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In My Opinion

Animals in Entertainment

Hindus who practice nonviolence must take an honest look at how animals are treated in captivity

By Ravi Grover

Ahimsa is a Hindu ideal that calls for vegetarianism and being kind to all living beings. Unfortunately, an area glossed over in the ahimsa discourse is that of animals held in captivity by the entertainment industry. In businesses such as zoos, circuses, rodeos and sea parks, inhumane treatment of animals needs to be addressed by those practicing ahimsa.

Earlier this year, a Sea World orca killed its trainer, adding another fatality to its record of three attacks on people. A year previous, a pet chimpanzee featured in commercials made headlines when it mauled a woman while attempting to escape. Zoos regularly see bears and tigers escape their enclosures and attack patrons. There are news stories of elephants escaping the circus and wreaking havoc. Incidents like these rarely happen when wild animals are in their natural habitats, allowed to roam freely and socialize with their species. But when isolated, held captive and forced into abnormal situations, these same animals suffer from severe depression and stress and act out aggressively.

Most of the public is unaware of the industry's use of himsa to manipulate the dharma of wild animals for the sake of entertainment and profit. For example, Bhagavan created a cheetah to run 40 miles per hour and thrive in tropical jungles and wide open spaces. Zoos disregard the laws of nature by confining it to a small cage in a different climate. Is it no surprise that wild cats exhibit depression by pacing back and forth in jail-cell-like structures? The orca whale is designed to swim up to 100 miles per day and is capable of communicating via sonar through a vast ocean. Sea parks place them in small tanks where their sonar bounces off the walls, causing some to become violent. Circus trainers use electric prods, bull hooks,

chains and sticks to beat and choke animals into submission. Is it no wonder that elephants, who live peacefully alongside people in Asia and Africa, when forced to perform in circuses, show signs of mental illness and become violent? Animals perform tricks out of fear of their captors.

In the book Gorillas in the Mist, zoologist Dian Fossey describes a European zoo's quest to draw more visitors by catching two baby gorillas from an African rainforest. During the abduction, twenty adults rushed to rescue their babies--only to be shot and killed. Stories of animals defending their clan to the death from captors are commonplace all over the world. Those who believe that wild animals are removed peacefully from their natural habitats are sadly mistaken. No species voluntarily abandons its clan and trades in its natural tendencies and social behavior for involuntary isolation and performance of tricks in front of human audiences. Many wild animals don't even survive the long transportation into captivity. The lifespan of a captive animal is much lower than those living in the wild.

Belief in nonviolence and protection of the environment should encourage one to stop supporting businesses that keep animals confined. Those who desire to observe and learn about nature should instead support the numerous alternatives consistent with ahimsa. Rather than going where animals are confined, families can visit a national park, take a boat ride and whale watch, go on a safari or scuba dive. Documentaries about nature can be viewed in theaters and on TV. Rather than giving money to zoos, circuses and sea parks, consider instead donating that money to eco-tourist businesses, environmental groups, animal sanctuaries or charitable organizations that work to protect God's creation.

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