

Part 3 – KOIN 6 Investigates "A Dangerous Practice?"

YouTube video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WQh5mqqApME>

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Produced by Carla Castano

Jeff Gianola

Now a KOIN 6 investigation. We're looking into the Oregon Zoo elephant keepers using a specific training tool.

Jennifer Hoff

Yeah, it's—it's controversial and some trainers actually call it a weapon. A bull hook was used excessively on Rose-Tu fifteen years ago. But the question is, what has changed since then? The abuse on Rose-Tu led Oregon State legislators to rewrite animal abuse laws. It got rid of the need to prove that there is in fact "pain" in animal abuse cases.

Jeff Gianola

Investigative reporter Carla Castano has been looking into why the zoo continue to use the bull hook. And Carla, you found several other zoos have abandoned that tool.

Carla Castano 00:00:37 (in the news studio)

They have. I started digging into this issue after going through the elephants medical records from the nonprofit group [In Defense of Animals](#). That's after I requested the elephant's medical records and 2008 Oregon Zoo bond information from the government agency [Metro](#), which oversees the zoo. They quoted me \$17,000. While the nonprofit group only had records from 1999 to 2005, I found a lot of information raising even more questions about the continued use of bull hooks on the Oregon Zoo elephants.

Bob Lee

When you use the word bull hook, it's painting a picture-

Carla Castano

-like Rama did so many times for Oregon zookeepers (video showing Rama painting with his trunk reaching through the bars of his stall while a keeper gives him commands). The elephant known for his painting was euthanized last month due to an old leg injury. Bull hook, Ankus or Guide, whatever you want to call the tool this Oregon zookeeper is seen with. It's a stick, usually with a sharp metal tip, used to punish or lead elephants to submit to human commands.

To Bob Lee: As I understand, the Oregon Zoo is still using bull hooks. Do you have any provisions that allow that? Is there any specific reason for that?

Bob Lee 00:01:49

Well, we work very closely with AZA and follow all their guidelines. We do use Guides to direct the elephants. We have them come over to us and present body parts.

Carla Castano

Oregon Zoo elephant curator Bob Lee defends the use of what he calls a Guide. In 2000, the Oregon Zoo was cited by the USDA for violating the Animal Welfare Act for what Bob Lee called excessive and abusive use of an Ankus on Rose-Tu in this Portland police report. When I asked Lee about it, he wouldn't say much.

To Bob Lee: The Oregon Zoo has been, I guess, reprimanded by the feds before for problems with Ankus use. I think it was something like, ah, you know, 2000. I don't know. You don't recall that incident?

Bob Lee

There was...well, there was ah—ah, there was a zookeeper that was fired back in 1999 for not following zoo guidelines when it came to tool use. Um...that did happen.

Carla Castano 00:02:46

It was April of 2000 when Bob Lee was a witness when Rose-Tu was beat with an ankus 176 times, according to this Portland police report (Close up of the report: August 15(?) 2000, 3:27 P.M. Portland Police Bureau Case No. 00-66799). The report goes on saying Lee watched elephant handler Fred Marion attack Rose-Tu quote "for 35 to 40 minutes," adding he observed Marion move the hook of the Ankus under her tail flap, turn it, and place it into Rose-Tu's anus (a close up of the report showing that he inserted the Ankus into Rose-Tu's anus). Lee stated that Marion then jerked down twice with the handle of the Ankus.

On the screen a quote from the report: "He observed Marion move the hook of the ankus under her tail flap, turn it, and place it into Rose Tu's anus. Lee stated that Marion then jerked down twice with the handle of the ankus."

Phil Pruitt was the night keeper to take over the next shift that day. He says nothing was written in the logbook about the abuse and no one mentioned anything unusual.

Phil Pruitt

I wasn't informed that I should be looking anyhow.

Carla Castano

Pruitt tells me the bull hook abuse Rose-Tu suffered was not to the zoo veterinarian until two days later. The Oregon Zoo will not comment, but Pruitt adds zoo managers knew about Marion's abuse on the elephants even before the Rose-Tu incident.

Phil Pruitt

This was a guy who had his skull fractured by an elephant in that barn.

Carla Castano 00:03:54

Pruitt says Fred Marion, the elephant handler who brutally beat Rose-Tu as laid out in this police report, had been injured badly by Tamba, another female elephant, and not long before he attacked Rose, too. Pruitt says when Marion came back to work in the elephant exhibit, he was what elephant keepers call hook happy, meaning he used the bull hook excessively.

Phil Pruitt

I think it would have been incumbent on the zoo to remove that individual from the barn knowing that he was hook happy because it was he was counseled on it.

Carla Castano

This police report shows the senior elephant keeper knew there was a history telling detectives he had to counsel Marion at least a dozen times in the past 18 months for inflicting hook injuries on various elephants. Even after this extreme case, I discovered a zoo vet found Ankus wounds causing issues like an abscess on Shine's trunk. It was only located by a zoo vet after a zoo visitor in 2002 complained, causing the elephants to be checked for bull hook mark, the medical records from 2002 reveal.

(00:05:05) He also reported that one of the elephants, the baby presumably Chendra, shielded away from the Ankus that was used near her. A vet spotted bull hook injuries on Rose-Tu, Shine and Pet a year later. The records tell us Pet may have sustained new Ankus contact injuries today as keepers communicated poorly with each other about commands being given and Pet was reprimanded in the process. Longtime elephant trainer Margaret Whitaker helped develop the protected contact elephant training model. She says it does not include bull hooks.

Margaret Whitaker of [The Elephant Sanctuary in Tennessee](#) 00:05:40

When we're behaving aggressively with these tools that are really weapons that are designed to hurt and frighten the elephants. Then sometimes they [the elephants] say enough.

Carla Castano

Whitaker says using positive reinforcement training methods are a much better technique. She tells me protected contact means the keepers don't go into the cages or elephant yards without a barrier, and they don't use tools like a bull hook or a Guide.

It's catching on. Currently in California, there's proposed legislation to make bull hooks illegal. And several U.S. zoos have stopped using bull hooks.

To Bob Lee: I've talked to some other zoos and they say protected contact works pretty well. You don't want to use it here.

Bob Lee 00:06:26

We have what's called welfare-based training. We have elements of protected contact. There is a barrier in place. So it's not the word, it's the program. So, ah, looking at our program, people who didn't know what the words meant or the definition behind it might say we're in protected contact.

Carla Castano

But Whitaker says the Oregon Zoo can't truly be practicing the protected contact elephant training model and be using bull hooks. This while Pruitt tells me if the elephant keepers are going to share space with an elephant, they have to have a bullhook. And he says an inexperienced keeper next to a 13,000 pound elephant can easily be heavy handed.

Phil Pruitt

Back in time, myself, I inflicted some hook wounds cuz ah, it's the only insurance you have is that hook.

Carla Castano speaking to Jeff Gianola and Jennifer Hoff in the studio 00:07:22

A trainer that I talked to out of Tennessee, she says that, ah, elephants have a really long memory. You probably heard that old phrase before. An elephant never forgets. Well, she says that's the exact reason why a bull hook just doesn't work when you're training an elephant, because you can't use it for two reasons, not to lead and to punish. Because once an elephant has been hurt by a bull hook, she says they're always going to be intimidated by it. They're going to be tense. And she says that can create a volatile situation.

Jennifer Hoff

Well, we see that there are other options out there. You know, we heard why the zoo says they have to use the bull hook one. Whether you agree with it or not, sometimes, man, it's tough to watch. It's tough to watch.

Jeff Gianola

That was heartbreaking going over those medical records.

Carla Castano

Oh, definitely. Definitely some sad stuff and lesions caused after, you know, the Ankus injuries and some other wounds associated with the Ankus injuries that were problematic afterwards.

Jeff Gianola

Okay, Carla, thanks for that report.

Carla Castano

Thank you.

00:08:16

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