

**Submission  
No 269**

**INQUIRY INTO EXHIBITION OF EXOTIC ANIMALS IN  
CIRCUSES AND EXHIBITION OF CETACEANS IN NEW  
SOUTH WALES**

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**2020**

**ENQUIRY INTO EXOTIC ANIMALS IN  
CIRCUSES- NSW COMMITTEE**



HEAD CARNIVORE KEEPER

1/1/2020

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## Introduction

My name is Mark De'Souza, I have been a zookeeper specialising in large carnivores (Big Cats) for the past 12 years, working at an array of high tier facilities across Australia and New Zealand. I currently hold a Cert 3 and Cert 5 in captive animal management in partnership with Taronga Zoo.

I have personally managed collections of up to 15 Big Cats such as (Lions, Tigers, Snow leopards, Bears and cheetahs) working in both protected contact and open contact settings.

***I believe my experience working in the field and education, gives me more credibility to comment on the care of big cats in a captive setting, then some vegans sitting behind a desk.***

Stardust circus Currently hold 8 African Lions at their facility. Having worked with African lions or Panthera Leo, I can tell you this species out of any, is best suited to the lifestyle a circus setting provides. African lions spend up to 20 hours a day sleeping, and one of the things we struggle with in a zoo environment is getting our lions active and moving around. Every zoological facility in Australia holds training sessions with their Big Cats for this along with many other reasons. Almost all of the open contact zoological facilities in Australia hold these training sessions in public view, as shows or demonstrations of the animals abilities, while at the same time, getting the animal Active and moving around, to help it maintain a healthy and active lifestyle. This comes naturally in a circus environment as the shows, work as a fun and rewarding way for the animal to exercise. The only difference between the shows zoological facilities do with their big cats, and stardust circus do, is the lights and costumes, ***and believe me I have many keepers who would jump at the chance to walk around in a sparkly vest at work.***

All those pushing an animal rights agenda, like the AJP does, will tell you things such as “these animals are trained with fear”, “they are beaten in submission” or another I have heard frequently is “they are starved to perform for food”

Logically speaking I can sum up this argument by stating, ***a tired, starving, angry, beaten lion, will do nothing but rip you to pieces.*** But let me further explain the process of training both zoological facilities and circus trainers use, as there is only one.

Working with a lion, or any big cat for that matter, is 100% about trust. The animal is comfortable because it knows you (the trainer) will not put that animal in a situation where it feels scared or threatened. This comes with the hundreds of hours spent with this animal, playing, feeding, training and bonding.

Another point worth mentioning is the tired rhetoric thrown at these shows, “the animals are made to perform dangerous and un-natural circus tricks” I will need to answer this in 2 parts.

The first being, ***you cannot, and I mean CANNOT force a 500 pound African lion, to do anything it does not want to do.*** That animal knows that it is more powerful than you, the reason it chooses to work with you, is the bond you have formed, and the reward (will elaborate further)

The second part of that I wish to address is the fact, nothing a zoological facility or a circus, gets its lions to do is unnatural or dangerous. They are natural behaviours, for example see the table below.

*This table I have illustrated will show you some of the natural behaviours stardust circus train their animals to exhibit, it will also show you zoological facilities here in Australia training these same behaviours, whether they are exhibited in public view or during vet checks in a back of house area. The method of training is the same in ALL CASES.*

*Below I will briefly explain why a zoo would train the behaviours:*

<b>Laying down/ Rolling over</b>	As you will see in the visual aid below, we train this behaviour in zoos, as part of our general husbandry. this allows us to get the animal to display its sides to the keeper for a physical exam or blood draw, this is a very basic behaviour
<b>Opening mouth on command</b>	We train this behaviour in zoos, as part of our general husbandry. this allows us to get the animal to display its mouth, so a Keeper or Vet Staff can perform an oral or dental exam on the animal without sedating it, this is a very basic behaviour we train.
<b>Sit up</b>	We train this behaviour in zoos, as part of our general husbandry. this allows us to get the animal to display its stomach to its keepers, we use this position rather than a roll over, as when presenting food, the animal is able to keep its balance more comfortably, then if it was to lie on its back.
<b>Standing on hind legs</b>	We train this behaviour in zoos, as part of our general husbandry. this allows us to get the animal to display its stomach to its keepers, we use this position rather than a roll over, as when presenting food, the animal is able to keep its balance more comfortably, then if it was to lie on its back.

**behaviour Trained STARDUST CIRCUS**

**Laying down/ Rolling over**



**Opening mouth on command**



**Sit up**



**Standing on hind legs**



**Behaviour Trained ZOO**



## Rewards and training.

A lot of people would refuse to believe it, but training a 500 pound lion, **is no different to training a dog**. Having trained many big cats and many dogs, I can personally tell you this is true.

**All zoological facilities and circus use only one method of training** the positive/negative re-enforcement. Now people hear the word negative re-enforcement and thinking beating and torture (thanks to our friends at the AJP and Animals Australia)

But that couldn't be further from the truth, let me explain below.

### ***Positive Reinforcement***

It follows that positive reinforcement is adding anything that increases the frequency of a behaviour. Food treats, praise, petting, play or going for a walk are all commonly used positive reinforcers, or "rewards."

### ***Negative Reinforcement***

Positive reinforcement trainers use negative Reinforcement during training when they withhold a food treat or other reinforcer such as attention in response to an animal offering an undesired behaviour. For example, attention is withheld when a dog jumps up on the trainer or barks for attention. Performed consistently, this teaches the dog that jumping or barking are ineffective ways of soliciting attention and these behaviours will extinguish, or disappear. Simply put, if you ask a Lion (for example) to sit, and it sits, it gets the reward. However if you ask a Lion (for example) to sit, and it does not, the treat is withheld, This is a healthy mix of Positive/ Negative reinforcement.

I can name you MANY instances where zookeepers in Australia have reached out to circuses for advice on conditioning an animal to perform a particular behaviour. One thing we all agree on, is the fact chicken is the best reward. Stardust for example feed their lions, a main diet of horse, for training sessions and shows, the reward becomes Alice's of chicken breast, why? Because to a lion chicken breast is basically our chocolate. It's an exciting treat they do not get in their regular diet, therefore the animal chooses to participate in the training session or show, for no other reason then, it's want for the reward.

## Enrichment

Now probably the one thing zookeepers struggle with, is providing environmental enrichment for their big cats, be that new sights, new smells, new surrounds. In fact it is something we spend up to 5 hours a day doing in a zoological facility.

However in a circus environment, each new town, brings the best environmental enrichment you could possibly ask for, something I can openly admit zoos could never achieve at that level.

Each new town brings new sights, new smells, new sounds, which is crucial in maintaining the animals optimal mental stimulation.

In a zoological setting, to achieve something like this, we need to bring in, projectors, audio equipment, perfumes and scents, as well as often a 6 man grounds keeping crew to change up the enclosure, moving logs trees ect. Something the animals are bored with, in under 2 weeks, so the process starts again.

It's For this reason I have found stardust lions to be some of the mentally healthy Big Cats I have seen in Australia and New Zealand.

Another reason being the shows or training sessions, are mental enrichment for the animals, it gets them thinking, and mentally active.



## Transport

Stardust's lions only move location approximately once every month. When they do move there are restrictions and regulations on how far, and how long, they can travel, these are regulated by the DPI.

When the animals do travel they do so in an enormous semi trailer, completely fitted to enhance the utmost comfort for the animals.

It also features a large reverse cycle air conditioner/ heating, as well as constant access to water. This area also acts as the animals night dens, so the animals are comfortable being inside this area, just like they are in a zoo. Once in their transport the lions simply fall asleep and wake up upon arrival at the new location, remembering they sleep for up to 20 hours a day.

Their large exercise yards are the first to be erected. These yards are also closely monitored and regulated again by the DPI.

**Many tests have been conducted on the stress levels of African Lions in the circus, during travelling, using the Salivary test, please find the Short video with the results below.**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2eIsbOchpxA>

## Staff training

The highly educated and knowledgeable team at Stardust have been responsible for training many aspiring zookeepers here in Australia.

I have been in a position of hiring staff for 7 years now, and let me tell you, the hands on experience you get working with their team, outweighs any uni student I have seen come across my desk. These are not clowns and acrobats who have decided to jump in the cage with lions, they are individuals who have dedicated their life's to the training and care of these animals, with knowledge and experience that seriously outweighs most zookeepers I have met in my 12 years.

## Public perception and future

One has to acknowledge the minority of opposition towards circuses with animals, however this same vocal minority also opposes the work we do in zoological facilities also. The Animal Justice Party have been Anti-Zoo from their inception.

One has to ask why the perception of this minority has changed in recent years?

It is for no other reason than animal rights groups just like the Animal Justice Party and Animals Australia flooding social media with lies and outdated imagery from foreign sources, just like what is happening to the agricultural industry here in Australia at the moment.

As the committee on this issue, your role is extremely vital, if you choose to side with animal rights extremists on this issue, I have no doubt you will be holding another enquiry into zoos in the coming years. Zoological facilities here in Australia know this is coming, as these groups are very vocal. Do you then start the domino effect first banning circuses, then zoos, then wildlife parks, rodeos, aquariums, where does it end? Because all these and more, are seen as “ethically and morally wrong” by these groups.

Another thing one has to acknowledge is the fact the submissions process to this very committee has been very poorly advertised to people in the industry, many circuses finding out via word of mouth, myself only finding out as a guest at our zoo mentioned it to me today during a demonstration. However I come to find out, thanks to individuals such as Emma Hurst, it has been known to Animal Rights groups for months! So one has to question, when taking into consideration public perception on the issue, is it the accurate perception you have received? Or that of a carefully selected minority.

I can see you have at this moment under 200 submissions, Stardust Circus average well over 200,000 customers through their doors a year, that's over 200,000 people actively choosing to support this business, an oppose to the 200 or so emails you have against.

If you publicly announced this submissions process to all those people, I feel the results would be very very different.