



POSITION PAPER: Media Images Promoting Human-Wild Cat Interactions
Big Cat Sanctuary Alliance

Position: Oppose

Position Summary

The public is exposed to a vast array of imagery depicting captive wild cats in ways that suggest these animals are domesticated, safe to handle and otherwise interact with, or may be suitable as pets. These images are found on social media and in mainstream print and televised media. Examples include tiger cubs interacting with dogs, rabbits and other animals; “pet” big cats inside homes; humans petting, taking photos with, and interacting directly with captive wild cats; the pairing of cheetahs (cubs and adults) with dogs; and news and television talk shows that feature wild cat cubs as props.

The Big Cat Sanctuary Alliance **opposes** the dissemination of these images to the public because it misleads people into believing that it is safe to be in close proximity to or handle wild cats, promotes private ownership of exotic “pets”, adversely impacts conservation efforts, and causes captive wild cats to suffer.

Public safety threat

The aforementioned images of captive wild cats lead people to underestimate the threats posed by direct contact with these animals. Wild cats may be captive born and trained but they are not domesticated, unlike common domestic pets who have lived closely with humans for thousands of years. This makes them unpredictable and dangerous; a tiger or other large cat can inflict tremendous harm. In a study of tigers in captivity, Nyhus et al. (2003) wrote:

Despite the appearance of pseudo-domestication in some trained tigers, these animals retain their predatory instincts and neural-visceral reflexes, and they can inflict serious wounds using their teeth or claws suddenly and without forewarning (Wiens and Harrison, 1996; Chapenoire et al., 2001).

Nyhus et al. further report that the risk of fatal attacks or injuries is highest in situations where tigers are kept as exotic pets, whether in households or in private roadside zoos, and when tigers are used as photo props.

Since 1990, there have been more than 300 dangerous incidents involving big cats in the U.S. Twenty-four people have been killed (four of whom were children) and many more have sustained traumatic injuries.

Poor animal welfare

Many of the images disseminated to the public involve cubs who are often bred by unscrupulous dealers looking to make a profit. Exploitive breeding practices, including inbreeding and cross-breeding, result in serious genetic defects and chronic health problems, causing lifelong suffering for the animal. Cubs are routinely removed from their mothers shortly after birth so they can be hand-raised and appear more docile. The stress of separation from the mother and handling by humans leaves cubs vulnerable to disease; improper nutrition can cause serious ongoing health problems.

Even though wild cats require specialized diets and care, private owners may not provide adequate health care, proper nutrition or appropriate housing. Some may declaw the cats, a painful procedure that can cripple them and cause lasting pain. (See BCSA position papers: Cub Petting and Photos with Wild Cats, Private Ownership of Wild Cats, Defanging and Declawing Wild Cats.)

Negative effects on conservation

There is evidence to suggest that media representations of wild animals can negatively affect the public's perception of the endangered status of those animals. A study by Ross et al. (2011) found that people who viewed a photograph of a chimpanzee shown in a human setting (e.g., an office) or with a human standing nearby were more likely to consider wild populations to be stable and healthy – when in fact chimpanzees are highly endangered. The presence of a human in the photo also increased the likelihood that the person would consider chimpanzees to be appealing as a pet. The authors concluded: “These findings shed light on the way that media portrayals of chimpanzees influence public attitudes about this important and endangered species.”

The same concept can be applied to images of captive wild cats. Depictions of tigers and other large felids in “domesticated” situations may blur the understanding of who these animals are and deflect attention from the serious threats they face in the wild due to poaching, habitat loss and human-wildlife conflict. For example, tigers are highly endangered, with fewer than 4,000 remaining in the wild; African lion populations are also decreasing (Goodrich et al., 2015; Bauer et al., 2019).

A study by Courchamp et al. (2018) suggests that the sheer magnitude of the cultural and commercial presence of wild animals leads the public to perceive that threatened or endangered animals, including tigers and lions, are abundant, when in fact their populations have plummeted in the wild. Rather than raise awareness, media depictions of wild cats appear to have the effect of turning these animals into novelties and suppressing any meaningful understanding of their true natures, to the detriment of their future on this planet.

References

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