



POSITION PAPER: Display of Wild Cats in Zoos ***Big Cat Sanctuary Alliance***

Position: Zoos accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) – No position
All other zoos - Oppose

Position Summary

The presence of thousands of tigers, lions, leopards, cougars and other big cat species in roadside zoos, pseudo-sanctuaries and novelty displays across the country subjects the animals to deplorable living conditions and inadequate care, threatens public safety, burdens local law enforcement, wastes public agencies' time and resources, and undermines valid conservation efforts.

The Big Cat Sanctuary Alliance takes no position on the display of wild cats in AZA-accredited zoos, and it **opposes** the keeping of big cats in all other zoos.

Poor animal welfare

Captive big cats require substantial space, escape-proof housing, and specialized and costly care that most facilities do not have the expertise and resources to provide. Roadside zoos and pseudo-sanctuaries typically fall far short of accepted industry standards for animal care and husbandry, resulting in big cats spending their lives—often decades—in small, barren enclosures, on concrete or hard compacted dirt, and without the most basic necessities of adequate food and water, shelter, veterinary care, companionship, and space to freely move. They often develop an array of captivity-induced health problems and neurotic behaviors as a result of living in grossly sub-standard conditions.

Additionally, a license from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) *is not* evidence of exceptional—or even adequate—animal care. USDA documents reveal that roadside zoos and other licensees with big cats all too often have miserable records of animal care. Federal audits confirm that the USDA is unable to effectively enforce the limited and inadequate standards of the Animal Welfare Act.

Public safety risk

Unlike dogs, cats, and other companion animals that have been domesticated over the course of centuries, tigers, lions, leopards, cougars and other big cat species are wild animals who never lose their predatory instincts—even when they're born in captivity. In fact, one study that focused on captive tigers in the U.S. determined that tigers are 360 to 720 times more likely to be in a fatal attack than dogs (Nyhus et al, 2003).

Wild cats present obvious physical dangers not only to the people who keep them, but to visitors, neighbors, and emergency responders such as firefighters, paramedics, and police. They can (and do) injure, maim, and kill people, and they take every opportunity to escape as evidenced by the hundreds of incidents that have occurred throughout the country. 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. Most of the incidents would have been avoided if the animals were kept out of unqualified hands. Reckless handling practices and unsafe cages for big cats at roadside zoos not only puts the public at risk, law

enforcement officers and other first responders are often put in danger when they respond to animal escapes or attacks.

Harmful to conservation efforts

The rampant breeding of big cats at roadside zoos and attractions actually harms conservation efforts and is done for the sole purpose of making money. Since almost all big cats at these facilities are of unknown lineage, the breeding of these animals, which is done largely for cub-petting opportunities, has created a surplus of tigers in the U.S. It is estimated that there are more than 5,000 captive tigers in the U.S., the vast majority of which live outside of AZA-accredited zoos (WWF, 2016), which participate in controlled species breeding programs. In addition, the breeding of different color variations of tigers, including white tigers—which are not a distinct subspecies of tiger, but merely an aberrant color variation that is produced exclusively through inbreeding—lacks any conservation value and is done solely for exploitation. All captive white tigers are inbred, and this has led to serious congenital defects including cleft palates, cataracts, club feet, and near-crippling hip dysplasia (AZA, 2011; Guillery and Kaas, 1973; Ketz et al., 2001). Similarly, the interspecies breeding of big cats to produce hybrids such as ligers, tigons, etc., which is increasingly popular at substandard facilities, serves no conservation purpose—and in fact misleads the viewing public about big cats and their protection—since these hybrids would never naturally occur in the wild. (Also see white paper *Big Cat Hybrids and White Tigers*.)

Illegal trafficking

Undercover investigations by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have demonstrated that an illegal trade in big cat parts, including skins and bones, does exist in the U.S. Since there is no system for tracking the big cats that are produced in the country, and tigers are often worth more dead than alive, there is ample opportunity for tigers to end up in the illicit trade in parts and products (Williamson and Henry, 2008; Tilson, 2012).

Further, the rampant breeding of tigers and other big cats, and the lack of tracking requirements and mechanisms, impairs our government's ability to achieve international consensus on preserving the tiger in the wild. China, which seeks to legalize tiger farming to supply the market for their parts, is able to undermine U.S. opposition to tiger farming by correctly pointing out that the U.S. has failed to restrict the breeding and exploitation of captive big cats in this country.

References

- AZA (2011, July). White tigers, lions, and king cheetahs: welfare and conservation implications of intentional breeding for the expression of rare recessive alleles. White paper.
- Guillery R.W., Kaas J.H. (1973). Genetic abnormality of the visual pathways in a “white tiger.” *Science* 180:1287-1288.
- Ketz C.J., et al. (2001). Persistent right aortic arch and aberrant subclavian artery in a white Bengal tiger (*Panthera tigris*). *Journal of Zoo Wildlife Medicine* 32(2):268-272.
- 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.
- Williamson, D.F. and Henry, L.A. Henry (2008). Paper Tigers: The Role of the U.S. Captive Tiger Population in the Trade in Tiger Parts. *TRAFFIC North America*, Washington D.C., and World Wildlife Fund.

WWF (2016, Winter). Captive Tigers in the U.S. Retrieved from <https://www.worldwildlife.org/magazine/issues/winter-2016/articles/captive-tigers-in-the-us>

Tilson, R. (2012, October 16). Petition to the United States Department of Agriculture for Rulemaking to Prohibit Public Contact with Big Cats, Bears, and Nonhuman Primates. Declaration of Ronald Tilson, Ph.D.

**For information on the Big Cat Sanctuary Alliance, visit www.BigCatAlliance.org.
For media inquiries, please email Media@BigCatAlliance.org.**