

Support the Big Cat Public Safety Act

H.R. 263/S. 1210

Sponsors: Representatives Mike Quigley (D-IL) and Brian Fitzpatrick (R-PA)
Senators Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), Susan Collins (R-ME), Tom Carper (D-DE), and Richard Burr (R-NC)

WHAT THE BILL DOES

The Big Cat Public Safety Act is a commonsense and urgently needed solution to the dangerous and cruel problems associated with private ownership of big cats and direct contact activities like cub petting. The wild animals used for petting and photo-taking encounters, and those imprisoned in basements or backyards as pets, not only suffer immensely, but also pose a serious risk to human safety.

H.R. 263 amends the Captive Wildlife Safety Act to prohibit the private possession of lions, tigers, leopards, cheetahs, jaguars, cougars, or any hybrid of these species. This prohibition is narrowly focused on pet big cats and exempts zoos, sanctuaries, and universities. Current owners are grandfathered in and are simply required to register their animals to ensure that first responders and animal control officers are aware of the presence of such animals in their communities. H.R. 263 also restricts direct contact between the public and big cats.

OVERVIEW OF THE PROBLEM

- It is estimated that thousands of big cats are currently kept in captivity around the United States. Exact numbers are a mystery—nobody knows exactly how many dangerous big cats are being kept in private hands, or where they are.
- A small number of unscrupulous facilities offer cub petting or photo opportunities, which fuels a vicious cycle of breeding and dumping cubs and is the primary cause of the growing population of captive big cats in the US. After they outgrow their usefulness and profitability at 12 weeks old, these cubs are funneled into the exotic pet trade, sold to another disreputable exhibitor, or may end up in the black market trade for wildlife parts.
- This is a problem that requires a federal solution. With some states banning private ownership of big cats, and other states imposing partial restrictions or no restrictions whatsoever, this regulatory patchwork is failing to protect public safety and animal welfare.

PUBLIC SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

- Since 1990, there have been at least 400 dangerous incidents involving captive big cats in 46 states and the District of Columbia. Big cats took the lives of five children and caused serious injuries to others, including lost limbs and other traumatic injuries. Captive big cats also killed 20 adults, and mauled scores of others.
- Among the most dramatic examples was an October 2011 incident in Zanesville, Ohio, in which a private exotic animal owner released dozens of big cats near a community, requiring law enforcement to kill the cats—and risk their own lives—for the sake of public safety.
- Big cats cannot be domesticated. Unlike companion animals who have been domesticated over centuries, big cats always retain their natural instinct to hunt and attack, no matter how they are raised.



John Roca/NYDN

After a man checked into a hospital with a “dog bite,” authorities responded to a tip about a tiger at the man’s apartment in Harlem. Police tranquilized the tiger from outside the window before entering the apartment and removing the big cat.

ANIMAL WELFARE IMPLICATIONS

- Big cats are wild animals who suffer when people attempt to keep them as pets. By the time they are fully grown, they are too strong and dangerous for private owners to manage. Consequently, the animals are frequently neglected and locked away in barren cages with barely enough room to move. Proper care and diet are also very expensive, so the cats are often malnourished and unhealthy.
- Big cats bred for profit can suffer from deformities due to selective breeding for certain physical traits. A prime example is the purposeful breeding for white tigers—which are not a distinct subspecies of tiger but merely an aberrant color variation. Captive white tigers are regularly inbred, and this has led to serious congenital defects including cleft palates, cataracts, club feet, and near-crippling hip dysplasia. This is done solely for cosmetic reasons and serves no conservation goals.
- Direct contact between the public and cubs fuels the demand for big cats as pets and causes enormous suffering. The breeders often separate mother cats from their cubs immediately after birth, leading to physical and psychological harm as it interrupts the mother-cub bonding process and taxes cubs' underdeveloped immune systems. It is stressful and frightening for the cubs to be passed around in crowds of people, and the handlers often physically abuse them to force them to “behave.”

CONSERVATION IMPLICATIONS

- Private ownership of big cats does not contribute to conservation goals. Privately owned big cats from the US cannot be released into the wild because they lack the skills to survive; consequently, confiscated big cats must be placed in other captive environments.
- Ending the continuous breeding of big cats for cub handling and ending the pet trade in big cats would lend the US greater credibility in conservation efforts abroad. State Department efforts to end cruel “tiger farming” are currently hamstrung by the existence of a big cat crisis in our own nation.
- Private possession and rampant breeding of big cats may also contribute to illegal international wildlife trafficking. Illegal trade in big cat parts like skins and bones is big business, and there is currently no way to know how many US-born big cats are exploited and killed for the black market trade.

Endorsements:

Zoological Associations – Association of Zoos & Aquariums, Conservation Society of California/Oakland Zoo, Detroit Zoo, Lincoln Park Zoo, Columbus Zoo and Aquarium, The Wilds, Naples Zoo at Caribbean Gardens, Blank Park Zoo, Audubon Zoo, Denver Zoo, Woodland Park Zoo

Law Enforcement – National Sheriffs' Association, Fraternal Order of Police, Sheriffs' Association of Texas, Maine Sheriffs' Association, West Virginia Sheriff's Association, Small & Rural Law Enforcement Executive Association, Association of Prosecuting Attorneys, New York City Bar Association, Florida Animal Control Association, National Animal Care & Control Association, Virginia Animal Control Association, Illinois Animal Control Association, Sheriff Matthew Lutz (Muskingum County, OH), Sheriff Jack Laurie (Atchison County, KS), Police Chief Chris Chafin (Fair Bluff, NC), Sheriff Vernon P. Stanforth (Fayette County, OH), Tim Harrison (retired law enforcement official from Oakwood, OH), retired USMC and FBI special agent Ed Kelso (Rixeyville, VA), Lt. Joel J. Caldwell (Commander for the Galveston, TX Police Department's Animal Services Unit), Josh Henderson (Supervisor for the Galveston, TX Police Department's Animal Services Unit), Deputy Director of Emergency Management Brad Golden (Park County, CO), Police Chief Dave Draovitch (Bismarck, ND), Sheriff James Custer (Fayette County, PA), Director of Public Safety Frederick Harran (Bensalem Township Police Department, PA), Sheriff Clinton "C.J." Walters (Bradford County, PA), Sheriff Larry Rhodes (retired; Garvin County, OK)

Sanctuaries – Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries, Big Cat Sanctuary Alliance, Lions, Tigers & Bears, Performing Animal Welfare Society (PAWS), Big Cat Rescue, Turpentine Creek Wildlife Refuge, Black Pine Animal Sanctuary, Carolina Tiger Rescue, Cedarhill Animal Sanctuary, Cleveland Amory Black Beauty Ranch, Crown Ridge Tiger Sanctuary, Elmira's Wildlife Sanctuary, Forest Animal Rescue, Keepers of the Wild, Pride Rock Wildlife Refuge, Safe Haven Wildlife Rescue, The Wildcat Sanctuary, Wildcat Ridge Sanctuary

Animal Welfare Organizations – Animal Welfare Institute, International Fund for Animal Welfare, Humane Society Legislative Fund, The Humane Society of the United States, Humane Society Veterinary Medical Association, Born Free USA, World Wildlife Fund, Four Paws, Zoocheck, Endangered Species Coalition, Natural Resources Defense Council, Animal Legal Defense Fund, American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Environment Investigation Agency, Tigers in America, Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Maine Animal Coalition, Maine Friends of Animals, Clemson University Tigers for Tigers