elephant enclosures, and coupled with a lack of space this led to severe arthritis in many elephants. However, as my documentary shows, with greater research and understanding of the biology and physiology of elephants most keepers are now aware of an elephant’s need for movement wellbeing (Maple, 2010; Rothwell, Bercovitch, Andrews, & Anderson, 2011; Stroud, 2007). Physical exercise and walks are a key part of a daily routine for elephants. However, as my documentary It’s All About Burma shows, Burma at Auckland Zoo is walked around 10 kilometres a day. Unlike their
captive counterparts, movement for wild elephants may not be
recreational in nature, but rather prompted by necessity, and while
elephant sanctuaries make much of the space available to the
elephants this does not necessarily equate to improved (Hutchins,
2006b).

(e) You can fix a zoo but not a circus

Circuses with performing animals are bearing the brunt of the animal
rights attacks. These countries and states have already instigated
bans: Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Paraguay, Bolivia, Greece, Bosnia
and Herzegovina, England, Austria and Croatia, India, Queretero in
Mexico, Catalonia in Spain. However, it could be expected that if all
circuses were closed then the attention of critics would turn to zoos.
In all strategic situations there is a paradox. Circuses may be
perceived as less desirable than zoos in terms of the welfare of captive
elephants due to the travelling lifestyle and pressure of performances.
Some zoos have disassociated themselves from circuses in order not
to attract attention and criticism from animal rights advocates.
Conversely, circuses have survived for hundreds of years, their
narrative is strong and the public, when allowed, continue to support
this form of entertainment.

(f) Free Contact establishes a dominant relationship and uses the
bullhook for discipline

This argument will be discussed more fully in Chapter 4 and is
behind the lobbying for circus closures mentioned above. The focus
on the bullhook or ankus appears to be misinformed, however this
narrative regarding the bullhook is well established, and in its current
form is central to the animal rights narrative. It is unlikely to be easily
modified. There is a question, however, as to how that dominant
relationship is formed. In the animal world, domination generally
comes about through size and strength. In the elephant world,
especially with female elephants, it is the role of the oldest and wisest
in the herd. One perhaps should question whether any human can take this role as they do not have the size or strength to do so. To talk of human dominance in this context appears to be misleading and it may be more appropriate to define that role as one of a leader, guide or decision-maker.

Critical narratives may not always have a negative effect. According to Fraser (1999) much of the study relating to animal welfare has come about because of public concern about the way animals are treated.

That study has created narratives that have produced positive outcomes. There is a population of captive elephants who deserve ‘responsible stewardship’ and it is important for those tasked with that role to listen to any negative narratives and ensure any elements of truth within them are addressed. It is possible the continued positive developments in captive elephant welfare have come about in response to public concern.

In Summary

This chapter shows that some narratives emerge more strongly than others and are therefore having more influence. It also shows that the communication space will be filled, as shown by Facebook and Twitter where the discourse takes on a life of its own, in the absence of informed or scientific information. Animal rights groups appear less constrained by protocol and use highly emotional narratives to garner public support. On the other hand, facilities such as zoos and circuses, as demonstrated with SeaWorld coming under fire in the documentary Blackfish, show less inclination to enter into the debate.
The following four chapters set out in some depth the academic work that has been done in the area of animal captivity and the relationship between humans and animals. The aim is to show what information and research is available in the area of elephant and animal captivity.

What is interesting when considering the existing discourse and narratives involving animal activist groups and elephant advocates in zoos and circuses, is that much of this research work is not referred to. For science communicators this is worthy of note. Regardless of the amount and strength of the considered analytical work available it has not pushed its way into the debate. Why not? And what are the consequences of that research and science not being included in the discussion that informs the decision-making related to captive elephants? If Toronto City Councillors had had more neutral and evidence-based information in front of them, would they have come to a different decision regarding the future of their three elephants? Would judges who have recently considered cases regarding captive elephants rule differently if they had the following information to inform their judgment?

In Chapter 3 research in the area of Encounter Value is explored; that is, what value is there in a contact between a human and an animal. This research includes an examination of non-human charisma and how that impacts upon humans. Overall, the future wellbeing of animals in captivity is in human hands.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 drill down into work that has been done in the specific areas of zoos, circuses and sanctuaries respectively.
Chapter 3

The Value of Animal/Human Connection

This encounter (below) between biologist, zoologist and author Lyall Watson and an elephant named Delilah at Johannesburg Zoo influenced Watson’s relationship with elephants for the rest of his life.

“I cupped the tip of her trunk in my hand and gently blew into it. The result was extraordinary. She entwined my whole arm in her trunk, breathed deeply several times, then put the tip of her trunk in my mouth and sighed. I came a little closer and let her explore my face and neck freely until I could hear a soft growl of pure delight, the elephant equivalent of purring. It was love at first sight. I decided then and there that my first priority in this zoo would be a new elephant house, and company, elephant company, for Delilah.”


Poppy, the little girl in the film ‘It’s All About Burma’ met Burma when she was three years old. Eight months later, now aged four, I asked Poppy what she remembered:

I remember feeding him an apple and he sniffed my hand and my legs and my whole body … and that he was grey … and that he was a girl.

And feeding her was like love.

~ Poppy Simpson-Glover

This sort of connection appears to be not uncommon when people are able to have contact with elephants. The question then arises, does this personal encounter with animals, such as elephants, create a value not only for the person who is experiencing the encounter, but also for the animal? If so, can that encounter have far reaching implications for the conservation of elephants as a species?
Encounter Value defines the value created for either the human or the animal or both from an encounter between a human and an animal. Measuring this kind of value is complex as these kinds of evaluations navigate ill-defined terrain around such areas as the projection of ‘feelings’ or emotions onto animals through anthropomorphism, and the inherent difficulty in quantifying the value of human experience. While difficult, that does not mean attempts at measuring such value should not be attempted or that the existence of such value should not be recognised.

**What is Value?**

There are many examples where a value is deemed to exist without a ready means of measuring that value in any standard unit. For example, in the fields of environmental and welfare economics, concepts such as Existence Value are explored – that is, knowing a blue whale exists on the planet adds value to our existence and experience of being human even though we may never see a blue whale in our lifetime (Stevens T. H., 1991). Our lives would be diminished if we heard that blue whales no longer existed, therefore they have Existence Value for us. Another economic concept is Option Value whereby we have value in our lives by just knowing that we can do something – that is, we have the option of using a national park whenever we wish even though we may not choose that option, and our lives would be diminished if that open access to national parks was taken away (Ehrenfeld, 1988). Economists have developed proxy measures to try and capture this value such as Willingness-To-Pay. Using such an economic proxy measure, survey participants are asked, even when there is no charge now, how much they would be willing to pay to use a facility if they had to. The importance of these kinds of methods is that they ensure recognition is given to elements of value that cannot be readily monetised and yet still have an inherent value and should be quantified in some way, or at least acknowledged in any decision-making.

In the context of captive animals what people are prepared to spend is a useful measure of their perceived value. If our limited dollars are considered
to be vouchers we have to spend in return for units of goods, services or experiences, then our choices about how we allocate that limited number of vouchers gives a reasonably accurate measure of what we value. A lot of decision-making happens around what individuals choose to spend money on in a trade where there are always more options than available vouchers. For example, some people will place a higher value on cigarettes than fresh vegetables, alternatively others will place no value on cigarettes based on their actual allocation of discretionary income – they just won’t allocate vouchers to buy them.

**Encounter Settings**

Encounters can take place in the wild, or at least in what is described as ‘the hybrid-wild’ since there are few places on earth where animals are not controlled by humans in some way (Bulbeck, 2005; Cronon, 1995). Encounters can also take place in ‘artificial’ nature settings such as zoos or even circuses. Each situation offers a different type of encounter that may or may not create different emotional responses for those involved in the encounter. There are also passive encounters such as those experienced through books or documentaries. Bulbeck (2005) refers to the latter as ‘abstract’ wild. Whatever the situation, there is a continuum along which an encounter can be placed ranging from the distanced and abstract photograph to the riveting reality of touching and feeding an animal.

The concept of an abstract wild is interesting. Nance (Nance, 2013) claims criticisms and backlash aimed at circuses and zoos came about due to wildlife documentaries highlighting what an animal in the wild ‘should’ look like. The converse may have occurred whereby television and storybook animals have affected people’s responses to wild encounters where wild animals don’t behave as expected. People may, for example, be anticipating an encounter with a dolphin like Flipper3 rather than with an unpredictable wild dolphin (Bulbeck, 2005). In that sense, the flipper experience is a stylized version of a dolphin experience.

3 Flipper was a dolphin that starred in a 1960s television show.
For people living in cities, according to Bulbeck (2005), an urban disconnect with nature has been compounded by constructed visual representations of nature which has repercussions in terms of the way people treat nature. Abstract nature is a term coined by Jack Turner (1996) whereby people become accustomed to the kind of nature they see on television, or experience in national parks. This has led to urban dweller who are proponents for the preservation of the environment being unsuccessful because they do not know what they are actually attempting to save (Bulbeck, 2005, p. xiv). Bulbeck suggests, then, that a direct experience with nature means a higher probability of behavioural changes with respect to animals.

Berger (1980) suggests eye contact gives humans the opportunity to see themselves from the animal’s perspective. This is perceived in two ways. An experience with a dolphin who gazes back at the human may prompt the human to acknowledge what they perceive to be the animal’s extraordinary intelligence (Bulbeck, 2005, p. 83). Alternatively, the wild animal completely ignores the human and is understood to be exhibiting its wild independent self.

**Non-human Charisma**

To understand encounter value, then, it is necessary to understand what happens to a person during, and as a result of, an encounter with a wild animal. Lorimer (2007) refers to a connection that develops as an ‘affect’. He describes the affect as the result of non-human (animal) charisma.

> “Affect provides the vital motivating force that impels people to get involved [in conservation].”

Lorimer (2007) describes the three types of non-human charisma as comprising ecological, aesthetic, and corporeal charisma. His study, which involved British conservationists and scientists, found when conservationists refer to charismatic species the charisma they refer to is generally encompassed by adjectives such as ‘cute’, ‘cuddly’, ‘fierce’, or ‘dangerous’.

35
These are the aesthetic characteristics of a species’ appearance and behaviour, which trigger strong emotional responses in humans involved in conservation.

Lorimer’s study of non-human charisma with conservationists and scientists describes two types of response – by which he refers to the affections and emotions engendered by different organisms and their practical interactions with humans over varying time periods. The two types are ‘epiphanies’ and ‘jouissance’ (enjoyment).

**Epiphanies**

Epiphanies refer to encounters where someone is ‘strongly moved’ by an encounter with an animal (or insect or bird) which could have influenced their career choice and/or research topic as an adult. Often these are encounters that occur in childhood.

“Sometimes they refer to just one event, or one encounter, such as seeing a rare bird. Others concern a repeated or seasonal set of events such as a tree shedding its leaves or regular trips to a piece of marginal wasteland.” (Lorimer, 2007)

Epiphanies are described as visceral and emotional but also very difficult to articulate. Lorimer uses an example related by cultural historian and enthusiastic birder, Mark Cocker, who describes an early birding experience:

“Then someone spotted an odd bird and it was instantly apparent I’d never seen one before. It was about the size of a curlew, yet not the same anonymous grey-brown colour and with an indefinable quality of beauty and strangeness. It floated away across the moor and then suddenly wheeled around and turned towards us, its silent and loosely bowed wings knitting a course through the up draughts in long exaggerated beats, not unlike a giant bat ... it was a short-eared owl, a bird in aerial display asserting its breeding territory with that fantastic see-saw action ... this bird was the first I’d ever seen. I recall, in fact, it was my ninety-ninth species and it was wonderful.”
Before that moment I had, like every young keen birder, compensated for experiences of the real thing with long hours poring over bird books and bird pictures. But on Goldsnitch Moss I realised, perhaps for the first time, by how much life can exceed imagination. A short-eared owl had entered my life and for those moments, as it swallowed me up with its piercing eyes, I had entered the life of an owl. It was a perfect consummation’’

Lorimer (2007) says these moments are addictive and explain why people can then become “hooked”. Bulbeck (2005, pxviii) describes her own epiphany with dolphins at Monkey Mia as “the first step on a journey of a thousand citations” and that encounters such as these are “indescribable, mysterious, and deliriously pleasurable”. She argues that this emotional response to animals means those points of encounter, wherever they may be, must be used to the animal’s advantage to encourage “respectful stewardship”.

According to Bulbeck, her epiphany occurred before she conducted the research documented in her book ‘Facing the Wild’. Other researchers have had similar epiphanies during their research. Primatologists Jane Goodall (chimpanzees) and Dian Fossey (gorillas) and Birute Galdikas (orangutans) became interconnected with the subjects of their studies (Haraway, 1992). All three opted, against accepted research protocols, to give names to the animals they researched. Those protocols were developed to ensure scientists/conservationists did not become emotionally involved with their research subjects as it was believed that such involvement would reduce their objectivity. Species populations are large-scale and that was what the researcher was there to save (S. Montgomery, 1991). Both Goodall and Fossey became famous for trying to save ‘their’ apes (Montgomery, 1991 pp194-195). But that didn’t come about through the application of ‘accepted research protocols’. Those apes, and the work of these two researchers in particular, became visible to the general population because of stories about Digit and Gremlin and about Goodall and Fossey’s love for them. A love generated by

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4 Monkey Mia in northwestern Australia is a beach where dolphins come to be fed and stroked by tourists.
5 Digit the gorilla and Gremlin the chimp were studied by Dian Fossey and Jane Goodall respectively.
their encounters with them. As a result of that connection, the rest of the world was able to value these animals differently (Rudy, 2011).

The same is true of some of the most well-known elephant studies where individual animals are named. In fact, it is possible for the public to name an elephant in the Amboseli Trust Elephant study for US$2500 in a form of sponsorship that doesn’t run out until the elephant dies (Elephants, 2013).

**Jouissance**

The second type of charisma – jouissance – relates to emotions that are usually explicitly written out of accounts of the scientific process, and are described as a type of “intellectual satisfaction”. Again, Lorimer uses birding as an example. There are around 200-250 bird species in the UK that a birder is likely to encounter. He found that for some participants in his research, ticking off that list was satisfying for the birders and also allowed for competition between birders, thus demonstrating that sighting rare birds can be an emotional experience.

**Human Need for Animal Contact**

Whether occasionally, as is the case with exotic animals, or on a daily basis, as in the case of companion animals, humans appear to have a basic desire for animal contact. Depending on the level of that contact, anthropomorphism becomes a major influence in the interaction between human and animal. Anthropomorphism is the attribution of human mental states – thoughts, feelings, motivations and beliefs – to animals (Serpell, 2003). It’s a common trait in companion animal owners. Pets are often fed human food, are given human names, have birthdays (sometimes with cake and candles), see specialist vets, are mourned and buried when they die – sometimes in special pet cemeteries. Some are dressed in designer labels, some are enrolled in daycare, many are treated with expensive surgeries when ill or injured, and they’re often substitutes for children. Serpell (2003) says this is because humans are social beings and as such require social support which is often provided by animals. He says companion animals have adapted to this role,
but he also says this anthropomorphic selection may be responsible for some severe welfare problems with those animals – such as inbreeding for ear shape, eye or coat colour, and temperament.

Serpell (2003) poses the idea that pets are social parasites exploiting innate parental instincts – the so-called ‘cute response’. Keeping pets is not without benefits as indicated in research by Friedman (2000) and Garrity & Stallones (1998). They all support the suggestion that pet owners appear to have healthier, longer lives. Siegel’s (1990) research also indicates that pet owners are more resistant to stresses and negative experiences.

Some of the studies cited by Serpell considered only that there was a pet in the house, but did not delve into the nature of the relationship between the subject of the study and the pet. Serpell’s (1996) earlier study found the owner’s level of attachment to their pet had a strong influence over their evaluation of their pet’s behaviour. When the behaviour the pet owner desired and the behaviour they actually received from the pet was well matched, Serpell found the attachment was stronger. For example, an elderly pet owner was more attached to her placid dog than a chattering budgie. Spicer, Jones & St George (1998) in Serpell (2003) found compatibility to be a major factor. It was found to contribute to an overall improvement in wellbeing, less stress, positivity and fewer physical symptoms of ill health. These positive outcomes were less evident among those with less compatible pets. Mathews and Herzog (1997) in Signal and Taylor (2007) found owning a pet influenced attitudes, as did religious and political beliefs, as well as gender, age and race.

**Attitude**

Taylor and Signal (2005) looked at the levels of human-directed empathy and attitudes toward animal treatment between the general public and people active in animal protection. These groups were assessed using two scales: the *Attitude Towards the Treatment of Animals Scale* (AAS) and the *Davis Interpersonal Reactivity Index* (IRI). The study found the animal protection community scored higher on both scales. Participants in the study were also
assessed on their ability to adopt “other-orientated perspectives” and Serpell found the relationship between perspective and attitude within the animal protection community is less strong due to their commitment to a particular philosophy/ideology. That position made it less likely that they would be receptive to the perceptions of others and were less likely to consider or accept the view of others who may have had a more functional attitude to the treatment of animals. Galvin and Herzog (1992) found animal rights supporters were more likely to be absolutist rather than relativist or situationist in their philosophy. Signal and Taylor (2007) also found females scored higher than males on the current measures of empathy and attitude towards the treatment of animals within each group. An unexpected finding was that males working in animal protection scored higher than anyone (regardless of gender) in the general community on both the attitude and perspective scales. The results showed a clear link between attitudes toward the way animals are treated and human-directed empathy.

**Preconceptions of Encounter**

The human-animal link is influenced by preconceptions. Most people will have seen pictures of elephants and zebras and lions even if they haven’t visited a zoo let alone the ‘wild’. The question is, can that distance from the real thing be damaging when it comes to the conservation of a species? Do the visual images provide sufficient connection to affect change? Or can they contribute to a sense of disappointment with the real thing, if the real thing doesn’t measure up to what’s been imagined?

Zoo visitors may complain if they don’t see an animal in its exhibit because it has retreated, or can’t see it in action because it is asleep some metres away. People on safari, on the other hand, may be prepared to wait days or even weeks to see an animal in its natural habitat, and even then, more often than not, through binoculars. Dolphin swimming trips may come back after a day’s sailing without finding dolphins yet the tourists may still be happy with their experience. Does this suggest there may be another dimension to the encounter value, beyond anticipation, to expectations regarding the ease of the encounter?
The role encounter value plays in how humans participate in conservation efforts is one piece of the conundrum posed relating to keeping wild animals in captivity. This applies particularly to elephants because of their cognitive abilities and intelligence. Labelled charismatic megafauna, elephants have attracted worldwide attention. This may be because the plight of elephants in the wilds of their range countries in Africa and Asia is bringing them seriously close to extinction. Or it may be because of their high profile in captive facilities like zoos and circuses.

Keeping elephants or any other animal in captivity also invites an ethical debate which will not be examined in any depth in this thesis, but is based on the cognitive abilities and intelligence of animals. According to Bekoff (1998) cognition means the ability to learn and includes consciousness, thought, perception, the ability to reason and solve problems, make judgments and act with intention. Intelligence is more difficult to define because it has different interpretations. In animals, it poses questions such as ‘do animals think like humans?’ Bekoff (1998) suggests animal welfare issues are directly related to how intelligent humans believe animals to be. For example, he says the annoying mosquito may be swatted but the annoying yapping dog is likely to live to see another day. Self-awareness and self-recognition are also considerations as to the value placed on an animal, and elephants are among animals who have shown this ability, along with language. Many species are capable of telling individual humans apart - dogs, cats, elephants - and can form deep bonds with them.

This need not mean the value of the encounter is greater depending on the value placed on the animal, however. Lorimer (2007) describing the epiphany experienced by a birder on spotting a rare bird, points to encounter value being likely to vary with each individual.
Encounters Under Threat

Direct encounters with elephants and other wild animals may be under threat. Animal advocates sit on both sides of the captive animal debate. There are those who see captive facilities as places where wild animals can live safe and stress free lives, others who don’t believe any animal should be kept for human use of any kind, including food and clothing.
Chapter 4

Encounter Value at Zoos

The discourse as it relates to captive animals, particularly elephants in zoos centres around whether elephants can ethically be kept in zoos, and how they are managed in zoos. Does a zoo having elephants advance the education and conservation goals central to zoo mission statements. This chapter examines the current narratives that are critical of zoos and considers them in the context of the scientific evidence available in an attempt to identify where these narratives may be inaccurate or misleading.

The general philosophy and focus of modern zoos globally is to educate the public about conservation issues and to protect threatened or endangered species. Some zoos do this better than others so for the purpose of this thesis, any zoos referred to specifically or in general will be assumed to be reputable zoos with a modern outlook focused on education and conservation.

This chapter also looks at the use of the ankus in some zoo elephant management programmes. At the time of writing, all AZA-accredited zoos (USA) have moved to Protected Contact programmes which means elephants and their keepers don’t share the same space. All training and health protocols are performed using a specially designed training wall. Prohibiting Free Contact where keepers share the same space as their elephants is not the same as banning the bullhook, but with a Protected Contact programme the bullhook is not considered a primary tool. However, not all zoos in the US are AZA-accredited. There are also zoos and facilities that still work in Free Contact in Europe and Australasia where the bullhook remains a primary tool.

While elephant management regimes in zoos need not necessarily prevent public encounters, the nature of those encounters may be changed.
Effect on Future Actions

If we accept the research presented in chapter 3, encounters with animals have a value that goes beyond the actual encounter and have an effect on the future actions of that person. Within a zoo environment, those encounters can take many forms; casual visits, school groups, behind the scenes tours, keeper talks, and direct contact with an animal.

Bulbeck (2005) argues that any emotional response engendered by an encounter, wherever it may occur, must be used to the animal’s advantage by encouraging “respectful stewardship”. On the other hand, according to Scruton (2000, p. 98) an animal’s suffering in captivity is not offset by any benefit that may come from an encounter.

Zoo websites and mission statements claim that one of the zoo’s roles is to educate and there is various research available both supporting and challenging the validity of this claim which will be explored in this chapter. One important piece of research by Falk et al (2007) is possibly the most extensive study done using 5500 participants. The three-year study found measurable impact on the conservation attitudes and understanding of adult visitors and that visitor motivations directly impacted upon the meaning derived from the zoo experience. The study also found zoo visitors had a higher than expected level of knowledge which meant only a small percentage showed significant changes in their knowledge of conservation. However, the study did find that 61 percent of visitors believed the experience supported their values and attitudes. Other findings included the belief that zoos and aquariums play an important role in conservation education, and that many visitors saw themselves as part of the solution regarding environmental problems. A majority (57%) of visitors said that their visit experience strengthened their connection to nature.

However, its significance is argued by Marino et al (2010) who believe its methodology is questionable and there is no evidence for its claims. One major criticism is that the Falk et al study only recorded what visitors said
they believed, but that there was no direct measure of knowledge. Self-reporting, however, is at the heart of many of the studies discussed in this chapter. One of the strengths of Falk et al’s study was the follow-up some months later of some of the respondents. This is viewed as a weakness by Marino et al in that memory and retrospective reports can lack validity. Marino et al do highlight the need for more direct measurement and even longer term follow up to determine whether or not education programmes and encounter experiences are having an effect.

In general the research looks at how effectively visitors are educated through interaction, keeper talks and demonstrations, and interpretive signage. For this thesis however, the focus is also on the value of visitors engaging with the animal, either passively – that is, passing by or stopping at an enclosure, or through a direct encounter with the animal; keeper talks and demonstrations, hands on contact or behind the scenes experiences.

Zoos are in a strong position to educate and inform visitors, whether through casual public visits or arranged school visits, because they are a destination. Unlike circuses, zoo animal collections remain in one place, accessible to the public almost every day, therefore, visitors can return as frequently as and when they wish.

**Education vs Encounter**

When claiming education as a primary goal, zoos must demonstrate the effectiveness of specific conservation messages and this can be difficult to determine and measure. Clayton et al’s (2009) study of visitor learning from zoo visits is based on the premise that informal learning is a social construct and outcomes would not be readily observed because the encounter is based on the visitor’s prior knowledge, background and expectations of the visit. They found, however, that zoos were a positive emotional experience for visitors and left them interested in learning more, and therefore concluded that positive emotional responses to an animal are related to subsequent conservation initiatives. Interestingly, in this research visitors stated an outing with friends and family was the most common reason for a visit but
when asked about the zoo’s main purpose the most common response was to teach visitors about animals and conservation. The researchers concluded that while education is not the main motivator of the visit, it is clearly an expectation (Clayton et al, 2009).

Visitor Research

Jensen’s (2011) study on children visiting London Zoo found one of the top ranking ideas the children associated with the zoo was ‘fun.’ Another study by Sickler and Fraser (2009) in Jensen (2011) focused on ‘visitor enjoyment’ in their study, which was shown to rank highly.

Clayton et al (2009) looked at how effectively zoos communicate the conservation message. Their study concluded support for protecting individual animals and entire species is directly related to a feeling of connection to the animal. They suggest connecting to prior knowledge and experience is also a key component of the experience as individual visitors come from diverse backgrounds and see, understand and process information differently. Zoos utilise prior knowledge when they can through keeper talks and demonstrations, and telling stories about individual animals – thus combining facts and messages to enable the visitor to make the connections between their own experiences and the issues or information presented.

The Clayton et al (2009) study builds on other studies along similar lines. Myers and Sanders (2002) in Serpell (2003) proposed that zoos can influence a person’s desire to care for individual animals or a whole species or even an entire ecosystem through an “empathy connection”. Empathy is increased through the opportunity for interaction, so giving animals personality, names and stories enhances this connection. Some critics argue this approach diminishes concern by making the individual animal less representative of the species as a whole. Sheldrick’s view is “what you are seeing in a zoo is not an elephant. What you are seeing is a tragedy” (“They’re Like Us, Elephant Researchers Say,” 2008).
So the challenge seems to be making the appropriate connection between visitor and animal in order to create a positive experience and evoke empathy with the animal as, theory suggests, that will lead to ongoing support for a species. Ballantyne et al (2007) found animal shows were more effective when animals are individualised and the message related directly to the issue of habitat destruction. This built on the study of Yerkes and Burns (1991) as cited in Ballantyne et al (2007) that showed pro-conservation statements made by zoo visitors increased from 54.9% to 86.5% after a show. What is still unknown, however, is whether keeper talks and demonstrations have more or less influence than observing the animal in its natural environment. This is an issue I will return to later in the chapter. It appears most researchers in this field agree that engaging the emotions of the zoo visitor is the key factor and that this objective can best be achieved through close encounters with animals and by enabling visitors to see the animal behaving naturally. Clayton et al (2009) and Ballantyne et al (2007) both state the connection with the visitor’s prior knowledge and experience is important and that information on its own, through signage, was less effective than direct encounters for zoo visitors, therefore visitors who felt a connection with an animal were more likely to feel a concern for the animal or species.

Research has been done in zoos to measure and evaluate the efficacy of the educational experiences on offer and the impact of any intended messages. But such research has failed in most cases to take into account the ongoing effect of encounter value which is more than just the understanding and retention of messages. Encounter value affects individuals in different and often deeper ways and depends on attitude, predisposition to particular messages, and prior experience or knowledge.

As discussed in chapter 3, members of the public have many choices when it comes to how they spend their disposable income and leisure time. Many people choose to visit zoos – 180 million in the United States, over a million in New Zealand6. To visit a zoo is a conscious choice and comes with expectations. Research indicates most people visit a zoo for a family day out,

6 These are cumulative figures.
a social outing. They are not specifically looking for an educative experience. That is not their primary objective but surveys show there is an implicit expectation that visitors will learn something new by going on a zoo visit.

Above all, there is an expectation that the zoo will be safe. This expectation is driving and sometimes changing the nature of many zoo experiences. In my natural history documentary It’s All About Burma, Burma the elephant is taken for walks throughout the zoo grounds several times daily. As discussed in the documentary, international zoo consultant Alan Roocroft points out this potentially poses a risk for zoo visitors who are not always aware when that walk is going to happen or what the inherent risks might be. Visitors get excited when Burma appears and many take the opportunity to ask questions while keepers take the opportunity to promote conservation messages, introduce Burma as a personality, and educate the public about elephants and their plight.

The approach adopted by Auckland Zoo seems to have met with at least some success as this report from Lorna Little suggests.

How Meeting Burma Changed my View of Elephants
By Lorna Little, zoo visitor, 2013

I met Burma at Auckland Zoo, and got to feed her an apple, pat her side, see her teeth and touch her ear. Her skin was rough but the hair was soft, and she was so huge but so very quiet on her feet! Her ear was relatively cool temperature and the look in her eye as she gazed down at me reminded me of my Grandma (weird I know...).

This experience changed the way I think about elephants. Beforehand, I knew elephants existed, and that they were big, heavy, with giant ears and came from somewhere in Africa. And that was about the extent of it – I had seen the documentary about Burma, and enjoyed being able to see the details of this huge animal.
However, after meeting Burma, I feel that they have a kind of a personality – she seemed to have a cheeky sense of humour, and was curious about what was going on but relaxed overall.

After I left the elephant, I was much more curious about the issues facing elephants in the wild and how elephants are managed in zoos. I was trying to remember all the little facts that were shown in the documentary and when I got home I looked up if elephants see in colour. I also wondered later on what kind of research has been done on plants subject to elephant herbivory (sic).

I am not yet elephant-mad, BUT I am much, much more interested in elephants. I feel privileged to have met Burma, and that I have an obligation to share what I know about her and other elephants whenever the opportunity arises. I shall be talking about that time I got to meet Burma for a long time to come.

**Captive vs Non-Captive Encounters**

Many zoos offer behind the scenes opportunities for ‘up close and personal’ encounters, but such encounters can also take place in an animals’ natural habitat through non-captive experiences such as safaris, whale watching, observation hides, tour boats and treks. Ballantyne et al (2007) compared zoo visitor experience results with non-captive wildlife experiences and found similarities in both the visitor experience and the effectiveness of the education and conservation messages. However, human encroachment on a natural environment can be negative causing stress to the animal, pollution of the environment and inappropriate feeding. Therefore education as to what is appropriate behavior in these situations is as important as it is in captive situations. The question is, does the educational benefit outweigh the negative impact? Or, put another way, if these non-captive experiences were closed down, would the loss of this mechanism to develop and support their conservation outweigh the benefits that might accrue to the animals involved?
In both situations, zoo or non-captive wildlife experiences, researchers found keeper talks and demonstrations to an interested and willing audience containing a mix of individual and species information and wider environmental information were effective in educating the visitor. However, there is some debate about whether ‘training’ for demonstrations is enriching for the animals or should be construed as exploitation. The challenge is for staff to involve the animals in an appropriate manner knowing the audience will come with varied and preconceived views and that therefore their response to such a presentation is unpredictable (Ballantyne et al, 2007).

It is not always possible to observe animals in their natural environment due to cost, travel and seasonal factors. It is likely wildlife destinations attract a certain strata of society due to the costs involved, therefore socio-economic status may also be a factor in who is able to develop a predisposition toward conservation and animals in this context. However, both in non-captive situations and zoos, emotional engagement is powerful and evokes an empathetic response from visitors (Ballantyne, 2007; Clayton, 2009; Myers, 2013).

**Children and Zoos**

Children are a target audience for zoos. They are targeted with educational messages, family fun days and other events. Jensen (2010) studied 3018 children visiting London Zoo, and revealed that their visit had a positive impact on their understanding of animals, habitats, environmental threats and conservation-related learning in 91% of the respondents. Just over half of those children were visiting as part of a formal learning programme – for example, a school visit. The study found visits supplemented by an educational presentation almost doubled the amount of learning achieved when compared to a self-guided visits. One of the main determiners of how children filtered and responded to the information provided was their preconceptions as to whether the zoo was a positive or negative environment for animals. The study gives the example of “awareness of cages” as an ethical concern for some children that was a barrier to both their learning and enjoyment.
Connection with Nature

Bruni et al (2008) also found zoo visitors associated more strongly with natural rather than with built environments, but took their study in a slightly different direction. They looked at whether or not zoos gave visitors a connection with nature rather than a particular species or animal, because for many city dwellers, the zoo provides them with a relatively rare opportunity to be in contact with a part of the natural world. The visitors to all three zoos in the study, consistently indicated they did indeed feel more connection with nature after their visit. Interestingly, and with possible implications for whether or not there are ongoing benefits of encounter value, the study found the effect occurs primarily at the unspoken level and may not be apparent to visitors at the time but is upon reflection at a later date. The results indicate zoo visits enhance the visitor’s connection with nature regardless of the size or scale of the zoo. Schultz et al (2013) also found visitors to Toronto Zoo felt a reconnection to nature, and that their visit motivated them to become more conservation minded.

Animal Activity

The ability to observe animal activity in zoos is at the heart of exhibit design. Zoos endeavour to achieve a balance; offering visitors the opportunity to observe animals while providing the animals with the opportunity to retreat away from being observed should they so desire. Ballantyne et al (2007) found animal activity had a significant influence on visitor satisfaction and empathy. Fernandez et al (2009) also found visitors enjoy the opportunity to learn about and observe captive animals and their natural behaviour but, and perhaps more importantly, visitors want to observe and interact with the animals in close proximity. While the Fernandez et al study did not include elephants, it was found that being observed at close proximity can be stressful for many species, especially primates.
Exhibit Design

The factors that need to be taken into account when designing enclosures is a huge subject and has been covered by many researchers such as those mentioned earlier in this chapter. It is not something that will be considered in depth here apart from its impact on visitor satisfaction, and therefore, its influence on encounter value.

A balanced approach is required. It would appear there is a threshold beyond which visitor interaction can become harmful. Some species will avoid interaction, especially when confronted by large numbers of noisy zoo visitors. However it is also possible that some species can be enriched by moderate levels of visitor interaction. The ability of an animal to retreat from public gaze is an important factor in exhibit design – in essence it gives the animal some degree of control over stressful situations. Therefore, it can be concluded the design of exhibits according to the characteristics of the animal can increase positive visitor interactions with animals which, in turn, facilitates the achievement of the educational goals of most modern zoos. For education to be effective, and for zoos to attract visitors, animals should be in naturalistic exhibits (Fernandez et al, 2009).

However, the naturalistic exhibit could be beneficial to only one party. Although it may evoke a positive response from zoo visitors, it may not evoke a positive response from the animals who live in it. Kawata (2011) suggests what is perceived as naturalistic depends on animals having the same cognitive ability as humans. The elephant, the chimpanzee or the lion may not get the benefits of what is seen by visitors as natural. He doubts nature has wired the brains of these animals to recognise the components such as smells, sounds and aesthetics seen as natural by humans. As well, there are many studies looking at the correlation between zoo visitors and stress levels on animals with varied results and while it is generally accepted the experience is good for visitors, more research is needed on the effects on the animals themselves. Davey (2007) suggests zoos and zoo staff need to be aware of the potential for stress, understand existing literature and carry out
their own research on exhibits to identify anything that might stress the animal involved.

Kelling et al (2012) go a step further to recommend exhibit designs have their foundation in ergonomics and human factors. Their argument is that the users of an exhibit should be considered co-workers – staff, visitors and animals. Acknowledging effective naturalistic exhibit design where visitors can see the animals encourages visitors to stay longer and ask more questions of keepers. Therefore, keeping staff need to be visible and available to visitors and the exhibit also needs to be functional for keeping staff to cater for the welfare of the animals. The latter is more than just satisfying the rights of the animal to food, water and shelter, but should involve encouraging species-specific behaviour. This has a flow-on effect where visitors can connect and engage with the zoo environment, and maximum impact can be achieved through informal learning, emotional connection and attitude change (Kelling et al, 2012). With zoos requiring measurement of their effectiveness, this approach could potentially lead to higher visitor satisfaction responses.

Rhoads and Goldsworthy (1978) studied the effect of zoo environments on public attitudes toward endangered wildlife. Participants were shown still images of animals in three different settings – natural, semi-natural and zoos. In 1978, before there were substantial changes made to the nature and character of exhibits, they were not as naturalistic as they have become in the 21st Century. It is therefore not surprising that zoos were not perceived favourably in the study. It found that animals in zoo exhibits were seen as “less dignified, confined, unhappy, unnatural, tame and dependent”. The study came about as a response to the emerging rationale zoos were developing regarding their educational role. It found that when the environment in which the animals were seen was perceived to be poor the visitor’s view of the zoo was negatively affected. They concluded that redesigning exhibits to become more naturalistic would “promote the conservation of endangered species”.
Long-term Studies

Apart from Falk et al’s (2007) study, there does not appear to be any long-term studies on the effects of zoo visits or zoo encounters on visitor’s attitudes and behavior years after the encounters. While a lot of anecdotal evidence exists, there is nothing formal which looks at whether learning about animals and conservation at zoos leads to lasting behavioural changes, or reinforces existing attitudes either negatively or positively. Falk et al followed up some participants seven to eleven months after their visit to determine the impact of their visit. They found 61% of visitors were able to talk about what they learned from their previous visit, and 35% reported the visit reinforced their existing beliefs about conservation, stewardship and love of animals. The validity of their methods has been disputed by Marino et al (2010) as previously discussed.

However, education theorist Vygotsky suggests all learning takes place in a cultural context. A zoo could be considered one such context. Vygotsky also suggests learning involves social interactions. While people still consider zoos as a form of entertainment there is an expectation that the visitor will learn from their experience which appears to suggest education and entertainment are compatible in this context. Learning for fun in a free choice environment means visitors can be drawn in and educated informally. Under such circumstances what is learned is more likely to be retained and can be enhanced over time. Research shows most zoo visitors rate the zoo as being a “good family day out” (Balantyne et al, 2007) and therefore could legitimately be considered an environment conducive to learning according to Vygotsky theory.

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7 Vygotsky’s theory has often been used in research around children’s learning, but his ideas apply to people of any age (Berk, 2010).
Behind the scenes

Behind the scenes encounters are available at most zoos. This is where members of the public, in small controlled groups, are given a personal tour or are taken behind the scenes where a keeper can talk about the animal or species and impart conservation messages. Such encounters might involve accompanying cheetahs on their morning or evening walk through the zoo grounds or becoming involved in an elephant scrub down at elephant bath time. While critics claim these are merely moneymaking opportunities for zoos to financially exploit their animals, zoos defend these activities as they constitute part of their philosophy and mission, i.e. to educate and promote conservation. While such encounters are a highlight for those taking part, are they as much of a highlight for the animals engaged in them? Anecdotal evidence would suggest this is possible. A platypus in an Australian zoo has been hand reared and appears to take great delight in and actively seek human company (Pond, January 12, 2013). Opo the dolphin is also described as actively seeking human company.

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8 Opo the dolphin actively sought human company in the Hokianga Harbour during 1954 and 1955
An important consideration in behind the scenes encounters is the nature and extent of the training required to ensure that the zoo and its staff are confident the public will be safe. Those who object to this practice claim such training is brutal and instills fear in the animal so that it will not misbehave. Elephant handlers involved in such activities claim they select the animals for this kind of encounter according to the animal’s personality and willingness to participate.

Talking to Zookeepers

Bunderson and Thompson (2009) took a different approach when considering the impact and value of encounters with animals. In a study on what the researchers termed ‘the calling’ of zookeepers, they interviewed a group of zookeepers about why they chose their career despite it being a relatively highly qualified vocation – the majority had university degrees – but one that commanded relatively low pay. The study found many had volunteered at the zoo prior to becoming employed, leading to the conclusion the zookeepers were motivated by a passion rather than by pay or status. It is possible this fits with Lorimer’s theories on epiphany or jouissance discussed earlier. By way of example, below are some comments from zookeepers detailed in Bunderson and Thompson’s study:

*It’s a calling for me just because my whole life I’ve just been interested in animals. So looking back I should have known at some time I would be working with animals.*

*It’s a part of who I am and I don’t know if I can explain that. When you use that expression “it’s in your blood,” like football coaches and players can never retire because it’s in their blood.*

*Whatever my genetic makeup is, I’m geared towards animals.*
I was always interested in animals ever since I was a kid. I drove my mom nuts catching bugs and worms and frogs and salamanders, bringing home anything I could find . . . butterflies, stuff like that.

I slept and ate and read reptiles when I was a little boy. I thought that’s all there was . . . Most boys my age, all they thought about was girls. Well, I thought about girls and reptiles.

I just always had every pet you could imagine—dogs, cats, hamsters, gerbils, birds, reptiles of different sorts. I’ve always had an interest in animals and I said the zoo would be a good place to work.

They have all been motivated by their contact with animals. That background might also explain the resistance many elephant keepers have to the transition from Free Contact programmes to Protected Contact and their perception is that it will reduce the direct contact they currently enjoy with their charges.

Zookeeperers also have a vested interest in the encounter value as it establishes and reinforces the bonds between them and their animals, and between the animal and the public. As a result many keepers actively seek contact with their charges. For some keepers that has become difficult because of the current debate about two types of captive elephant management: Free Contact where elephant and keeper share a space and the keeper is dominant, and Protected Contact where elephant and keeper never share the same space and there is no need for keeper dominance. These two styles are generally not interchangeable, although there may be occasions when an elephant in Free Contact needs to be put into a Protected Contact situation for a medical procedure or because it is a male and has gone into musth – a condition of high sexual arousal in male elephants that occurs each year and may last several weeks.
The Free Contact/Protected Contact Debate

Which type of contact to use is debated by elephant professionals around the world. It can depend on the circumstance of the elephant – circuses for example can only work in a Free Contact situation, zoos can choose either mode of operation. One criticism of Free Contact is that it is believed that the elephant will only accept dominance from the keeper if it is afraid of the keeper or has suffered brutally at the hands of humans. A second concern relates to the safety of the keepers and the visiting public – a particular concern for organisations operating in a litigious environment.

While Free Contact has been the traditional form of management, Protected Contact is now the fallback position for the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) which has called for all its accredited facilities to manage their elephants in Protected Contact from 2014.

Once considered one of the most dangerous jobs in North America, elephant keeper deaths and injuries were analysed over a 15-year period from 1988 to 2003. Elephants are powerful so any injury is likely to be serious. However, the study showed injuries were not as prevalent as newspaper headlines suggested (Hutchins, 2006a). Most of the deaths however occurred in Free Contact situations.

Elephants are one of a few wild animal species in zoos commonly handled in Free Contact. The question as to why this should be is central to the debate about elephants in zoos. Lions, tigers, rhinos and giraffes are not generally associated with Free Contact situations, so why are elephants treated differently?

Sukumar (2011) points to elephants being traditionally ‘tamed’ and used by humans as part of the reasoning behind Free Contact. Facilities such as zoos and circuses have continued a practice often established in the elephant’s home range in Asia.
If encounter value is deemed important to how much an individual cares or learns, does moving to Protected Contact downgrade the experience, the relationship, the bond of trust between keeper and elephant? Does a downgrade in the experience result in a diminished conservation result from zoos? Where zoos have been working in Protected Contact for many years, such as San Diego Zoo, many of the keeping staff have never handled elephants any other way. Once in Protected Contact, elephants cannot be managed again in Free Contact because the elephant group is likely to have found its own hierarchy which does not include the keepers. (Desmond et al, 1994). It would therefore be dangerous for keepers to enter the enclosures.

While Protected Contact is management through a barrier, it is not considered a remote or hands-off regime. Laule (n.d.) points to a great deal of physical contact and interaction between elephant and trainer and suggests physical contact and interaction between elephant and keeper is essential for the elephant’s wellbeing. In the transition from Free Contact to Protected Contact the positive elements of interaction between elephant and keeper need to be maintained for the mutual benefit of both to avoid bored, neurotic animals.

So, as zoos focus more on safety and shift management of their elephants to a Protected Contact regime, in some situations there could be a widening gap that may affect the connection between keepers and their elephants, and a weakening of the bonds. This is likely to be determined on an individual basis depending on the existing relationships.

**Captive Breeding**

As part of their conservation efforts, many zoos are involved in captive animal breeding and have been responsible for a large number of species being supported in or even re-introduced to the wild. They have also been responsible for bringing species back from the brink of extinction – Prezwalski’s horse being one remarkable example.

The number of successful live elephant births at zoos is increasing but captive breeding with elephants is not always successful, and some suggest should
Artificial breeding can be invasive, and result in a high proportion of male calves which is a bias that comes with its own management problems. Unlike females, male elephants in the wild do not remain in family groups and are more difficult to keep in captivity due to the state of musth. Therefore, the long term care of bulls is an important consideration.

There is no doubt that the birth of a baby elephant, or any baby animal, is a major attraction for zoo visitors but it is a double-edged sword for zoos. While critics accuse zoos of breeding animals for exploitation, zoos argue breeding is part of their conservation mission. Since it is unlikely any captive born elephants will ever be released into the wild due to the logistics involved in such a relocation, keeping captive elephants in zoos possibly runs counter to the conservation messages advanced by those same zoos. Others argue that captive breeding is the only hope for elephants in the light of the human-elephant conflict in their range countries. Either way, the increase in visitor numbers is likely to have a positive effect through the encounter value it offers and the influence that has been shown to have on behaviour.

It should also be noted that the presence of young elephants has a positive effect on other elephants in the facility, and, if nature is the yardstick by which captive facilities are measured, then breeding may be considered a positive aspect of keeping elephants in captivity (Hutchins, 2006b).

Either way, the breeding of elephants in captivity must be linked to conservation support for elephants in their home range (Sukumar, 2003).
In Summary

The research indicates there is a reasonable body of evidence that supports the contention that zoos are educational, can provide encounters than can be of value in the conservation of the elephant species and that zoos are intimately involved in that conservation themselves.

Given the evidence-based research available one has to ponder why zoos are so relatively ineffective at promoting their educational and conservation objectives as they have much to contribute to both the narrative and the discourse.
Chapter 5

Encounter Value and the Circus

Of the three options for captive elephants – zoos, circuses and sanctuaries – circuses appear to be a lightening rod when it comes to attracting critical public opinion.

Unlike zoos, which entertain in the name of education and conservation messages, circuses are associated more with entertainment. Entertainment drives everything the circus offers to the public – the best, the most dangerous, the most skilled. Many circuses use animal performers, including elephants, and unlike zoos with keeper talks and interpretive signage, circuses often carry their conservation messages in their show programmes and inform the public through interactions like elephant rides.

The Narrative

Critics accuse circuses of being cruel and exploiting their animals, forcing them to perform unnatural behaviours for the human entertainment. They say it is degrading and demeaning for the animal. And that type of training can only be achieved through the use of the bullhook, a sharp metal tool designed to inflict pain.

The Debate

With debate raging around whether or not elephants should be kept in captivity, circuses using performing elephants are regularly protested against and attract the most virulent criticism from animal rights activists.

Garrison (2008) believes elephants deserve to live in an environment that meets their needs “not the needs of those who profit unduly from their uniqueness”. She believes the worst situation for captive elephants is circuses
which “use and abuse” them citing they have a financial interest in keeping elephants and convincing the public that elephants in circuses are acceptable.

Varner (2008) on the other hand suggests with modern training, positive reinforcement, can achieve a “rich life in partnership with humans” and that the size and power of elephants makes it interesting that they work with humans as willingly as they do. Elephants are tamed, not domesticated, but have been working with humans for thousands of years. If born in captivity and treated like “domesticated partners” – that is, as a companion animal – elephants could have a good life with humans who love them in a healthy way that exercises their mental and physical faculties. Varner suggests elephants’ willingness and enthusiasm for work could make them more suited to circuses than zoos. Friend (1998) has described elephants waiting outside the performance tent becoming agitated, vocalizing and trying to perform their act while still outside the venue.

A reasonable question is: if circuses are an opportunity for people to connect with elephants, is that connection of enough value to more than balance any perceived or real negative impacts of keeping elephants performing in circuses?

Encounter value with circus elephants is possibly strongest with those who work with them as they are in their company often 24 hours a day, especially when travelling, rather than those in the audience who are entertained by them. All circus elephants are managed in a ‘hands on’ Free Contact regime. It cannot be any other way.

However, encounter value comes in many forms. Watching a well-trained circus elephant perform gives a different sense of elephant than watching a wild elephant documentary. It is possible to get a sense of its strength, agility, size, willingness to perform, and a sense of wonder, although it is not a direct encounter. A feature often associated with circuses is a back stage ‘meet the elephants’ opportunity or elephant rides which are more direct encounters. Elephant rides are becoming less common, again due to lobbying by animal rights groups in the belief that it is not only dangerous, but painful and
damaging for the elephant to carry weight on its back (Sahagun, 2011). There is some truth to this as elephants are designed to push and pull. In relation to their size, their backs are weak.

Circus elephant trainers are protective of their elephants and the relationship they have with them – a relationship that is threatened by animal rights groups who say it is all built on lies, domination and fear. But people vote with their feet. Circuses are big business because despite the protests people still choose to go there, take their children and their grandchildren, so they can feel the awe and wonder of animals performing.

The travelling life may also mean, unlike zoos, fewer elephants can touch more people, especially those who do not live near zoos. Public engagements mean those people can be educated about elephants, and especially their plight in the wild. Whether these encounters have an impact on attitude to conservation is an area worthy of further research, but as discussed earlier, encounters are beneficial to the public.
Size of the Industry

Feld Entertainment is, according to its website, “the largest producer of family entertainment in the world.” It claims thirty million people in 74 countries attend Ringling Brothers Circus, Disney on Ice, the monster truck extravaganza Monster Jam, and other live productions.

Ringling Brothers Circus is just one of the major circuses. There’s also Carson and Barnes, Beatty, Ramos and Hanneford in the US, over 300 circuses throughout Europe and one in Australia that use elephants.

What my exploration of circuses has shown me is that very little research has been done on the value of circuses to communities. The significance of the size of circus organisations is that they have the financial capacity to generate research if they perceived it to be of value in defending their businesses from attack by animal rights groups. Ringling’s is reputed to have spent tens of millions of dollars successfully defending itself from litigation and attempting to recover costs. If strategically, that organisation had a more proactive approach, they may have found it beneficial to fund research that could independently examine the positive role they play in communities.

History

Circuses have been a part of folklore for hundreds of years – since the first elephant appeared on American soil in 1796. The circus coming to town was a major event that ground towns to a standstill. Crowds lined roads to watch as elephants emerged from the circus train and paraded through town to the location of the tent. They were then, and are now, major draw cards. Elephants often were put to work helping erect the tents that gave them visibility and helped to sell tickets. Between performances elephants would be outside the big top waiting to perform, and that was an opportunity for parents and children to touch an elephant, feed an elephant or go for an elephant ride.
Perceptions

As discussed earlier, perception drove much of what people came to expect from circuses. Since the 1870s, the public has had suspicions about the way circus elephants were trained. Nance (2013, p. 106) quotes from Harper’s Weekly (1881) that “the training of elephants is “not always easy” and keepers must take a “heavy hand” with their elephants. Travelling with elephants meant it was difficult to provide for their health and wellbeing (Beatty, 1941).

Elephants were a novelty, their management and needs largely unknown. While some male elephants came into musth, a form of heightened sexual aggression, and caused damage to property as well as their handlers occasionally, it made a great story. A tradition called ‘circus day’ when the public were invited to watch the circus tents going up, see the animals and meet the performers, gave celebrity status to some of the trainers. This was the beginning of the ‘elephant man’. While cat handlers bragged of being mauled or narrowly escaping death, so the elephant man could claim to physically and mentally defeat the biggest animal in the world (Nance, 2013).

Rampaging elephants through the ages receive global publicity. Possibly the most famous is Tyke who was shot dead in the street in Hawaii in 1995 after breaking away from the circus. Tyke’s grisly story is shown on YouTube ("Elephant goes out of control and murdered," 2009). In 1978 circus performer, Eloise Berchtold, was gored to death by an elephant in musth in front of the audience (Alexander, 2000, pp. 24-29). Even elephants who don’t do any damage get publicity, like Mia who escaped from a circus in Rome and spent two hours grazing beside a motorway (Reuters, 2013). According to Alexander (2000), disasters, even potential disasters, are never the fault of the animal. The idea of fault then, if not the animal’s, must invariably be seen to be the human’s and could explain why even killer elephants.

Nance (2013, p. 120) also describes how the dichotomy between public fascination with the happy circus elephant and the vicious brute as toted by some elephant trainers created a publicity dilemma. On the one hand, elephants in circuses were an opportunity to capture public imagination and thrill, but on the other, it has become a weakness which arguably has haunted the circus industry right through to modern day.

**Training Methods**

Kiley-Worthington (1990) draws a distinction between training and handling; training is when an elephant learns to do something, handling is when an elephant learns to do nothing. In her report commissioned by the RSPCA and UFAW (Universities Federation for Animal Welfare) in Britain, Kiley-Worthington concluded that while there are bad trainers and good trainers, training itself does not cause distress or suffering. In her opinion, training can be of benefit to both animal and trainer. Garrison (2008) describes circus training as abusive. She has witnessed elephants sourced for the circus from Asian countries, being ‘broken’. This is a process where baby elephants are denied food, water and sleep while being beaten constantly with bullhooks. It is here, according to Garrison, before reaching the circus, that elephants learn to fear the bullhook. Beatty and Wilson (1941) described similar training methods explaining that they were used because animals needed to be forced to perform exactly on schedule as shows were three-ringed and had to run simultaneously. Hancock (2008) cites the work of famous circus elephant handler George ‘Slim’ Lewis who said an elephant needed to fear punishment in order to respect its handlers. According to Lewis, beating an elephant was not unusual and such treatment was justified with the rationale that because an elephant was so large and strong a handler would have no chance if the animal attacked therefore he had to dominate the beast. Clubb and Mason (2002) also describe training and handling methods in an extensive report prepared for the RSPCA as varying at the individual trainer level according to experience and preference. Clubb and Mason (2002) acknowledge the potential for and effectiveness of passive training in a positive environment which can achieve the desired acceptance of the trainer.
has a trusted member of the ‘herd’. Like Nance (2013), Kiley-Worthington (1990) found the public image of circus animal training using props such as whips was not always the reality but rather to keep the public entertained. Kiley-Worthington also argues that brutal training is not conducive to the bonds and trust required for a safe performance.

**Emergence of Wildlife Documentaries**

The 1970s saw the emergence of wildlife documentaries featuring elephants – in particular the Amboseli elephants studied for over 40 years – the longest running elephant study ever undertaken. Wildlife documentaries aimed to entertain and educate audiences about elephant biology. More importantly, they showed elephants in their natural habitat, performing natural behaviours; a far cry from the elephant standing on two legs perched on a stool in a circus tent. The difference was clear and the message was clear: elephants should be in the wild, there is nothing natural about the circus ring.

**Circuses in the Twenty-first Century**

In the 21st Century both ardent supporters and virulent opposers of circuses exist. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the issues, the anti-circus voice often appears to be the loudest. That does not necessarily mean more people support the anti-circus message but those who support it make more noise. Political pressure has led to many cities across America and around the world banning circuses from using exotic animals of any type, not just elephants. New Zealand was no exception. Even Dunedin, New Zealand, banned the Loritz circus from allowing Jumbo the elephant to graze on council-owned fields. A victory for animal activists but the unintended consequence for Jumbo was being confined to a gravel parking lot outside a pub (Hargreaves, 2009). Most recently, Mexico has banned circuses using animals. Again a victory for animal rights organisations but potentially a death sentence for those animals.

With figures of circus attendances estimated in the tens of millions each year, circuses are still viable although more subdued. Whole towns no longer turn
out to see the arrival of a circus and announcements of a circus coming to town are greeted with a mix of excitement and rage. Protesters regularly make their presence known, often very noisily, and sometimes to the detriment of the animals they are purporting to protect as occurred in the Dunedin example cited earlier. In the United States the elephants still arrive in town by train, but some of the walks are now made under cover of darkness to avoid the animal activists out to protest.

New Developments

While investigating circuses of today it quickly becomes clear they operate in two worlds. In one they are thriving businesses that still attract millions of attendances each year. They are popular with those who choose to ‘vote’ in favour by allocating discretionary income to pay to go to a circus. The second world is one where there is a constant process of meeting attacks by animal rights activists. Those attacks take many forms.

An LA Times opinion piece by Janice Aria, director of animal stewardship for Ringling Brothers, sets out the circuses commitment to its elephants, assuring the reader of humane practices, benefits to elephants of circus life such as physical activity and mental stimulation. At the same time, the writer acknowledges the animal activists will continue to mislead and object to animals being used in performances regardless of the level of care they receive in the circus (Aria, 2011).

Source: LA Times
Although the opinion piece appeared in December 2011, as recently as July 2013 comments were still appearing attacking the article.

Irish Liz · 
Poached, tortured, constantly confined, starved, forced to perform unnatural tricks 3-4 times a day as a cash cow for the sadists who gain financially from it. It’s sick. See for yourself. You tube Tim Frisco. You tube HBO Apology to Elephants full documentary narrated by Lily Tomlin. Read. Know. www.circuse.com

Cindy Wines
This article is so full of crap. I have read and watched videos and testimonials for the horrible abuse of these poor elephants that are kept chained up for hours on end or traveling in hot cramped trains. If you watch www.ringlingbeatsanimals.com, you see that they talk down to these intelligent, gentle animals. The babies are ripped away from their mothers the minute they drop to the ground so they can be “trained” with whips, tazers, ropes and bullhooks. The circus is NO place for elephants, tigers, lions or any animals. These tricks are awkward and pathetic. Go to an animal free circus like Cirque de Soleil. Close down ALL circuses. They are inhumane!!

Litigation and Lobbying

In October 2013 after a concerted lobbying effort, a unanimous vote by the Los Angeles City Council banned the use of bullhooks on elephants in zoos and circuses. This has been a highly contentious decision as the vote was taken without input from professional elephant handlers who only discovered the issue was being put to a vote two days beforehand. They were not given the opportunity to put an alternative case. On the other hand, animal rights activists had been lobbying for years for this ban, presented undercover video, an extreme example of a bull hook, and had actress Lily Tomlin in the front row. Reported in the LA Times, the item was published under the Animal Cruelty section (Carla Hall, 2013).
In 2009 in a high profile and long running court case that ran for nine years, Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey were sued by animal rights groups The Animal Welfare Institute (AWI), the Fund for Animals (FFA), Born Free USA and the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA). The claim was that Ringling Brothers abused its elephants. There is even a website called www.ringlingsbeatselephants.com. The groups tried to persuade a Washington DC District Court judge to their view that hands-on training, chaining, and the travelling regimes of the elephants amounted to abuse. Internationally renowned wild African elephant researcher Joyce Poole was just one high profile elephant expert brought in to testify against Ringling’s treatment of their animals. But what was significant was that an ex-Ringling Brothers employee, Tom Rider, testified but was found by the court not to be a credible witness. It was shown that Ryder was paid by the organisations for his testimony. The judge also ruled Ringling Brothers could counter-sue the animal activist organisations for legal costs. ASPCA settled out of court by paying Ringling Brothers US$9.3 million in damages from the ASPCA and more than US$24 million is being sought from the other organisations. This hearing will take place in 2015.

Centre for Elephant Conservation

A perceived weakness of circuses in the modern age has been that circuses have traditionally not had a conservation or education message. They exist and have always existed purely for entertainment. Elephants could perform tricks and acts that demonstrated their intelligence, agility, and strength, but, the audience didn’t necessarily learn about elephant biology, nor about the perils they face in their range countries. However, there is some evidence that circuses are reconsidering their role and style.

While circuses are still firmly in the entertainment camp, there have been some interesting adaptations to the new realities of public opinion. Ringling Brothers & Barnum and Bailey have established the Centre for Elephant Conservation in Florida. While critics call the facility a breeding farm for circus elephants (Garrison 2008) the stated aim of the centre is to be a breeding facility dedicated to the conservation, breeding and understanding
of these amazing animals to ensure elephants do not become extinct. The centre also funds conservation efforts including the recent elephant census in Sri Lanka, the largest of its kind and the first to give a realistic indication of elephant populations and demographics. At the same time, critics have condemned the survey as a farce, claiming it is government propaganda and funded by a circus organisation (Aravinda, 2013; Varma, 2013b).

Social Media

Social media has assisted animal activists in taking what was once a local issue and creating a connected network of supportive advocates throughout the world. Animal activists have built negative narratives around circuses using emotive messaging and appear to be successful in controlling the debate, leaving circus organisations to react to each campaign they create.

Social media and the internet have been useful tools for the animal rights cause. Increasingly audiences will go first to the internet for information and to make decisions about where to spend their time and money. Unfortunately for circuses, the internet is very well supplied with anti-circus material and forums. A google search for circuses and elephants brings up a barrage of newspaper articles, websites, blogs, Facebook pages and YouTube clips calling for an end to all animals, not just elephants, performing in circuses.

Material

An analysis of the material used by animal activists indicates that there are a small number of very specific images and videos which have been widely and repeatedly distributed in support of their case to remove all elephants from circuses. These specific images show circus elephants being trained as calves and elephants being beaten with bullhooks. As distasteful as these images are they appear to be the only ones available and are therefore used over and over again for effect.
Training or Torture

This photograph, along with a number of others, of a baby elephant being trained by Ringling Brothers circus staff has been doing the rounds of social media for a number of years. Variously described as abusive, cruel and torture by animal rights organisations, Ringling Brothers confirms the photographs, all of which can be viewed on the above website, are legitimate but taken out of context by people who do not understand training. It is difficult not to construe the behaviour of the humans as cruel and painful when first confronted by the image. The accompanying caption confirms that impression, however some claim that this is a good illustration of how emotion can overwhelm fact.

The photographs were taken by ex-Ringling Brothers circus employee, Sam Haddock, who was unhappy with how the elephants were being trained. He took his photographs to PETA and agreed to go public. He died shortly after. However, PETA circulated the photographs and used them to show the violent training methods in a complaint filed with the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 2009. It should also be noted these photographs are approximately 11 years old and are still being used on protest banners and petition sites (B. Montgomery, 2009).
There is an alternative narrative for this photograph. It shows one trainer cuing the elephant’s back with his arm in such a position that force cannot be used, his thumb and index finger relaxed and the bull hook held between his second and third finger – not ideal if the intention is to apply strong force. The woman is holding a treat bag for positive reinforcement when the elephant is in the correct position. The ropes used are thick and clean to avoid discomfort or bruising. The training is being performed on soft sand, and everyone in the photograph looks calm and professional. It is likely, though, that the baby elephant is resisting, and it is worthy to note the elephant probably weighs around one tonne at this stage and could be difficult to control (Koehl, 2013).

Circuses on the other hand have responded with caution. Their view is the training and performance they do with elephants is a showcase of their craft, of the trust and bond between elephant and trainer. For many, working with their elephants is a way of life, not an occupation.

False Claims

Apart from the Ringling Brothers circus trial mentioned earlier, and the baby elephant training photographs above, there is a constant barrage of accusations against circuses through social media sites. Many go unanswered or are simply ignored by circuses, but in March 2013 Australian Stardust circus demanded a public apology after the RSPCA placed advertising in local newspapers urging people to boycott the circus because the advertisement, depicting a lion with a chain around its neck and a whip held near its face, was false and did not portray what the circus actually did (Unknown, 2013).

Dishonest portrayal of circuses is not new. It was also described by Scigliano (2002, pp. 256-257) where the City of Seattle proposed banning exotic animals from city-owned facilities. One of the bill’s sponsors Heidi Wills said she hadn’t seen a circus in many years because she “deplored unnatural spectacles like elephants in tutus, bears on bicycles, and tigers jumping through burning hoops.” Her own message was in fact misleading because
Ringling’s Circus, which regularly rented a civic facility, has no animals doing any of these things. Subsequently this bill was also dropped.

**Elephant Welfare**

A criticism leveled at circuses by animal rights groups is the stress caused by the circus travelling lifestyle, and the methods of training. Some argue touring makes providing for an elephant’s welfare is difficult. In 1997 an elephant called Heather died en route from Colorado to Texas from heat inside her trailer which she shared with two other elephants and eight llamas (Holtmann, 1997). Other criticisms are prolonged chaining while travelling, limited free access to water, methods of training, along with the lack of opportunity to just be an elephant. These criticisms are echoed by some of the key internationally recognised elephant researchers – Poole, Moss, Payne, Varma, Sukumar and other non-elephant researchers like primatologist Jane Goodall. Elephants are social and tactile animals and chaining prevents them from contact with each other and also encourages stereotypic behaviour like swaying and head bobbing due to the inability to move naturally; being in a train or transport truck with constant noise is detrimental to an animal which uses low frequency communication, and suffer foot problems due to lack of movement and spending time on concrete floors (Poole, 2009).

**Stereotyping and Study**

Thought only to be seen in captivity, stereotyping is a visual cue which may indicate stress or boredom. Texas A&M University Department of Animal Science Faculty Fellow and Professor Ted Friend (Friend, 1998) looked at stereotypic behaviour in circus elephants before and after performances. He found very little to suggest stereotypic behaviour is any more significant in circus elephants than zoo elephants, and found it varies between individual elephants. Friend’s study was unique in that, unlike zoos, the elephants were observed in different environments and situations. Hediger, cited in Kreger (Kreger, 2008) is considered one of the pre-eminent researchers on animals in captivity. She believes circuses are a better environment to study the animal mind because it tested how well animals could adapt to new situations.
Unlike zookeepers working with many animals during normal work hours, circus trainers work with few animals around the clock (Kreger 2008).

**Behaviour**

Circuses argue that performing keeps their elephants in fit physical condition and that it’s good for their minds, gives them challenges and develops the bonds with their trainers. Travelling gives them new experiences, sights, sounds and smells. A criticism is that they are forced to perform and the behaviour for the most part is unnatural, however it is also argued that animals only performing behaviour seen as natural could be unnecessarily restrictive (Kiley-Worthington, 1990). Those who work with circus elephants talk about their enthusiasm for work, the relationship between elephant and trainer and elephants actively seeking out interaction and games with their trainers (Polke, 3 December, 2013). There is a research gap in the behavioral effects of human-animal interaction in both circuses and zoos (Kreger 2008).

**What does the future hold?**

For circuses, there appears to be an air of confidence that they are sufficiently supported by the paying public to continue working with elephants. Ringling Brothers in particular has its Centre for Elephant Conservation (CEC) based in Florida which houses 29 of its 46 elephants (the others are touring with its three circus units) and has seen the births of 21 calves since its establishment in 1995. Owned by Feld Entertainment, according to its website CEC is involved in research, and is committed to building a sustainable elephant population in North America. It is also committed to a future for elephants with significant financial resources to ensure high welfare standards for the elephants in its care. However, as can be seen in the SeaWorld vs *Blackfish* public debate, keeping quiet may not be a strategy that works in circuses’ favour long term.
Captive breeding

Captive breeding of elephants attracts both supporters and ardent opposition because it is still relatively experimental and invasive. CEC offers possibly the most successful facility in that it has sufficient numbers of elephants, both male and female, to make breeding viable. For zoos, with smaller numbers of elephants, breeding can be problematic. In general, breeding is achieved via Artificial Insemination which may or may not be successful.

Mother and calf at Centre for Elephant Conservation in Florida

Call for Freedom

While there are calls from animal rights groups to free elephants from circus life, those working with elephants in the circus say elephants enjoy the life, and will often pine away if they are retired. Several elderly elephants still travel with the circus and stand in the sidelines where it is claimed they are much happier than when they were left behind in retirement. There is also
the problem of where ‘freed’ elephants will go. As will be discussed in the following chapter, many call for circus elephants to be freed to a sanctuary.

Renowned elephant expert Professor Richard Lair (1997) does not believe elephants belong in circuses, but also acknowledges there is a problem as to where the approximately 200 circus elephants go if the circuses are shut down.
Chapter 6

Elephant Sanctuaries

From PAWS Sanctuary website (www.pawsweb.org)

The reality of their [elephants] lives in captivity is that many are in chains up to 18 hours a day. They are enclosed in steel pens—often alone—broken and controlled by fear and intimidation. Our mission is to give them the freedom they deserve.

Definition of a sanctuary

A sanctuary is defined as a refuge or place where injured or unwanted animals of a specified kind can be cared for. The idea that elephants could go to such a sanctuary is central to an emotionally appealing narrative that is used to suggest that there is an answer to the perceived problems posed by having elephants captive in zoos and circuses.

There is little or no evidence based research that can be brought to the discourse on sanctuaries, but there is some factual evidence that needs to be considered.

Capacity

First we should consider the number of elephants involved. Globally the number of elephants in captive situations is substantial. Elephant ecologist Dr Raman Sukumar, speaking from an Asian captive elephant perspective, makes the point that “we cannot wish away the 15,000-odd elephants in captivity [in Asia] and release them all into the wild or even into exclusive sanctuaries (as some wishful thinkers have been suggesting).”
In the US where there are approximately 800 elephants in zoos or circuses, there are two elephant sanctuaries, both with limitations. California’s PAWS has 11 elephants (seven African) in its care and Tennessee’s TES has 13 elephants (two African). Neither is in a position to take new elephants although both have a goal to eventually house 100 elephants.

Nature of Conditions

In some narratives there appears to be a perception of a sanctuary which is not born out by the reality. Sanctuaries promote the space available which is typically in the order of thousands of acres. The idea generated is that the elephants will be set loose, be able to run free, and live in a situation that resembles something close to the wild.

Elephant sanctuaries have elephant barns similar to ones built in zoos, electric fences also used in zoos and are fed by humans and cared for by humans. Some even have protective fences around trees in the enclosures.

However, in reality elephant sanctuaries are fenced and divided into smaller areas so that small groups, usually pairs of elephants can be kept together. Not all elephants get on together so management of individuals requires that the ‘herd’ is divided still further based on which elephants can be in the same space at the same time (Roocroft, 2013, pers comm). The elephants are encouraged to form their own friendship bonds and the policy is not to separate bonded pairs.

It is also of interest that having space available does not always mean that space will be used. In December 2013 one of the resident elephants at TES died. She had formed a close bond with another elephant named Misty. The ex-director of TES, Carol Buckley, commented on Facebook that now Misty was alone, other elephants may take care of her. According to Buckley, Misty didn’t move far from the barn, but now her companion has died, another elephant, Tarra, may befriend her and encourage her out into the sanctuary.
Source: Elephants.sanctuary Facebook page

**Narratives**

Sanctuaries set out to offer an environment for elephants as far removed as possible from the cruelty and abuse they are perceived to have received in circuses and in some zoos. Elephants are ‘retired’ or ‘rescued’. Most of the elephants in the two sanctuaries are from a circus background which gives sanctuaries the opportunity to perpetuate the narratives affecting circuses (see
The environment of a sanctuary is almost the antithesis of the perceived or real environment of the circus.

In a sanctuary, the elephants have choice. For the most part they are managed in a Protected Contact situation where the keepers do not share the same space, but rather work with the elephants through a training wall. It is up to the elephants to participate; they are free to leave at any time.

Both sanctuaries were established by dedicated animal lovers. PAWS was established by an ex-animal trainer, Pat Derby, now deceased. It is being run by her partner Ed Stewart who has worked with Pat at the sanctuary since 1985. The Elephant Sanctuary in Tennessee was established by an ex-circus performer, Carol Buckley who was dismissed in 2010. She wanted to retire her own circus elephant in 1994. The back-stories of both these women may add credence to the sanctuary concept because they both have direct experience of the environments they want to save elephants from.

The elephants that arrive at these sanctuaries have been retired from circuses or relocated from zoos which have closed their elephant exhibits. The histories of the resident elephants are available online. These histories are emotional and effective in engaging public support (Mills, 1999). Donations can be made to individual elephants as well as to the sanctuary as a whole. Online updates and newsletters keep the donor informed as to the elephants’ welfare, behaviour and enjoyment of life in the sanctuary.

At the same time, those stories are used to highlight the plight of elephants that could be ‘freed’.
Without the sanctuary option, animal rights groups would not have a ready-made solution to the perceived injustices visited upon elephants. The word ‘sanctuary’ itself creates a mind picture. Whether sanctuaries are practical or not they provide a very useful focus for activists. For those wanting animals out of zoos and circuses, organizing and signing petitions, contributing to Facebook pages, twitter accounts and protests to get elephants into sanctuaries allows them to feel they are making a difference. If sanctuaries didn’t exist, they’d have a problem. It is unknown whether this activity translates into funds for sanctuaries, however.
Rescuing elephants is also effective publicity for raising awareness of elephants in captivity. The battle to get the Toronto elephants to PAWS sanctuary spanned more than two years. It was hailed as a victory when the elephants arrived at PAWS on October 17th 2013.

PETA’s photo accompanying its blog on the Toronto Zoo elephant rescue shows a herd of wild African elephants in a wide open space, free to range with no humans in sight. It could be assumed due to its placement with the story that the photo shows the three Toronto elephants in the foreground joining other elephants at the sanctuary in California. This is not correct and
raises the question of why an actual photo was not used to illustrate the blog, such as this one on PAWS website.

Source: PAWS website www.pawsweb.org

**Funding**

Both the Tennessee sanctuary and PAWS are in a position where they cannot take more elephants due to health issues within the herds, and both are privately funded. The Tennessee sanctuary is said to be under financial pressure and some claim may not remain financially viable (Stroud, 2012 pers comm). It estimates the cost to keep an elephant for a year is US$130,000. PAWS sanctuary is generously funded by its benefactor Bob Barker, former host of ‘The Price Is Right’.

It would be fair to question whether in the medium and long term the funding for both these private sanctuaries can be sustained. What would happen to these elephants in that event is a question rarely asked and certainly not answered in the current discourse. Were such questions to be asked decisions like the one made by the Toronto City Council to allow its elephants to be moved to the Californian sanctuary, might be re-evaluated for they may have unintentionally put the future of these elephants at risk.
Health

Both US sanctuaries now have tuberculosis in their herds which is a condition that is transferrable between elephants and humans (Michalak, 1998). It is also found in some zoos and circuses and is a difficult issue to deal with.

This knowledge also puts into question Toronto City Council’s decision to send its three elephants to a place where they are likely to become infected. Ironically, Toronto Zoo, while trying to do the best for its elephants by allowing them to go to a sanctuary, lost its AZA accreditation when sending the elephants to PAWS. The AZA does not condone sanctuaries because sanctuaries do not breed their elephants. The loss of AZA accreditation can be problematic when animals are exchanged, because exchanges can only occur between AZA members.

Psychological health is also a consideration with sanctuary elephants. Many, if not all, elephants in sanctuaries are diagnosed with, or show signs of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The very act of life in captivity, either in a zoo or a circus, is stressful and affects the way elephants are able to cope with stress. Some older elephants were wild caught and carry with them emotional scars relating to the trauma of witnessing family slaughter (Bradshaw, 2007). Even those born in captivity are likely to be born to mothers who suffer PTSD. Elephant-on-elephant aggression seen in captive situations is considered a result of PTSD and is seldom seen in the wild (ibid).

Encounter Value at Sanctuaries

Sanctuaries are not open to the public because this can be viewed as exploitation. They also follow a hands-off management regime known as Protected Contact and use only positive reinforcement. For the elephants, this means minimal interaction with humans unless on elephant terms. The elephants choose whether or not to participate in any health sessions. This was not always the case, though, as can be seen by the images of the sanctuary founders with the elephants. A carer (the name sanctuaries use for
keeping staff) was killed and the director injured at TES in 2006 which prompted the change in management away from Free Contact, particularly for elephants diagnosed with PTSD.

However, both sanctuaries appear to realise the importance of encounter value and showing a connection with elephants. Both sanctuaries use images of their directors in Free Contact hands-on relationships with the elephants.

A new organisation has been established, based in the United States, to raise funds for a sanctuary in Brazil. That, too, shows photographs of its team in contact with elephants.
Without the opportunity to engage the public directly with their elephants in the way zoos and circuses do, apart from some exceptions as discussed later in this chapter, sanctuaries must find other ways in which to engage support.

Funding for these organisations is primarily by donation, fundraising and benefactor support. Individual photographs of the elephants, and the opportunity to choose where the donation goes, offers a form of connection between the public and the elephant.

Global Sanctuary for Elephants (www.sanctuaryforelephants.org) has links with both US elephant sanctuaries and is fundraising to establish a similar facility in Brazil to cater for rescued circus and zoo elephants in South America.

Global Sanctuary for Elephants also uses the human-elephant connection to evoke emotion.

Sanctuaries, given their philosophy of no public contact, do not provide many of the benefits that come with direct encounters as claimed by zoos and circuses. Both sanctuaries have education programmes with material for use by schools. TES also has webcams online for access by the public, however, PAWS is presently fundraising for webcams.
However, for fundraising PAWS also hosts monthly open days and patron days where, for a fee of several hundred dollars, people can spend a day or a weekend at the sanctuary.

“We hope to provide an experience that will enlighten our visitors to the problems inherent in keeping these highly social animals in captive situations and the understanding and care which is necessary to meet each individual elephant’s special needs. At the end of the day participants will, truly, have “Seen the Elephant.”

Open once per month $250 for a day trip, $800 for a weekend. No children.”

(www.pawsweb.org)

TES, on the other hand, has established a learning centre in town where staff show videos of the elephants to the public, and special fundraisers can occur such as the 65th birthday of Shirley, the sanctuary’s oldest resident.

Oakland Zoo has also started promoting its plans to create an elephant facility which will provide a similar environment to PAWS and TES. The difference is Oakland Zoo plans to breed elephants and aims to have a herd of 50 elephants in 50 years (Johnson, 2013). As well, in May 2013, the AZA established the National Elephant Centre (NEC) in Florida as a place to retire zoo elephants and also to establish a breeding herd.

In summary

This chapter shows that there is a need in the public mind for an alternative to zoos and circuses. Sanctuaries offer a positive environment for elephants with space, choice and companionship. In the face of evidence presented to the public which shows elephants are abused in captivity, tortured in training, are deprived of space and companionship with other elephants, the sanctuary offers a solution. This evidence is difficult to ignore and is endorsed by renowned researchers such as Joyce Poole through her website ElephantVoices.com. However, this chapter also shows that sanctuaries are not a practical solution, at least at the time of writing.
Chapter 7

Film: It’s All About Burma

In the creative component of the thesis, the natural history documentary film ‘It’s all about Burma’, I present the care regime for Burma, Auckland Zoo’s Asian elephant, who has been alone for four years since her older companion Kashin died.

Internationally many believe management of elephants in captivity is best achieved through a Protected Contact regime where the elephants and keepers are separated from each other at all times. Auckland Zoo uses a Free Contact regime where keepers and elephants share the same space. I wanted to show in this documentary that, contrary to the dominant narrative that Free Contact only works when elephants are afraid of their keepers, there are ways of managing elephants that allow for human-elephant contact involving positive reinforcement principles and fun.

Genesis of the Film

This film about Burma was not the film I originally intended to make. My original film was to be about an African elephant called Mila, a retired circus elephant living in a sanctuary south of Auckland. In April 2012, Mila killed her new owner and the sanctuary was closed down, so Mila was being prepared to travel to the United States. Burma was only going to be one small part of my documentary to show the differences between an Asian elephant and an African elephant. When it became clear Mila’s future move would not be confirmed in time for me to complete the film, I had to change direction. That was when I decided to make a film with the footage I had of Burma.

This is important because the filming with Burma was done for the most part over a single day during which I literally followed the staff and filmed whatever they were doing. There were no rehearsals, no shot lists, no
storyboard, no plans; all I asked was for some close-ups of feet, ears and trunk. Even the encounter with the young child Poppy and her Mum, who appear towards the very end of the film, were spontaneous and un rehearsed. The keeping team was happy for me to run along behind them, get as close as I felt comfortable to be, and take as long as I needed. Burma also tolerated my presence, but elephants get easily bored, and are extremely curious, so activities moved at quite a pace. If I couldn’t keep up, I wouldn’t get the shots. Therefore, what is seen in the film is not a contrived performance for the camera; it is just what happened on a normal day. It could be validated in this respect by having other individuals accompany the keepers and Burma throughout a normal day.

The Turning Point

The same day I filmed Burma I attended and recorded a seminar given by Erin Ivory, the keeper looking after Mila, where she presented videos of circus elephants being beaten. Ivory is from the United States and she spoke of the debate in the US between people wanting to change elephant practices and those involved in what she termed ‘domination-based training’ – a term used to refer to Free Contact regimes. The videos of brutality toward elephants she showed had been filmed covertly. She reported that some zoos using a Free Contact regime use baseball bats to control and intimidate their elephants and that activist pressure had got bans placed on the use of ankuses (Ivory, 2013, 20 February).

From the perspective of language, Ivory’s talk to a large group of people was highly emotive and aimed to present a disturbing picture of how elephants are managed under Free Contact. Some people walked out rather than watch the images on screen. Ivory related how in the United States there was a “massive argument between people wanting to change elephant practices and those involved with domination-based training [Free Contact].” The videos she showed were “[filmed] behind closed doors”. She pointed out that “[animal rights] pressure puts bans on ankuses” and, as discussed in Chapter 2, the ankus is the primary working tool for elephant keepers in these types of facilities. Ivory works only in Protected Contact facilities where the elephant
and keeper do not share the same space, therefore the ankus is not a primary tool. This may have led to her support of the idea that the ankus is abusive and Free Contact is not the ideal way to manage elephants.

With the ankus maligned, I could not reconcile what Erin Ivory was saying with what I had experienced at Auckland Zoo. I was later told by Ivory that was because the truth was hidden from me, because the Auckland Zoo keepers would never let a volunteer see what was really going on. I was asked to accept that the entire elephant team could change the way they worked with Burma just because I was there and that they had done so every week for the five years I worked there as a volunteer… not just on the day I filmed. I found it difficult to accept that suggestion.

That meant that I was motivated to examine the narrative being presented and its place in the overall discourse. I decided not to pursue a film about Mila and decided to make a film featuring Burma instead.

**Conflicted by Conflict**

As my film was developing my tutors and film advisors wanted to see more conflict in my documentary. I took that on board and then realised that the need for conflict, a need assumed to be essential in most media, could be one reason why some of those dominant narratives have been allowed to take hold; the media’s need for dramatic conflict means that elephants only become newsworthy when danger, death or conflict are involved. I resisted this approach and did what I set out to do. What I observed and captured was a beautiful relationship between an elephant and a human and I have reported it that way. I was moved by the warmth of their relationship and I wanted my audience to be moved in the same way.

For 20 years I have worked in the often hard-edged world of journalism and strategic communications. I understand how emotion will often overpower fact; I have used that knowledge many times on behalf of clients in advertising and media pieces to encourage an audience to accept a perception that suited a client’s desired outcome. I can see with a professional eye the
strategies and linguistic techniques animal rights groups are using; what tools they are using, how information is used selectively, and how important the language used and emotive messages are. As a result I am acutely aware of the way in which narratives can be developed and discourses guided in a manner that obscures some or all of the relevant information.

There are several dominant narratives being examined and addressed within the film:

(a) Free Contact is only possible through domination and control.

Throughout the film, Burma is relaxed in the company of her keepers. Andrew and his team are leading Burma through her daily activities, just as she would be led in the wild by the matriarch or higher order female. Her human ‘herd’ is affectionate, and this is also heard in the tone of their voices. They clearly enjoy their work. Free Contact is possible in a positive environment, and, as international elephant expert Alan Roocroft says in the film, what they are doing is good for Burma. She has routines she understands and enjoys. This makes her comfortable enough to trust her keepers and in turn they are able to offer Burma a stimulating environment.

(b) The bullhook or ankus is used to beat and abuse elephants – it is not a ‘guide’.

Burma shows no signs of being nervous or uncomfortable around the ankus. The ankus is visible in many shots, but it is made of Perspex and because of that it doesn’t look threatening. It is, however, the same tool and used in the same way as any conventional ankus made of metal. The ankus is used as a pointer, or to touch cue points on Burma’s body which may be out of reach. However, the keeper’s hand can be just as effective, and both Laurel and Joel ask Burma to lift her feet, or turn around, or lower her head with hand signals or light touches. At the end of the film, Burma picks up the ankus and hands it to Andrew. He rides away and as
he does it is possible to see him hold the ankus near the back of her head to provide a touch signal to guide her to move forward. It’s a gentle movement, easily missed.

(c) Zoos cannot provide enough space, and elephants need to walk.

Creative zoos and programme managers can find ways to make the available space work. Burma has a large enclosure of several acres at Auckland Zoo. With the Free Contact regime the keepers are able to take her for walks through the zoo grounds and up into the bush which extends the amount of space available to her significantly. Walking is just a part of what Burma needs. Most of all she needs physical activity and a reason to move. In the wild, the reason is for food or water or safety but Burma has all her needs met, so it’s up to the keepers to create reasons for her to move. Putting her food in varied locations around the enclosure, taking her to the bush to feed, pushing massive logs and climbing rocks keep her fit and stimulated. It’s up to the keepers to manage this, and it’s relatively easy in a Free Contact situation.

(d) Elephants are stressed by children and noise.

Burma appears to enjoy her daily walks and meeting zoo visitors. Whenever she is out and about people come running to see her. Although not included in the film, in my interview with Alan Roorcroft, he commented on what a “kick” he got out of hearing people calling Burma’s name. He commented: “She’s a celebrity.” While she’s out, the team make sure Burma doesn’t get restless or distracted or startled and her confidence in them is such that she is not fazed by noise and shouts. The different sights, sounds and smells around the zoo are also good for keeping Burma stimulated.
(e) Elephants learn to paint with cruel training

The decision to include a sequence of Burma painting was a difficult but deliberate one as such activities are seen negatively by animal rights groups. Elephant painting is criticised because they believe cruelty is required to train an elephant to paint. I wanted to avoid anything in the film that might detract from the positive tone of the film. By including the painting, the film gives an alternative narrative by showing Burma calm and relaxed, willingly taking the brush and making strokes. In particular, I chose to include this to let the viewer hear the way Burma is being spoken to while she paints, much as a parent would encourage and praise a child.

Techniques

Drawing on the power of the online videos that have gone viral showing mistreatment and abuse of elephants, I worked with several of the techniques they employ.

Undercover footage is always handheld which gives a sense of spontaneity and authenticity. Unlike the carefully crafted tripod shot that takes time to set up and frame, the filming is done on the run. My film is almost entirely handheld and as such includes the viewer in the experience.

I made good use of close ups. To get the story across, I wanted the viewer to be intimately connected with Burma, to see her luxurious hair, to understand how delicately her trunk moves, to look into her eyes. In this sense the film is visually textural.

Many of the shots were taken from a low angle to give viewers a sense of Burma’s size, especially in relation to the people who are working with her. This also reinforces the idea that the man/woman and the bullhook are no match for an elephant who doesn’t want to comply.
I made the film Burma’s story. From the beginning when she lost her companion, I wanted the viewer to relate to how it must be losing such a close friend, and have some understanding of how lonely she must have been. This was deliberately placed at the beginning of the film in the hope that the audience would develop an emotional connection with her, that empathetic feelings would be evoked. I reasoned that if that connection was made then the importance and value of the keepers in her life would be clear. The film is suggesting that Free Contact is important for the health and wellbeing of some elephants and is a regime that does work successfully.

The music was also designed to give Burma a soundtrack, to give a sense of her personality. Burma is a kind, calm elephant, but she appears to have a sense of humour. When I was filming her, she often came to stare at me and I felt as though I needed to explain why I was there. While filming in the bush, she handed me some browse as if I needed feeding – that sequence can be seen in the film although there is no reference to the fact that she was handing me, the camera person, the browse. The sense of elephant consciousness can get lost in a film, but the music was deliberately devised to make that evident.

The choice of talent is important in any documentary, and Andrew Coers is a likeable, genuine young man. He comes across as trustworthy, and his relationship with Burma of over 13 years speaks to his dedication to Burma. He did not appear to be a man who came to work to abuse his elephant – on the contrary he seemed to be Burma’s enthusiastic and loving companion. He certainly didn’t look like the stereotypical tough ‘elephant man’ of old. In terms of a main character I could not have cast a more credible leading man.

When animal rights groups send out videos of abuse, the implied and sometimes even explicit message is that this is how it is for that animal 24 hours a day, every day. It is difficult to evaluate the accuracy of that implication. However, in a sense, I have done the same. I brought to the screen Burma’s story implying that this is her life, every day.

The film becomes Burma’s narrative, and an alternative narrative for other elephants in other zoos. Burma doesn’t need freeing to a sanctuary. She does
not need to go to another zoo. She has a good life in Auckland with people she has known for much of her life who she seems to trust and has bonded with.

Fact vs Emotion

Fact is almost always trumped by emotion. An authentic emotional response will galvanise an audience. Activists for any cause often use highly emotional arguments and imagery because the emotional message is more likely to be remembered and promote action. (Mills, 1999).

As a science communicator, with this film I was focused on testing how to tell the viewer about elephants and their needs, without letting the emotion overwhelm the facts. I was seeking to create a balance between the emotion and the facts and experimenting with how to use positive emotion as a language for facts. In this way it was an experiment to see if I could use an approach that was other than the archtypical conflict approach as a means of getting attention. I attempted to use crafted emotion to put the audience in a space where they could be receptive to the positive messages. In this sense the film can seem light and enjoyable to an audience but still be effective in communicating facts about elephant care and the discourses surrounding them.

To get the viewer to understand more about elephants, and ultimately to care more about elephants, I had to make sure there was breathing space in the film. I gave people time to watch and enjoy, not just listen.

Where I believe scientists have failed is by not understanding that their rational approach is not shared by the majority of the public. Therefore I worked hard to ensure that the film would connect emotionally with the viewer in the hope that they would be receptive to other information.

What I have done with the film is introduce elephants and their interesting biology through Burma. By the end of the film, they have come to know her and the life she leads. Ultimately, I want viewers to have an alternative
narrative in their mind when they hear that Burma is alone in the zoo, that she should be sent away, that Free Contact is abusive, that bullhooks are weapons, and I believe the film has the potential to achieve that end.

What would I do differently?

My regret is not making more of the ankus in the film. In the course of the research for this thesis I have found the use of the ankus has been misrepresented and misunderstood, that the narrative regarding its use has been tarnished with misinformation, but also that it has been misused by some. On its own it may seem a small issue, but its ban is having far reaching implications on the way elephants are managed in captive situations, and on the reputations of elephant keepers. Take away the ankus, and visitor encounters such as Burma walking through the zoo grounds or meeting a three-year-old girl, are no longer possible. In hindsight, my film would have been a good opportunity to initiate a different discussion about the ankus, its history, its cultural significance, and how it is used as a guide.

Film Acknowledgements

Rooster shot (2 seconds) 21:46:15-21:48:10 supplied by Anna Wilde

CCTV footage 16:45:18-17:12:03 (26 seconds) supplied by Auckland Zoo

Title graphic 'It's All About Burma, the not so lonely elephant' 00:14:00-00:22:00 (8 seconds) animation by Wu Peng

All other camera work, editing and sound are my own.
Chapter 8

What Can Be Done?

This chapter looks at the research presented so far in this thesis and how those working in zoos and circuses can use this to introduce alternative narratives within the discourse around captive elephants.

As indicated earlier, in the documentary ‘It’s All About Burma’, in the very last sequence, Burma picks up the anku from the ground and hands it up to Andrew Coers who sits on her neck. As he rides away, he gently touches the anku to her head to reinforce his verbal command and guide her forward. The movement is subtle, and is best described as a guide. But it is a crucial moment in terms of what the film says about the relationship between elephant and keeper and how the anku is used in managing elephants.

This is stark contrast to videos widely available on YouTube that portray the bullhook or anku as an abusive weapon. A sharp, metal tool designed to inflict pain, cause wounds, and severely punish an elephant.

As discussed, the bullhook as an abusive weapon is just one of the narratives used by anti-zoo and anti-circus lobbyists to sway opinion away from supporting circuses. Other narratives relate to training techniques, the separation of calves from their mothers, the relocation of captured elephants from the wild, the lack of space available for elephants to walk, the chaining of elephants, the transportation of elephants from city to city in the confined space available in trains and trucks, their exploitation for profit, health and welfare issues related to their captivity, the unnatural behaviour they claim is induced by captivity, and their potential threat to public safety.

In this thesis the bullhook narrative has been chosen as the one to examine in the most detail as it is representative of many of the other issues raised and traverses all aspects of elephant management. Within this narrative the thesis
has focused on two groups – the animal rights group and the elephant advocates group in zoos and circuses. In anti-zoo, anti-circus publicity campaigns the bullhook is presented in the context of some carefully planned and highly emotional messaging that is effective because of its simplicity. It appears to imply, ‘if you love elephants then you will do whatever you can to stop this abuse’.

With this in mind, it is important to understand that the dominant narrative in regard to the bullhook or ankus has been established through the release of videos portraying bullhook abuse. These videos are freely available on the internet and have been recorded on several different occasions in several different locations. They have been used as evidence in court and appear to be indefensible. For zoos and circuses that is part of the problem. They have neither defended nor condemned the videos with enough vigour to achieve ‘cut through’ with the general public, or undermine or put in context the key message these videos are successfully spreading, that elephants in captivity are abused, beaten, and treated cruelly.

As this thesis discusses, elephants have a defined charisma arguably unrivalled by any other animal. Research presented shows they evoke emotion and empathy that is described by people who work with them, people who have met them, people who have seen them from a distance, and people who have only seen them on screen. Decades of studies have shown that elephants in the wild are self-aware, intelligent, loyal and social beings. Critics of elephants in captivity claim they are often deprived of the opportunity to be elephants (Poole, 2009) to the extent some say what is being seen in a zoo or circus is not an elephant, that it doesn’t behave like an elephant, it just looks like an elephant (“They’re Like Us, Elephant Researchers Say,” 2008).

Human relationships with elephants span some 4500 years, leading to the mistaken belief by some that they are domesticated (Sukumar, 2011). They are not. They are tamed. And this takes us to the heart of the problem for those who work with and advocate for elephants. Circus elephants and zoo elephants are instinctively wild. They have not been bred for traits that make
them suitable for captivity. From their first appearance in the United States in 1796 they have captivated the human imagination and perceptions have been built and changed over years. Initially they were promoted as being dangerous and only capable of being controlled by courageous ‘elephant men’ which, in times of much changed sensibilities, is a legacy that has become a discourse trap for zoos and circuses [Nance, 2013].

However, the problem in the 21st Century is two-fold. Not mentioned previously but important to the debate, is that elephants in the wild are disappearing at a drastic rate; reports vary but between 25,000 and 38,000 and even 50,000 elephants are poached in Africa every year. That is one every 15 minutes. In Asia greater competition for space between elephants and humans is leading to additional pressure being placed on elephant populations. Pressure on the use of elephants as working animals by western animal rights groups are having a de-stabilising effect on the structure of mahout communities meaning that elephants are at risk of only being seen as a nuisance and a pest. By 2025, the elephant could be functionally extinct.

Therefore, those who are responsible for the care of elephants in captivity believe they are ambassadors for the species and provide a vital conservation role. Those who condemn keeping elephants in captivity believe they deserve more, and they should live like wild elephants. However captive elephants cannot be released into the wild because they would not know how to fend for themselves, and countries with elephant populations will not accept these elephants back. As a result captive breeding of elephants in western zoos and circuses does not result in calves being released into the wild elephant population.

The impact of wildlife documentaries and photographs from the 1970s in mass media and more latterly social media, has been to create an image of what a ‘real’ elephant looks like, usually wandering free on a picturesque African plain, which is always going to look significantly different from images of elephants in captivity. And when images of wild elephants are set next to images of captive elephants and then those images set against videos of what appears to be elephants being abused, a volatile environment for any
further debate is created. No further discussion would seem to be necessary. The film ‘An Apology to Elephants’ (2013) presented by actress Lily Tomlin and featuring renowned wild African elephant researchers such as Joyce Poole, Cynthia Moss and Asian elephant authority Raman Sukumar, is powerful and effective for presenting, among other narratives, the narrative that the bullhook is a weapon. It includes brutal video clips supplied by animal rights organisations such as In Defence of Animals (IDA).

Wild elephants have never seen a bullhook or ankus. They live in family groups of females and some pre-pubescent males. They are led by a matriarch, the oldest female in the herd. The well-known narrative is that she has the wisdom and knowledge learned from those older than her and is able to lead her herd to food and water and safety. Younger herd members respect the matriarch unquestioningly. There are no tussles for domination as there are in other species.

So one of the unexplained narratives is that when elephants are in captivity, there is a need for them to be led. Without a natural matriarch, elephants will tussle for social order regardless of age. When humans work hands-on with them in a Free Contact regime, whether in zoos, circuses or in their range countries, management can only be achieved if the human is recognised as the leader. That cannot be done through size and strength. The animal rights groups’ narrative is that this is achieved through ‘domination and control.’ Elephant advocates in zoos and circuses describe it as ‘training’ and establishing the trainer as the leader. Whatever it is called, the bullhook or ankus is an important tool with a bad reputation. The use of the ankus in zoos and circuses makes them vulnerable to attack but it may also provide them with an opportunity. If carefully handled the use of the ankus could be turned from a weakness into a strength.

More research is required to fully understand what lies behind and within the strands of this discourse. There appears to be a clashing of ideas from both sides, both with good intent. What is unknown, is whether the clashing of ideas is what is causing the heat and noise, or whether the heat and noise created is a managed effect to assist in moulding perceptions as part of a
larger strategy aimed at a vulnerable part of captive elephant management in zoos and circuses.

Those who work with elephants in Free Contact, where elephants and keepers share the same space and work in a hands-on environment, explain the bullhook or ankus as a tool used in the same way as the lead on a dog or the reins on a horse. It is a guide designed to reach cue points on the elephant. Zoos have a choice about whether they use the ankus or not. They can move their elephants into a Protected Contact programme where keepers and elephants do not share the same space and work is carried out through a training wall or barrier. Without Free Contact, however, circuses cannot continue to work with elephants.

Why engage in battle?

The longer elephants are kept in captivity, the more is discovered about them. According to Joyce Poole in the documentary An Apology to Elephants (2013), we have only just begun to develop any real understanding elephants. Captive elephants have contributed much to that understanding and knowledge to date. Ironically, that research has provided critics with one of their main arguments for not keeping elephants in captivity. Research conducted in zoos established that elephants are self-aware. It is then doubly ironic as this sort of research could not be conducted on wild elephants, while captive elephants provide a population where such research is possible.

If choosing to engage in the communications battle on behalf of those working with captive elephants it makes the best sense to join the discourse on the basis of the established science. Elephant managers and trainers must utilise their expertise and the body of knowledge that is emerging from both wild and captive elephant research.

Another important reason to engage in the discourse is to defend their practice of offering opportunities for animal encounters and education about the animal and its conservation. Encounters have been shown to effectively shift attitudes, direct encounters even more so. Humane Free Contact,
practiced and applied in an appropriate and caring manner, is a valuable approach to captive management. It allows encounters to occur, and the ensuing value that accrues from such encounters should not be underestimated. If such encounters come as a trade-off for what some believe to be the unnatural world in which captive elephants must exist, then zoos and circuses need to demonstrate that the trade-off is beneficial not just for humans, but for elephants.

**Choosing the Battle**

In the world of captive elephants there are numerous conflicting narratives being promoted by the two groups, the animal rights activists and captive elephant advocates. Ironically the objectives and desired outcomes of both groups is essentially the same – healthy, contented elephants whose needs are being met.

One of the fundamentals of communications strategy is to know which battle to choose to fight. The battle chosen would generally be selected through an analysis which indicated that the position proposed was one that would attract the most support. In this case, to illustrate how the factual science might be introduced into the discourse and how an alternative narrative might be developed the ‘problem’ of the negative perception of the bullhook has been selected. As explained, the bullhook underpins many aspects of captive elephant management, and affects both zoos and circuses. Both industries desire to retain its use but getting them to work together to this end might be difficult to achieve.

In planning the battle, the first thing to note is it is not necessary to win everyone over to the cause. There will always be those who will not hear the message, and certainly not trust the message. Those are referred to as the intractables. Rather, the plan would be to target and persuade the general majority, those who constitute the bulk of the ‘bell curve’ on any one issue, not those who hold positions at the extreme ends of the spectrum. What is evident from the millions of people who visit zoos and circuses is that there is a large audience that will be open to positive messages around elephant
captivity if they are well articulated. That is where the effort must be focused for zoos and circuses if they were to create a sustained programme of narrative building.

The ‘Communications Space’ is never idle

There is a conceptual ‘communications space’ that is never empty and never inactive. Often organisations under attack choose not to engage in that space and instead hide away in order to be noticed less. What this does is leave the communications space open and for it to be dominated by those of a different viewpoint. In the case of captive elephants, zoos and circuses have tended to ‘leave the field’ and hand the communications space to animal rights groups.

A Google search on ‘elephant bullhook as a guide’ produces a first page of entries containing videos, photographs and perceptions of the bullhook that reinforce one narrative. These will be the only messages being heard and so have the opportunity to embed in the public’s consciousness unopposed.

The link indicated brings up an LA Times report that although LA Animal Services conducted 25 hours of USDA inspections at Ringling Brothers while it was in Los Angeles "at no time did it find any violations or problems with
any animal”. The department also hired a vet who “found no signs of abuse or improper use of guides” (Saillant, 2013). These quotes in the article come from Feld Entertainment’s response to the ban, and refer to a ‘guide’ rather than a ‘bullhook’ but don’t address the actual role of the ‘guide’.

This report clearly indicates that zoos and circuses have the research and evidence that could enable them to build a different narrative that challenged the animal rights discourse, but they appear to absent themselves from the debate.

**Choice of Language**

Understanding the importance of language in a narrative is vital if a strategy is to be developed. Communications work shows people and media can be influenced through the language that is put to them. The bullhook can be referred to as a ‘bullhook’ an ‘ankus or a ‘guide’ with each having different levels of meaning for the target audience. Experience shows that if certain words or phrases are repeated often there is a high chance they will become embedded in the debate lexicon. Therefore, Feld Entertainment’s use of the word ‘guide’ in the article is in contrast to the article headline which uses the word ‘bullhook’. To the layman without any knowledge, it is likely ‘bullhook’ would give a more negative impression than ‘guide’. Changing the word alone is not enough to change perception. Development of an emotional link to its actual role may be the key to embedding an alternative perception, and establishing a different narrative. For zoos and circuses, it is important to understand that whoever has been able to establish their narrative earliest has a serious advantage. It is difficult to dislodge a narrative that has taken hold in a population regardless of how true it is. Therefore, the word ‘guide’ as demonstrated in Chapter 2 is now often viewed as a euphemism.

Animal rights organisations tend to operate within their own set of rules and have developed accepted codes of behaviour. Their memberships may often be small but they have a highly motivated core of passionate followers active in social media. Their tactics are simple. They focus on any perceived
weaknesses in the opposing viewpoint, preferably ones that have a high visual impact and value to their cause. Attacking the bullhook is therefore a smart strategy.

As discussed, one narrative regarding the bullhook or ankus has firmly taken hold and it could be accepted that this narrative has exposed a weakness, but this may also provide an opportunity to introduce another narrative with an opposing viewpoint.

It is possible those attacking the bullhook realise they are vulnerable if the name gets changed. Phrases such as ‘cruelly beaten by an ankus’ or ‘attacked with a guide’ have less emotional impact.

Authenticity and Transparency

Circuses and zoos may benefit by using similar effective techniques to promote the alternative narrative. An authentic emotional response may galvanise an audience (Mills, 1999). Narratives that evoke emotions may be more successful and be difficult to counter. Authenticity cannot be stressed enough. Just as evidence of abuse appears and is shared through social media, any dishonesty on the part of zoos and circuses will also make its way quickly into the public arena.

The key recommendations to introduce a new narrative are:

a) Do not hide the ankus

This is not to say the ankus should be swung about, but rather zoos and circuses need to use every opportunity to encourage people to see it, touch it, ask questions about it. The ankus or takaw of some Thai mahouts are works of art. Educate people on its history, its significance, and how effective or ineffective it is as a punishment tool.
b) Discipline

Explain discipline through metaphor. Discipline is linked with training and involves improving or attempting to improve behaviour. It does not mean punishment and does not have negative connotation. Guidelines (AZA, ARAZPA, DPI, AVMA) recommend how elephants can be trained and disciplined using positive techniques. Those guidelines do not include physical punishment or any withdrawal or withholding of food or water.

c) Visual evidence is difficult to ignore

By uploading footage of training sessions it is possible to explain the objectives of the training, why it is necessary, how it is undertaken and the principles involved. It is also an opportunity to show the bond that is developed between the elephant and the handler in the process. It may also be an opportunity to show human-animal interaction in the form of play behaviour and fun.

d) Personalise the elephant

Engage the audience with the animal and handler by giving them back-stories and personality. This is a technique often used to elicit monetary support for elephant rescues, however the same technique can be used to reveal that captive elephants have distinct personalities and temperaments, just like people. Understanding and working to these differences demonstrates the importance of the elephant handler’s role both in safety and in the elephant’s wellbeing. There will be value in building an understanding that not all elephants are the same.

e) Encounter and Education

Create opportunities for encounter and education. As has been shown in Chapter 3, encounter value affects attitude changes therefore allowing appropriate encounters to take place may make people more
receptive to the ankus message. Likewise, Varner (2008) says humans are wired to learn, therefore direct the learning toward the new narrative. Zoos and circuses have willing participants as visitors or audience, therefore they should take every possible opportunity to educate those willing participants about conservation, elephant biology, training, behaviour and more.

f) Be proactive

It is often more effective to be proactive in a situation rather than wait to defend, or react to situations. Responses must be carefully planned with key messages that are agreed across the industries involved.

g) Celebrity endorsement

Actress Betty White is a zoo supporter and has worked on behalf of the Los Angeles zoo to promote its philosophy in education and conservation, as well as its dedication to its three elephants. The circus is full of celebrities in their own right, so finding the ‘face’ of the circus, for example an elephant trainer or trainers, who can become spokespeople for the ankus narrative can have an immediate effect.

h) Dynamic paradox

A strategic concept worth noting in this context is the dynamic paradox (Luttwak, 1987). Often when one seems to be winning it is actually losing and vica versa. There are examples given in this thesis where animal rights activity has alienated a community or audience. Zoos and circuses need to be attuned to those opportunities to bandwagon on that effect to take a narrative to an audience likely to be open to hearing it.
i) Hearts and Minds

A narrative can only survive if it has the support of people, so it’s important to understand how potential supporters and non-supporters function, how they think, and what they believe (Zalman, 2010). Zoos, and to an extent circuses, are part of communities who can be their strongest defenders. Once we start talking about communities we are talking about people and therefore communication, perception and influence become the currency.

j) Transparency

Allow the public behind the scenes, particularly circuses, to watch training sessions. This was one of Kiley-Worthington’s (1990) recommendations, although she exercised some caution as training, by its very nature is unpredictable. However, it is one of the more interesting aspects of captive elephant management and opening training sessions would effectively dispel the cruelty myths, allow the public to see another side to the human-animal relationship, and offer educational opportunities around conservation.

Media Relations

The use of media to advance any narrative can be effective if the way media works is understood. News media outlets increasingly rely on news being supplied. On this basis, zoos and circuses have opportunities to work a media programme. However these types of activities may only be successful if they are maintained over a long period of time. Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of either side of the debate can be effective for developing key messages.
An analysis of animal rights campaigns

Strengths

• They have successful formulas that are working for them.
• They can bring energy and motivated people to bear on any issues, anywhere in the world through social media – they are transnational.
• That transnational nature can create an impression of scale which assists with the application of pressure on political decision makers. Politicians may get a barrage of email and social media contact creating the impression of a huge show of support for the animal rights stance but it may come from throughout the world with little or no direct links to a particular local community decision.
• They make noise and can intimidate organisations into disengagement by wearing them down with constant hit and run attacks.
• They generally work good long-term strategies and are capable of maintaining campaigns for long periods of time.
• They have often been difficult to nail down to determine who they are and how they can verify what they are saying.

Weaknesses

• When they have ventured into the system to attack zoos and circuses they have become vulnerable to counter attack. Recent court judgements have focused on inaccurate information and testimony that has resulted in heavy penalties being paid by animal rights organisations (ASPCA vs Feld). Instead of remaining with the guerrilla tactics where they hit and run without need for serious verification, they have opted for set piece battles in courtrooms which tend to suit their opposition more than themselves.
• People will often support an underdog or someone who appears to be hard done by. Constant attacks on zoos and circuses may backfire and galvanise support for the elephant advocates.
• They can become unpopular with local communities for trying to impose their ideas, and so lose the population and then the politicians.
• If those opposed to them can show that a proportion of the information they create is inaccurate or implied or assumptive, a strong counter campaign could hammer away at key pieces of information that are proven to be inaccurate and so they make themselves vulnerable through inaccuracy.

An analysis of captive elephant advocates’ ability to campaign

Strengths

• Circuses have financial strength that will enable them to fight if they choose to do so.
• When circuses have come out to fight back as in the damages case against rights groups, they have the financial strength to be able to succeed.
• Circuses continue to draw crowds and therefore a natural community of individuals who are likely to be supportive
• Zoos have a sustainable financial model as they are generally local authority organisations.
• Zoos are establishing a credible conservation narrative. They are connected to other vital conservation organisations who are involved in the preservation of species in programmes that are coordinated around the world. That gives them a global network that could be utilised to support that narrative.
• Zoo elephant managers tend to be experienced elephant handlers.
• Zoos have access to science and research.
• Zoos tend to have on-site veterinary care.
• Zoos are open to the public and that gives them a level of transparency.
• Zoos are an established part of the community.
• Zoos are embedded in our social history. Parents will take their children to the zoo because they went to the zoo as children. Zoos have other social functions. They are a social gathering place and can be an important social centre in a city.
• Zoos attract large numbers of people. They are well patronised. They have a supportive community likely to be responsive to and supportive of their narratives.

Weaknesses
• The use of the bullhook will become an increasingly important vulnerability until that negative narrative is challenged.
• Zoos are always open to the criticism of being like prisons. It is a narrative that doesn’t appear to embed with people who visit modern zoos.
• Space, or perceived lack of space, will always be an issue with zoos and therefore they will be open to attack on the basis that they represent an environment nothing like that inhabited by wild animals.
• Animal rights criticism can affect the brand of zoos and their established place in communities.
• Because zoos tend to be under the control of local authorities they are naturally within a sensitised political system. Communications people in local government have one of the hardest jobs in communications because no matter what is happening someone will always be unhappy. Such political organisations also tend to be risk averse. This may restrict their ability to present a credible case and go on the offensive to back what their zoo does if it comes under attack.
• There is no coordinated response from both zoos and circuses to criticism. A key element working for animal rights groups against zoos and circuses is the division between different groups within the elephant advocate grouping. Zoos may be happy for circuses to be the primary focus of the criticism in the belief it is better focused there than being targeted on them. The problem with that approach is that once animal rights groups have established dominance over circuses they are likely to turn their attention to zoos. There is also a division within the zoo fraternity between those that support the Protected Contact protocols for elephants and the Free Contact proponents. A divided house is easier to conqueror.
In summary

Animals of science bear little resemblance to animals of fiction (Bulbeck, 2005). In the elephant debates there appears to be a clash between an imagined and stylised view of what elephants are which has emerged from fiction and wildlife documentaries and the reality of the lives of working elephants and elephants in captivity.

Words are weapons. Therefore science communicators need to be well versed in how those weapons are wielded and carefully craft the language they use. This is not to say they should engage in euphemisms, because there is a need for transparency in the debate which means the words used must carry authenticity to gain trust.

With the potential life expectancy of an elephant in captivity being around 60 years, a long-term solution for elephants in captivity is required. The financial stability of zoos, circuses and sanctuaries is may determine which of these modes of elephant captivity is likely to survive.

Western pressure on Asian societies in the area of elephant captivity needs further research. Surendra Varma (Indian Institute of Science) has extensively researched the relationships between elephant and mahout welfare in India, including zoos, circuses, forest camps, temples, private ownership, and street begging. He has found an increasing incidence of alcoholism within mahout populations (Varma, 2013a) possibly as a result of threats to their livelihood brought about by animal rights pressure from western countries. Animal researchers in Asia express concerns that, paradoxically, if animal rights narratives are successful and working elephants cease to be viable in Asia, that might put the existence of elephants at risk as they will be perceived as an agricultural pest (Sukumar, 2011).

There appears to be strong evidence that an animal-human connection exists and that establishing this connection between humans and elephants can create conservation benefits (Bulbeck, 2005; Lorimer, 2007). There is also
evidence that certain animal species and certain individual animals have a non-human charisma (Lorimer, 2007) that adds to the value of the encounter. Drawing on Michaels’ (2013) theory presented in this thesis around discourse and narrative and how they evolve and can be manipulated, it is possible for any negative narratives that are detrimental to or threaten the future of elephants in captivity to be turned around if zoos and circuses choose to be fully involved. In particular, circuses have the most to lose if such a narrative is the only one heard and overwhelms the science. The ankus is a primary tool and if it is not available circuses must adapt or die out. By understanding the mechanics of the debate, identifying the weaknesses in their critics’ narrative and reinforcing the message ‘we love elephants and won’t tolerate abuse either’ zoos and circuses can potentially establish a common ground for those in the middle ground, those that are able to be swayed, and retain those who already support them.

At the outset of this thesis, I sought to answer this question: Can science communicators combat politicised discourse and narratives where the science is being ignored, smothered, or at least used selectively, by those involved?

Within the time and scope constraints of this thesis, sitting alongside the associated documentary It’s All About Burma, the question has been partially answered. Yes, science communicators can combat politicised discourse and narratives, but as this thesis shows it requires a deep understanding and observation of those discourses and narratives and the committed long-term application of strategic communications skills. It requires a focus on public challenges to narratives that subvert science and the creation of alternative narratives that successfully engage populations. Not every person can be persuaded and it is not necessary to persuade everyone to be successful. A discourse may be turned if alternative points of view are frequently and consistently thrust into the conversation to the point where they become accepted as part of the conversation. A body of research exists, but it is not in a form readily available to the public for their decision-making. Therefore, it would seem the failing of science communication in the public debate is in its absence, thus leaving the field open to be swayed by those driven by passion.
and, at times, by fanciful notions of elephant management. Committed long-term engagement by science communicators in debates such as that of elephant captivity is the best means of ensuring science is protected.

To more fully answer the question, further research would be beneficial in the areas of use of propaganda in documentary making, long term studies of attitude changes brought about by encounters between humans and animals, the effectiveness of standards and guidelines for zoos, circuses and sanctuaries, decision-making by governing bodies and judiciaries related to elephant management to determine what influences those decisions, and whether comparisons between wild elephant behaviour and captive elephant behaviour has scientific value.
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