



August 25, 2008

I appreciate the responses to my letter regarding the AVMA's policy statement that defends the use of bullhooks (called "guides") and chains (called "tethers") as means of controlling elephants (1).

I respectfully disagree with the assertion that the use of bullhooks and chains is "no different than humanely using the variety of leashes, collars and harnesses available for managing dogs." Chaining dogs for longer than 3 straight hours is illegal in my state, so the 60-100 hours of continuous chaining that Ringling Bros. admits to in ASPCA et al. v. Ringling Bros. et al (DC Div no. 03-2006) would never be tolerated for dogs.

It is scientifically well established that chaining negatively impacts elephants physically, behaviorally and psychologically as it inhibits movement, prevents opportunities for the development of important social relationships, is implicated in the development of abnormal repetitive behaviors, and can lead to life-threatening arthritis and foot disorders (2, 3, 4, 5).

And the statement that "misuse and abuse of equipment for elephant management is unacceptable" is admirable, but bullhooks are steel-tipped devices similar to fireplace pokers that are inherently inhumane because they are tools of domination that are only as effective as the amount of negative reinforcement (pain and discomfort) they represent. According to Dr. Joyce Poole, one of the world's foremost authorities on elephant behavior, use of the bullhook on a single elephant results in "negative psychological consequences" for the elephant being jabbed or prodded AND for those elephants who simply witness the act (4).

Condoning the use of bullhooks and chains does not adequately take into consideration the plentiful scientific evidence establishing that elephants are extraordinarily intelligent, intensely social and very psychologically complex individuals who suffer physical and psychological harm (2, 4, 6).

As veterinarians we have an obligation to protect elephants from these detrimental and coercive tools and methods, especially since more humane and safer management practices exist (protected contact and elephant restraint devices) that allow us to effectively care for, manage, and study elephants in captivity.

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- (1) Letters to the Editor, *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2008;233:550.
- (2) Clubb, R and Mason, G *A Review of the Welfare of Zoo Elephants in Europe*. University of Oxford, Animal Behaviour Research Group, Dept. of Zoology. Oxford, England. 2002.
- (3) West, G. In: Fowler, M and Mikota, S, eds. *Biology, Medicine, and Surgery of Elephants*, Ames, Iowa: Blackwell Publishing, 2006.
- (4) Poole, J. Opinions regarding chaining of elephants, testimony to Massachusetts legislators. 2007. Available at <http://www.elephantvoices.org>. Accessed August 22, 2008.
- (5) Gruber, TM et al. Variation in stereotypic behavior related to restraint in circus elephants. *Zoo Biology* 2000;19:209-221.
- (6) Bradshaw, GA, et al. Elephant breakdown. *Nature* 2005; 433.