

# Letters to the Editor

## Thoughts on AVMA policy on elephant guides and tethers

In my opinion, the AVMA policy statement addressing the use of tethers and bullhooks on elephants<sup>1</sup> fails to ensure safe and humane handling, as it still condones a coercive management system that is inherently unsafe, inhumane, and prone to serious abuse by circuses, zoos, and other elephant exhibitors.

Coercive elephant management practices do not protect elephants. Bullhooks, used to dominate and control elephants, historically have been implicated in their abuse, most notably in zoos (ie, Oregon, San Diego, and El Paso)<sup>1-4</sup> and circuses. Recently released documents<sup>5</sup> from Ringling Bros. Circus describe multiple incidents of bullhook-induced abrasions and lacerations and use of the device to strike elephants. In fact, Ringling Bros. is the subject of a federal lawsuit alleging violation of the Endangered Species Act for abusive training practices.<sup>5</sup>

Far from being a benign tool, the bullhook confers authority to its handler only because an elephant associates the device with pain and discomfort. If trainers truly could control elephants with light touches and voice commands, they would carry a lightweight stick instead of a steel-tipped weapon.

Last month, it was revealed that Ringling Bros. Circus routinely chains elephants in box cars for an average of more than 26 hours at a time and for as long as 60 to 100 hours without a break while traveling across the country.<sup>5</sup> For days at a time, elephants, who in the wild are engaged in near constant activity for 20 hours a day, are unable to walk or even turn around.

Coercive elephant management practices do not protect humans. A 2006 study<sup>6</sup> that reviewed elephant-caused injuries in zoos found attacks occurred most often when keepers were working in direct contact with elephants and attributed

a decrease in injuries to improved training and a trend towards protected contact management.

Protected contact management uses positive reinforcement to induce behaviors. A protective barrier separates handlers and elephants at all times. San Diego Zoo has successfully trained a group of imported African elephants using only this method, facilitating births and providing necessary care.<sup>7</sup> More than half of zoos accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums now use protected contact, with another one or two zoos added yearly.

We implore the AVMA to support only the protected contact system for all elephants, regardless of their use in zoo displays or animal acts. This method has proven safer for humans and kinder for elephants, while allowing for veterinary treatment and daily care.

As long as inherently cruel management practices continue, elephants will suffer and humans will be endangered. It's time for the AVMA to reject the coercive elephant management system, which is so fraught with abuse and has proven to repeatedly be at odds with human safety, elephant welfare, and public opinion.

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2. Oregon Zoo. Clinical records. Available at: [www.helpelephants.com/records](http://www.helpelephants.com/records). Accessed Jun 29, 2008.
3. Scigliano E. *Love, war and circuses*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002;277-282.
4. Charges for multiple violations of the Animal Welfare Act in the beating of Sissy [press release]. Washington, DC: USDA, Jan 12, 2000.
5. *ASPCA et al v Ringling Bros et al* (DC Civ No. 03-2006), motion for preliminary injunction.
6. Gore M, Hutchins M, Ray J. A review of injuries caused by elephants in captivity: an examination of predominant factors. *Int Zoo Yearb* 2006;40:5-62.
7. Andrews J, Lehman C. An update on the training of wild caught and naive herd of African Elephants (*Loxodonta Africana*) at the San Diego Wild Animal Park, in *Proceedings. Assoc Zoo Aquar Annu Conf* 2006. Available at: [www.aza.org/AZAPublications/2006Proceedings/index.html](http://www.aza.org/AZAPublications/2006Proceedings/index.html). Accessed Jun 29, 2008.

## Drs. Miller and Golab respond:

We appreciate Dr. Kislak's interest in the AVMA's new policy on the use of guides and tethers for elephants.<sup>1</sup> As she appears to be aware, elephant management and whether elephants should even be held in captivity are highly controversial topics. Regardless of one's views, the longevity and practical realities of elephants are such that they will be held in captivity in North America and outside of their native ranges for a long time to

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Readers are invited to submit letters to the editor. Letters may not exceed 500 words and 6 references. Not all letters are published; all letters accepted for publication are subject to editing. Those pertaining to anything published in the *JAVMA* should be received within one month of the date of publication. Submission via e-mail ([JournalLetters@avma.org](mailto:JournalLetters@avma.org)) or fax (847-925-9329) is encouraged; authors should give their full contact information, including address, daytime telephone number, fax number, and e-mail address.

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come. It is possible the only place that elephants will survive over the long term will be in captivity. Having accepted this, the question incumbent on the veterinary profession is "How can we best address the health and welfare needs of elephants?" For veterinarians who work with elephants as part of their professional responsibilities, it is important that access to elephants for basic preventive and treatment procedures be safe for personnel and elephants and practical. Use of guides and tethers can assist in achieving this goal for some elephants in some situations. Furthermore, many recent advances in elephant reproduction and health have required the use of guides and tethers to ensure human and animal safety, and this research is important for the long-term survival of elephants. While protected contact is a viable strategy in some operations and for some elephants, it is not a one-size-fits-all option. Using guides and tethers is no different than humanely using the variety of leashes, collars, and harnesses available for managing dogs under various circumstances or the variety of training strategies and equipment that are used to manage other species. Certainly, misuse and abuse of equipment for elephant management is unacceptable and must not be tolerated.

The diverse membership of the AVMA's Animal Welfare Committee and its extensive discussion of issues are a means of critically evaluating options for optimizing animal welfare. In particular, a thorough data-based evaluation of existing practices and exploration of alternatives are important to determining where they can be reasonably applied and improved. Without such a broad approach, public policy may be developed that incurs unintended consequences and results in compromised animal health and welfare. Alternatives to the use of guides and tethers include chemical immobilization, which is potentially hazardous to elephants and personnel, and protected contact, which will not meet the health and safety needs of elephants, their handlers, or veterinarians in many situations.

Articles in the press and lawsuits regarding elephants must be

evaluated critically, as the information provided is sometimes misinterpreted or distorted in line with the beliefs of various interest groups. Further research may identify preferable options for elephant management; however, at this time, sufficient evidence exists that guides and tethers can be used humanely. The American Association of Zoo Veterinarians similarly supports the use of guides and tethers for elephant management.

The AVMA encourages dialogue on existing concerns and options for improving animal welfare. We thank Dr. Kislak for the opportunity to discuss the AVMA's new policy. For those desiring more information, a backgrounder on elephant training is available on the AVMA Web site.<sup>2</sup>

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2. AVMA. Welfare implications of elephant welfare. Available at: [www.avma.org/reference/backgrounders/elephant\\_training\\_bgnd.pdf](http://www.avma.org/reference/backgrounders/elephant_training_bgnd.pdf). Accessed Jul 13, 2008.

### More on finding solutions for free-roaming cats

The subject of free-roaming cats is complicated and emotionally charged. As a volunteer wildlife rehabilitator and cat rescuer, I have witnessed the destruction caused by free-roaming cats and I have observed deplorable conditions at managed cat colonies. Some important and relevant issues that must be considered are the following:

- Domestic cats released as part of trap-neuter-release (TNR) live and die outdoors and therefore can be exposed to various hazards and diseases. Is TNR truly compassionate?

- Cats are prolific hunters of native wildlife.<sup>1</sup> Endangered, threatened, and rare species, including species of special concern, can be impacted. Is the return of an invasive, non-native predator environmentally responsible?
- Cats can transmit a number of zoonotic organisms. There is no evidence that colony management programs will reduce diseases.<sup>2</sup> Is TNR good public health policy?
- Reduction in the total number of free-roaming cats as a result of TNR programs is insignificant.<sup>3</sup> Is TNR really effective?

Dr. Lord should be applauded for tackling this controversial subject.<sup>4</sup> Dr. Jessup responded<sup>5</sup> that a statement about cat predation would have made the survey more complete; however, Dr. Lord countered that such a statement would have potentially biased the participants. That is surprising given how TNR was described in the survey, that is, in a way that may guide respondents to accept TNR as the only option. Other options (socialization for adoption, sanctuaries, fenced-in enclosures, or euthanasia) were not presented.

Dr. Lord's survey describes TNR as "...a program in which stray and feral (or wild) cats already living outdoors are humanely trapped, vaccinated, and spayed/neutered by veterinarians. Kittens and tame (stray) cats are adopted into good homes. Healthy adult cats too feral (wild) to be adopted are returned to their familiar habitat under a person's care."<sup>4</sup>

This seems to give the impression that veterinarians are involved in trapping cats and states that kittens and tame cats are adopted into good homes, which may or may not be true. Healthy cats are returned to their familiar habitat, however unsafe or environmentally sensitive an area may be. Domestic cats are not a natural part of any North American ecosystem. Feral cats are often not tested and sometimes not vaccinated for fatal feline diseases. Being under a person's care conjures up an image that does not fit what seems to be commonplace at managed colonies (piles of food,