



**The Elephant Advocacy
Project**

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House Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee Members,

I am submitting these comments in SUPPORT of the adoption of HB 1531 on behalf of The Elephant Advocacy Project (TEAP). TEAP is a 501 (c) (3) federally registered non-profit that works to promote the improved welfare of captive elephants and retirement of captive elephants to sanctuary. The current federal regulatory scheme employed by the USDA APHIS fails to ensure humane handling, care, treatment, and transportation of captive elephants and other wild exotic animals used riding, circus or other public exhibition or address the significant risk of exposing the public, even allowing direct contact, with wild dangerous animals. Growing numbers of States and local governments across the United States are enacting legislation like HB1531. There is a volume of scientific data that evidence of the physical and psychological damage done to captive elephants due to the conditions of captivity and forced performance (riding, circus performance, and other exhibition) and the physically abusive negative reinforcement used to control them with “free contact” handling with a bullhook.

Elephant riding, circus performances, and other forms of “free contact” elephant exhibition for entertainment are predicated on sustained physical abuse, trauma, domination, and severe confinement, each of which does scientifically documented harm to the physical and psychological welfare of elephants. EVERY captive “free contact” handled elephants is forced to submit to being ridden and perform after enduring a “crush” or breaking period that usually begins beginning at around 2 years of age. For wild captured baby elephants, like Asha owned by Natural Bridge Zoo, this breaking begins shortly after capture before shipping them to circuses and zoos. Captive born elephants in the United States endure very similar spirit breaking, The initial “crush” is severe physical domination and coercion, where elephants are isolated, tightly bound (or placed in a crush box) withheld food, water, and sleep, are and savagely beaten with bullhooks, canes and other weapons until they stop trying to escape or resisting completely no matter what is being done to them. The use of physical threats and abusive negative reinforcement continues throughout the elephant’s life. In the traveling circuses, such reminder beatings are called a “tune up.” Undercover video of what this entails can be seen here <https://youtu.be/dhf6bYDJQqs?si=o0rSvsUmiLifcA8g> .

Bullhooks, electric prods, nails, or other such weapons to inflict pain are used in the most sensitive areas of the elephant’s body, including inside ear and behind the ear, in the mouth, trunk, in the mammary glands, and even in the anus. These punishing techniques are systematic abuse and traumatize the elephant. During public exhibition, the bullhook or other such weapon is used poke and prod the elephant in sensitive parts of its body as a reminder to do as the handler says or else there will be painful consequences of not obeying. In effect, the handlers

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use the elephant's exceptional memory against it. The constant pressure of physical discomfort, threats, confinement, and infliction of pain traumatize the elephant, which can ultimately make it more dangerous and unpredictable.

If these same things were being done to a person, it would be labeled torture. It is systematic torture and abusive and the threat, domination, deprivation, and confinement continue throughout the elephant's life. It is simply not possible for this kind of abusive treatment to occur without compromising the elephant's health and welfare.

According to court documents submitted with the warrant on December 6, 2023, submitted by the Commonwealth of Virginia Attorney General as part of their investigation of animal abuse at Natural Bridge Zoo included eye witness testimony of mistreatment of African Elephant Asha. In the sworn statement, the witness said NBZ elephant handler Mark Easley, who has been the handler of Asha at NBZ for the last 15 years including handling her during elephant rides, stated the bullhook should be used to "always jab them where bone is close to flesh and ."make it count" and continued that "the only reason to hit an elephant is for intimidation". Other evidence was submitted documenting the welfare damaging and abusive conditions of how Asha was housed and improperly cared for.

An elephant being handled "free contact" using a bullhook or other negative reinforcement object is doing as asked out of fear of painful consequences and any "handler control" only exists until the second elephant is more frightened by something else or has just reached a breaking point and cannot tolerate abusive treatment any longer and tries to run away or exhibits aggression. There is no reliable way to predict when or where this will occur, or what may set the elephant off, sometimes even seemingly harmless thing can trigger an unexpected response. With the high number of incidents where people have been injured or killed by elephants, there is also a substantial public safety issue , it is only a matter of when time before the next dangerous incident will occur.

Please support HB 1531 and putting an end to this systematic physical abuse of elephants in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Sincerely,

Sandra Clinger
President
The Elephant Advocacy Project