



## **POSITION PAPER: Defanging and Declawing Wild Cats**

Big Cat Sanctuary Alliance

**Position: Oppose**

### **Position summary**

The defanging and declawing of wild cats are agonizing and inhumane procedures that cause chronic pain and debilitation and severely compromise welfare. They are most commonly performed on big cats used in circuses, magic shows, public handling operations, roadside zoos and other commercial animal exhibitions, and by private owners attempting to make an inherently dangerous animal “safer.”

The Big Cat Sanctuary Alliance **opposes** the defanging and declawing of any wild cats, unless required for medical purposes that are in the best interest of the animal.

### **Defanging (tooth removal)**

Defanging is a painful, inhumane practice wild cats are forced to endure in an attempt to make these top predators “safer” for human handling and exploitation. The procedure involves removal of the canine teeth by pulling them out, with or without veterinary assistance, or by grinding them down. The latter procedure exposes the nerves of the teeth and creates open pockets where bacteria can flourish and cause infection. In some cases, owners use their own rudimentary tools, such as pliers, subjecting animals to excruciating pain, infection, and ongoing suffering. No matter the method, the result is painful life-long dental problems and compromised health and welfare.



Although big cats chew food with their back teeth, they need their canine teeth to grip the meat so they can chew it properly. Most defanged big cats are unable to consume a normal diet of bone-in meat and will require boneless meat, supplemented with extra calcium to make up for the lack of bones in their diet.

### **Declawing**

Declawing is a surgical procedure, known as an onychectomy, in which the cat’s toes are amputated at the last joint. A portion of the bone—not only the nail—is removed. Declaw surgery is usually performed when the animal is young. Some big cats will experience immediate complications from the procedure, however, it may be months or even years before the damaging effects of declawing become obvious, including permanent lameness, arthritis, and other long-term complications (Paw Project).

Cats normally walk with their toes bearing the weight of their bodies, with each step cushioned by the pad under the toe. According to the Paw Project, when declawed, cats can find it painful to stand or walk. They may compensate for the pain in their paws by attempting to shift their weight farther back on their feet, essentially walking on their “wrists.” This abnormal posture and movement creates stress on the legs, which can lead to crippling arthritis. The bone ends remaining in the feet may contain remnants of nail-forming tissue and continue to grow deep within the foot,

causing infection and pain. In more severe cases, the pain may be so excruciating that the cats can move only by walking on their “elbows.”

The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) condemns the practice of declawing captive exotic and indigenous wild cats for nonmedical reasons, stating, “Other than for medical reasons that would clearly benefit the animal, there appears to be no justification for performing the procedure in this population of cats” (AVMA, 2012, para. 4).

### **Animal welfare law**

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) issued a policy statement in 2006, stating that declawing and the removal of canine teeth were no longer deemed appropriate veterinary care under the federal Animal Welfare Act, unless prescribed by a veterinarian for individual medical problems involving the teeth or paws. The policy states: “These procedures are no longer considered to be acceptable when performed solely for handling or husbandry purposes since they can cause considerable pain and discomfort to the animal and may result in chronic health problems” (USDA, 2006, para. 1). Violators are subject to enforcement action. This policy applies only to USDA licensees (breeders, dealers, exhibitors), leaving privately owned wild cats with no protection.

Unfortunately, licensees continue to violate USDA policy. However, a legal settlement in 2018, involving a veterinarian who declawed multiple tigers, lions and big cat hybrid at a southern Indiana facility, set the precedent that declawing endangered and threatened big and exotic cats without medical necessity violates the federal Endangered Species Act (Bowman, 2018).

### **References**

AVMA (2013, January 1). AVMA now condemns declawing wild and exotic cats. *JAVMA News*. Retrieved from <https://www.avma.org/News/JAVMANews/Pages/130115l.aspx>

Bowman, S. (2018, October 29). Declawing lions, tigers now illegal after Indiana lawsuit against vet who declawed 12 big cats. *Indianapolis Star*. Retrieved from <https://www.indystar.com/story/news/environment/2018/10/29/indiana-lawsuit-makes-illegal-across-u-s-declaw-big-cats/1771835002/>

Paw Project (n.d.) Health problems due to declawing. Retrieved from <https://pawproject.org/about-declawing/declaw-surgery/>

USDA (2006, August). Information sheet on declawing and tooth removal. Retrieved from [https://www.aphis.usda.gov/animal\\_welfare/downloads/big\\_cat/declaw\\_tooth.pdf](https://www.aphis.usda.gov/animal_welfare/downloads/big_cat/declaw_tooth.pdf)

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