



December 6, 2021

Congreso de Quintana Roo  
Palacio Legislativo  
121 del Boulevard Bahí  
Chetumal, Quintana Roo  
Mexico

**Re: Support for bill to ban public handling of big cats and reptiles**

On behalf of the Big Cat Sanctuary Alliance (BCSA), whose membership is comprised of reputable sanctuary operators and highly regarded U.S. and international partner organizations, we urge you to support the proposed bill to ban public handling of big cats and reptiles. As experts in the field of captive big cats, we are all too familiar with the dangerous and cruel practice of cub petting.

Cub handling is a practice in which traveling exhibitors and roadside zoos charge the public a fee to pet, play with, and even swim with tiger cubs and other juvenile large felids. The cub handling industry utilizes inherently cruel and exploitive practices to profit from the exploitation of innocent animals, while raising serious public safety and animal welfare concerns, including the following:

**Unscrupulous breeding practices are physically and psychologically damaging to both mothers and cubs.**

Big cats are either bred on-site or purchased from unscrupulous breeders who pay no attention to genetics or health. The cubs are forcibly taken away from their mothers shortly after their birth – sometimes on the same day – and hand-reared. This is done to make them accessible for people to handle during the first few months of their lives when they are the most profitable for public contact.

The premature separation of mother and cubs allows exhibitors to “speed-breed” the mothers – as often as three times per year, which is nearly ten times their natural reproductive rate. Both cubs and mothers are traumatized when separated. Cubs may be fed a nutritionally deficient diet in order to stunt their growth and keep them profitable for as long as possible. These nutritional deficiencies can cause serious health problems, such as metabolic bone disease which causes the bones to become brittle and prone to fractures and breaks. To make matters worse, the cubs are often denied proper veterinary care. The stress of constant handling and cruel treatment by handlers often cause illnesses and injuries, and in some instances death.

**Direct contact with big cats is a risk to public health.**

The early separation of mothers and cubs deprives the cubs of antibodies usually received through their mother’s milk during early feeding. This leaves them susceptible to diseases and parasites. Many of these illnesses, including ringworm and several bacterial infections, can easily spread to people handling the cubs. Bites and scratches can lead to bacterial infections as well.

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*Crown Ridge Tiger Sanctuary*

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Animal Sanctuaries*

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*Carolina Tiger Rescue*

Tammy Thies  
*The Wildcat Sanctuary*

**Staff**

Kathy Blachowski  
*Program Manager*

*The Big Cat Sanctuary Alliance (BCSA) is a non-profit organization that works to end the private ownership and commercial exploitation of big cats and other wild cats, while providing expert resources to its sanctuary members aimed at improving the health and welfare of rescued captive wild cats.*

**Cub petting operations dispose of older cubs, creating serious animal welfare and public safety problems.** Once cubs are too old or too big for handling, they are often discarded. They may be sold to private owners who cannot properly care for them or sent to decrepit zoos where they are confined in tiny cages. In both of these instances, poor containment and management can lead to escapes and big cat attacks. Even when born and raised in captivity, big cats remain wild animals. They can attack suddenly and without warning, with tragic results. Discarded cats may also be killed, and their parts and products sold into the black-market wildlife trade.

Some cats may find their way to true captive wildlife sanctuaries, including those that are members of the Big Cat Sanctuary Alliance. True sanctuaries do not buy, sell, breed, or trade their animals, and they do not allow public contact with big cats of any age. As a result, sanctuaries take on the financial obligation of lifelong care for rescued animals, which is extremely expensive. Many rescued cats arrive with existing health problems, requiring specialized care and medications that further increase the cost of their care.

**People handling big cats can transmit COVID-19 to them.**

Big cat species have proven to be susceptible to COVID-19. There are many documented cases of big cats, including tigers, becoming ill with COVID-19, and some big cats have died. Cubs with compromised immune systems are especially at risk for the disease. The virus spreads quickly among big cats, and sick animals are unlikely to receive proper veterinary care.

**Using big cats as props serves no education or conservation purpose.**

Handling a cub that has been denied all things natural – including family structure and socialization, nutrition, stimulation, space, and habitat – does little to convey information about the natural behavior, ecosystem role, range, and conservation needs of its wild counterparts. Cub petting simply sends the wrong message about often highly endangered species, and it may increase the likelihood that someone will consider a wild animal to be appealing as a pet, even though these animals are extremely dangerous.

Cub handling operations harm genuine conservation efforts by misleading people into thinking that big cats are abundant and not at risk of extinction. Using cubs as props and playthings turns these animals into novelties and deflects attention from the serious threats that big cats face in the wild due to poaching, habitat loss, and human-wildlife conflict.

Based on serious public safety and animal welfare concerns, we strongly urge you to support this bill to ban public handling of big cats.

Sincerely,



Kathy Blachowski  
Program Manager, Big Cat Sanctuary Alliance

**BCSA Sanctuary Members**

Big Cat Rescue  
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  
Lions, Tigers and Bears  
Performing Animal Welfare Society  
PrideRock Wildlife Refuge  
Safe Haven Wildlife Rescue  
The Wildcat Sanctuary  
Turpentine Creek Wildlife Refuge  
Wildcat Ridge Sanctuary

**BCSA Partner Members**

AAP Primadomus  
Animal Legal Defense Fund  
Bears, Etc.  
Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries  
International Fund for Animal Welfare  
The Humane Society of the United States  
Tigers in America  
World Animal Protection