



POSITION PAPER: Protected Contact Management of Captive Wild Cats

Big Cat Sanctuary Alliance

Position: Support

Position summary

In captivity, wild cats must be cared for and managed to ensure good health and welfare. Progressive facilities today practice *protected contact* management, which uses reward-based training, is safer for keepers, and more humane for the cats. However, in some facilities wild cats are managed in *free contact*, a method that relies on negative reinforcement and punishment-based training, presents a threat to handlers, and is inhumane for the cats.

The Big Cat Sanctuary Alliance **supports** only the use of protected contact management for captive wild cats.

Protected contact management: safe and humane

Protected contact management provides a modern, positive reinforcement-based method of caring for and training big cats and other wild animals. In protected contact, keepers do not share the same space with an animal. All interactions are conducted from outside a barrier separating keeper and animal, and reward-based training techniques are used. Using this method, keepers can train wild cats to voluntarily engage in a range of husbandry and veterinary care. Protected contact management is practiced in sanctuaries accredited by the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries and members of the Big Cat Sanctuary Alliance, and zoos accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums.

Free contact management: pain and punishment

In free contact management the handler shares the same space with, and has direct contact with, a wild cat or other animal. This type of management is used in circuses, big cat shows, private ownership situations, roadside attractions, and various other novelty acts. During free contact, trainers may rely on the use of negative reinforcement, such as whips, metal rods, and electric shock devices, to inflict pain and instill fear in wild cats so they comply with commands and perform behaviors on cue.

Animal welfare

A simple Internet search will produce numerous videos showing the true extent of the violence and abuse trainers inflict on big cats and other animals during behind-the-scenes training sessions for circuses, films, and other performances—all of which require the use of free contact methods. Despite the potential for animal abuse, no government agency, including the U.S. Department of Agriculture which enforces the federal Animal Welfare Act, monitors training sessions, even though training sessions are where the most severe abuses commonly occur.

In contrast, protected contact management is associated with improved animal welfare. This method frees animals from the threat of physical punishment and provides a choice of whether to engage in interactions, giving them more control over their environment. In a study on the transition from free contact to protected contact training of elephants at a zoo, Wilson et al. (2015) state that

increased control may be related to decreased abnormal repetitive behaviors, greater exploration, reduced physical evidence of stress, and improved cognitive performance.

Wild cats often pay with their lives when an owner, handler, or member of the public is injured or killed. Keeping people and big cats safely and securely apart saves wild cat and human lives.

Human safety

Both handlers and visitors alike are at risk whenever they come into direct contact with a captive wild cat. A study of tigers in captivity by Nyhus et al. (2003) found:

[I]n the United States the probability that fatal attacks or injuries will occur is highest in situations where tigers are kept as exotic pets, whether in households or in private 'roadside zoos.' This may reflect in part the likelihood that facilities and training are less controlled and there may be a greater opportunity for people, particularly children, to come in contact with these animals through petting, feeding, photo opportunities, and other situations that are less likely to occur in accredited institutions." (p. 580)

The free contact handling of wild cats puts people at risk of injury or death and promotes a false sense of security in owners and handlers. Even when born in captivity and handled by people, wild cats retain their predatory instincts. They can attack suddenly and without warning with disastrous results. Use of protected contact management greatly minimizes the possibility of human injury and death.

References

Nyhus, P.J., Tilson, R.L., and Tomlinson, J.L. (2003). Dangerous Animals in Captivity: Ex Situ Tiger Conflict and Implications for Private Ownership of Exotic Animals. *Zoo Biology*, 22, 573-586.

Wilson, M.L., Perdue, B.M., Bloomsmith, M.A. and Maple, T.L. (2015). Rates of reinforcement and measure of compliance in free and protected contact elephant systems. *Zoo Biology*, (34) 5: 431-437.

For information on the Big Cat Sanctuary Alliance, visit www.BigCatAlliance.org.

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