



## **POSITION PAPER: Big Cat Hybrids and Breeding Big Cats for Rare Colors**

Big Cat Sanctuary Alliance

### **Position: Oppose**

#### **Position summary**

The unusual appearance of white tigers, white lions, and hybrid big cats has made them a profitable product for the exotic animal trade, despite the highly damaging effects of inbreeding and cross-breeding on the animals' health and welfare. Though prized by private owners and the entertainment industry, these big cats often endure a lifetime of debilitating health problems.

The Big Cat Sanctuary Alliance **opposes** the breeding of hybrid wild cats and the purposeful breeding of big cats to achieve rare color morphs, including but not limited to white tigers and white lions.

#### **Hybrid big cats**

Hybrid big cats are the result of cross-breeding different species of big cats. For example, ligers are the result of breeding a female tiger with a male lion, and tigons result from breeding a female lion and a male tiger. Li-ligers are the offspring of a male lion and a female liger. This breeding practice is associated with serious health and welfare issues, as discussed below. Hybrid big cats are mainly found in roadside attractions where they are promoted as curiosities and exploited for profit.

#### **Breeding for rare colors and traits**

Rare colors in big cats, such as white tigers and white lions, are the result of genetic mutations. These animals are not a separate sub-species nor are they albinos. In order to produce cubs with these traits, the cats are inbred, meaning they have been bred with tigers who are closely related genetically. As a consequence, they may suffer serious genetic abnormalities and other serious health issues.

In the case of white tigers, a double recessive gene carried by a small percentage of tigers causes partial loss of pigmentation in an animal, resulting in white fur. White tigers have very rarely been found in the wild because both parents must carry this uncommon recessive gene. All white tigers in captivity today are the result of inbreeding (Nyhus 2010).

White tigers and white lions are found in zoos, circuses, magic shows, roadside attractions and traveling shows, and are held by private owners. The Association of Zoos and Aquariums formally banned the breeding of white tigers in 2011.

#### **No conservation value**

Captive-bred white tigers and white lions serve absolutely no conservation or education purpose, though exhibitors dupe the public into believing there is a need to conserve them. This seriously impedes efforts to inform the public about the true challenges of conserving big cats in the wild. Fewer than 4,000 tigers remain in their home ranges, and lion populations are rapidly decreasing.

Hybrid big cats also have no conservation or education value. Like white tigers and white lions, they are bred solely for profit.

## **Health and welfare problems**

Breeding for rare colors or cross-breeding big cat species seriously compromises animal health and welfare by increasing the chances of disease, debilitating medical conditions, and/or premature death.

Cross-breeding big cat species has severe adverse health impacts, including neurological defects, high neonatal mortality, sterility, cancer, arthritis, genetic abnormalities, organ failure, and gigantism and unsustainable growth. Ligers are predisposed to gigantism and experience diminished life expectancy, behavioral problems due to conflicting instincts, cancer, arthritis and other diseases. Tignons often do not survive infancy and those who do have diminished life spans. They also have a heightened risk of neurological defects, cancer, arthritis, dwarfism, depression, birth defects, and immune deficiencies (ALDF 2016).

The persistent inbreeding of big cats for rare color morphs causes genetic problems to be amplified and accumulate, resulting in disabilities and high mortality rates. For example, in white tigers inbreeding has resulted in facial malformations, hip dysplasia, cleft palate, immune deficiency, spinal deformities, clubbed feet, strabismus (crossed eyes), retinal degeneration, and other critical health problems (AZA 2011; ALDF 2016).

## **References**

ALDF, 2016. Requesting rulemaking to ensure the use of appropriate methods to prevent, control, diagnose and treat diseases and injuries for big cats under the federal Animal Welfare Act. Petition before the United States Department of Agriculture Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service. July 29, 2016.

AZA, 2011 (June). "Welfare and Conservation Implications of Intentional Breeding for the Expression of Rare Recessive Alleles." Animal Welfare Committee: Taskforce on Animal Breeding Practices. White paper.

Nyhus, P.J., Tilson, R., and Hutchins, M. Thirteen Thousand and Counting: How Growing Captive Tiger Populations Threaten Wild Tigers. In *Tigers of the World: The Science, Politics, and Conservation of Panthera Tigris*. Tilson, R. and Nyhus, P.J., eds. Academic Press, 2010.

**For information on the Big Cat Sanctuary Alliance, visit [www.BigCatAlliance.org](http://www.BigCatAlliance.org).  
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