



POSITION PAPER: Commercial Breeding of Wild Cats

Big Cat Sanctuary Alliance

Position: Oppose

Position summary

Frivolous breeding of wild cats for commercial purposes jeopardizes animal welfare, undermines bona fide conservation efforts, fuels the exotic animal trade, and overburdens sanctuaries. The only legitimate purpose for breeding wild cats is to promote genetic integrity and contribute to conservation.

The Big Cat Sanctuary Alliance **opposes** the commercial breeding of wild cats.

Background

No federal agency tracks the number of captive big cats in the U.S., so it is difficult to provide an exact number. A 2010 analysis of captive tigers reported approximately 5,000 in North America (Nyhus et al.). When this data is extrapolated to include all big cat species, the number would potentially be far higher. While the true number of captive big cats remains unknown, what we do know is that these animals, particularly tigers, continue to be used in commercial enterprise in the US, especially in cub petting operations that rely on the constant production of cubs.

Wild cats are bred for sale to roadside zoos, private owners as exotic “pets”, animal trainers, and traveling exhibitors. Experts suggest that several hundred cubs are born each year to supply facilities that regularly offer petting and photo opportunities with cubs. Exhibitors “speed-breed” the cats without regard for the animals’ health or genetic integrity, solely to provide a steady supply of cubs for public handling opportunities. (Also see BCSA white paper *Cub Petting and Photos with Wild Cats*.)

The AZA is the only domestic organization that manages endangered species through Species Survival Plans (SSPs) based on the best available science to maintain genetic integrity (Association of Zoos & Aquariums, n.d). However, the cats bred in SSPs account for a negligible number of the country’s captive population. For example, only approximately 371 tigers—out of about 5,000 in the U.S.—are part of AZA-managed SSPs, representing the entire population of purebred tigers (Nasser, 2018). The rest are mixed subspecies, inbred or crossbred, and have no genetic value for wild tiger populations.

According to Dr. Ronald Tilson, who coordinated the AZA Tiger SSP from 1987-2011 and had decades of experience in tiger husbandry, private breeders typically ignore professionally-recognized best practices for breeding and fail to maintain genetic diversity. As a result, offspring experience lower reproductive success and “some will suffer from congenital defects such as hip dysplasia and cleft palates, and a few will become so neurotic that they will attack and maim or kill their cage mates” (The Humane Society of the U.S. et al., 2013, p. 58).

Lack of conservation value

Captive wild cat populations are not only of no benefit when it comes to protecting their wild counterparts, they exacerbate the conservation challenges facing big cats in the wild. There is evidence that the prominence of endangered wild cats in captivity undermines efforts to protect them in nature. A study published in the journal PLOS Biology found that 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 climate change, habitat loss, poaching, illegal trafficking, and human/wildlife conflict.

Illegal wildlife trade

The U.S. trade in captive wild cats is virtually unregulated, so there is no way to know how U.S.-born wild cats are disposed of, including whether they are sold 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.) Trade in captive wildlife parts, such as bones and skin, whether legal or illegal, drives demand for the “real” product, thereby leading to big cats being poached in the wild.

The breeding and use of big cats in the U.S. has also interfered with our nation’s ability to positively influence big cat protection practices and policies abroad. The World Bank’s Global Tiger Initiative, which includes tiger range states and non-governmental organizations, called upon the U.S. government to “show leadership and phase out its private captive tiger population” (The Fund for the Tiger, 2011, para. 33). Random captive breeding runs directly counter to this goal.

Effect on legitimate sanctuaries

When wild cats bred for profit outgrow their use—often at just a few months of age—they frequently are disposed of with no commitment to provide appropriate and life-long care. Far too many cats end up housed in financially insecure and substandard facilities. When a private owner no longer wants or is unable to care for an animal or a roadside zoo closes its doors, there are few options for placement. AZA-accredited zoos generally will not accept big cats from these situations 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.

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