



POSITION PAPER: Private Ownership of Wild Cats

Big Cat Sanctuary Alliance

Position: Oppose

Position summary

The private ownership of wild cats is a serious problem due to inadequate care and conditions for the animals, the serious risk to public safety, lack of government regulation, and the considerable burden it places on legitimate captive wildlife sanctuaries.

The Big Cat Sanctuary Alliance **opposes** the private ownership of all wild cat species.

Background

Privately owned wild cats are confined in backyards and basements, suburban homes, urban apartments, and on farms and ranches. They are often obtained from unscrupulous breeders who have no regard for animal health or genetic integrity. (See BCSA white papers *General Breeding of Wild Cats* and *Big Cat Hybrids and White Tigers*.)

No U.S. federal agency tracks the number of captive big cats in the country, so the exact number of these animals is unknown. Based on a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) census (which includes only licensed breeders, dealers, or exhibitors but not “pet” owners who are not required to be licensed), it is estimated that there are about 5,000 tigers in the country. When this data is extrapolated to include all big cat species, the number can potentially be far higher.

Lack of sufficient regulation

Unlike animals exhibited in zoos, circuses, roadside menageries and traveling shows, the private possession of wild animals requires no federal licensing. So many wild cat owners are not subject to even the very minimal reporting or documentation requirements under current federal and state law. No federal regulation exists to oversee the private ownership of wild cats, and state laws vary widely. Six states have virtually no laws addressing wild animal ownership (Alabama, Delaware, Nevada, North Carolina, Oklahoma and Wisconsin), some states allow ownership with a permit, and other states restrict ownership only to USDA-licensed exhibitors, who make up the majority of wild cat owners.

Poor animal health and welfare

Captive wild cats require substantial space, escape-proof housing, and specialized and costly care that most private owners do not have the expertise and resources to provide. Wild cats may spend 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, 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.

Public safety threat

Privately owned wild cats are prone to escape and responsible for attacks on adults and children. In June 2019, an escaped “pet” caracal walking down a street attacked a mother and six-year-old child in Illinois. The cat was shot and killed by police. Even when born in captivity and handled by people, wild cats retain their predatory instincts. Wild cats can attack suddenly and without warning

with disastrous results. 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. The reported number of people injured by wild cats likely represents a fraction of the actual number, as these incidents usually go unreported.

A study of captive tigers in the U.S. by Nyhus et al. (2003) states:

“[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)

Danger to first responders

When an incident occurs, such as an animal attack or escape, law enforcement officers and other first responders are often put in danger. The most notable example occurred in Zanesville, Ohio, in 2011 when a deranged man released his collection of exotic animals—including 18 tigers, 17 lions and three cougars—near a populated area (Heath 2012). Sheriff’s deputies risked their lives in a terrifying ordeal that lasted through the night and resulted in them fatally shooting the cats for the sake of public safety. Enforcement agencies rarely have the training or resources to handle such events, and each incident can bear enormous costs – both financially and emotionally. The Zanesville incident cost \$8,000 in officer overtime alone, with several officers subsequently needing time away from work to cope with the severe trauma of having to shoot and kill dozens of wild animals.

Effect on legitimate sanctuaries

When a private owner no longer wants or is unable to care for an animal, there are few options for placement. Zoos accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) generally will not accept big cats from private owners due to the animals’ unknown genetic histories. Inevitably, legitimate captive wildlife sanctuaries – those that do not buy, sell, breed or trade their animals – are on the receiving end of the problem. As a result, most sanctuaries are at capacity or unable to take on the financial obligation of caring for additional animals. Providing lifelong care for captive big cats is extremely expensive. Many rescued cats arrive with existing health problems, requiring specialized care and medications that further increase the cost of their care.

References

Association of Zoos & Aquariums. (n.d). *Species Survival Plan Programs*. Retrieved from <https://www.aza.org/species-survival-plan-programs>.

Heath, Chris (2012, 6 February). 18 Tigers, 17 Lions, 8 Bears, 3 Cougars, 2 Wolves, 1 Baboon, 1 Macaque, and 1 Man Dead in Ohio. *GQ*. Retrieved from <https://www.gq.com/story/terry-thompson-ohio-zoo-massacre-chris-heath-gq-february-2012?verso=true>

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.

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