



POSITION PAPER: Cub Petting and Photos with Captive Wild Cats

Big Cat Sanctuary Alliance

Position: Oppose

Position summary

Public interactions involving captive wild cats of any age compromise animal welfare, pose a risk to public health and safety, undermine conservation of species in the wild, and ultimately create a surplus of dangerous wild animals that are kept in backyards and inadequate facilities across the country.

The Big Cat Sanctuary Alliance **opposes** the use of captive wild cats for cub petting encounters and photographic opportunities or any similar public interaction.

Background

Dozens of U.S. Department of Agriculture licensed facilities across the country engage in the unsafe and inhumane and unsafe practice of allowing members of the public to interact and pose with dangerous wild cats for a fee—essentially using the animals as photo props. This includes tiger cubs and other juvenile large felids as well as smaller felid species of all ages. Cubs are typically separated from their mothers at birth, subjected to excessive handling, denied proper nutrition and veterinary care, and often frequently transported to unfamiliar settings. Once the cubs are too old or too big for handling, they are often discarded, sold off, or caged for the rest of their lives, contributing to the surplus of captive big cats and the epidemic of privately owned dangerous wild cats.

Detrimental to animal health and welfare

Cub petting and photo op exhibitors rely on a steady stream of babies to maintain their businesses. Lions, tigers and other wild cats used for public interaction are forcibly taken from their mothers soon after they are born to be hand-reared, depriving the animals of normal biological and behavioral development. This is done to make them available for handling early in their lives when they are most profitable for direct contact.

In the wild, infant cats nurse for months and remain with their mothers for years after birth. In cub petting operations, babies are often fed a formula diet that lacks the essential nutrients and antibodies they would otherwise receive from their mother's colostrum during early feeding. This results in cubs weighing less than mother-reared cubs and digestive issues from formula-feeding and unhygienic environments, potentially leading to infection (HSUS et al., 2013). Cubs may be intentionally fed an inadequate formula to delay growth in order to prolong the amount of time they can be used for public handling. Malnutrition often results in metabolic bone disease, a condition in which bones become weak and easily break because of insufficient calcium in the diet. A cub's chances of aspiration or death increase when exhibitors allow the public to bottle-feed the animal in an improper and unsafe position (HSUS et al., 2013).

Premature separation of mother and cubs also accelerates the adult female's timeline for reentering estrus. Exhibitors have been observed breeding individual females up to three times per year, which is nearly ten times the animals' natural reproductive rate. This "speed-breeding" and separation cycle severely and often irreparably compromises the physical and behavioral health of the animals involved.

Cub handling businesses often lie to the public when asked why young cubs are apart from their mothers. In most cases, cubs are not rejected or attacked by their mothers. Where rejection does occur, it is likely due to stress caused by human disturbance shortly after cubs are born.

Threats to public health and safety

Public handling of wild cats of any age poses a risk of physical injury and exposure to diseases that are transmissible to humans. These risks are exacerbated when the cub is stressed from continual handling, irregular feeding, and sleep deprivation, which further compromises their immune system. In addition to suffering bite and scratch wounds that can become infected, people can contract parasites such as ringworm (an especially common and very contagious fungal infection in cubs used for public handling) and may become ill with *E. coli*, Toxoplasmosis, Staphylococcus, and Streptococcus by merely holding a cub (HSUS et al., 2013). Even rabies is a threat, as there are currently no vaccines for the disease licensed for use in exotic species (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011).

Lack of education and conservation value

There is nothing educational about cub petting or posing with a wild cat for a photo. Handling cubs who have been denied all things natural to them—family structure and socialization, nutrition, stimulation, space, habitat, etc.—does little to convey information about the behavior, ecosystem role, range, and conservation needs of their wild counterparts.

There is no evidence that petting, playing with, or taking photos with a wild animal helps protect those species in the wild or causes individuals to actively support conservation efforts. On the contrary, according to a study published in the journal *PLOS Biology*, the prevalence of big cats such as lions and tigers in our culture may actively contribute to the false perception that these animals are not at risk of extinction, and therefore not in need of conservation (Courchamp et al., 2018). This deception takes attention away from the real conservation challenges of habitat loss, poaching, illegal trafficking, and human/wildlife conflict.

Public interaction with wild cats can also facilitate the poaching and trafficking of wild animals. Because the U.S. trade in captive wild cats is poorly regulated, there is often no way to know how U.S.-born wild cats are disposed of, including whether they are sold into the wildlife trade for their parts and products—a trade that has become one of the most significant threats to wild cats worldwide. (The U.S. is the second-largest destination for illegally trafficked wildlife in the world.) There is ample opportunity to funnel wild cats who were irresponsibly bred to supply cubs for public contact into the black market trade (Williamson & Henry, 2008). The trade in captive wildlife parts, such as bones and skin, whether legal or illegal, drives demand for the “real” product, resulting in big cats being poached in the wild.

References

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