



POSITION PAPER: Domestic/Wild Hybrid Cats

Big Cat Sanctuary Alliance

Position: Oppose

Position summary

The breeding and private possession of domestic/wild hybrid cats compromises animal welfare and poses a risk to the safety of the public and other animals. A patchwork of state and local laws and regulations makes oversight difficult, and abandoned or confiscated hybrid cats place a considerable burden on exotic animal sanctuaries.

Hybrid cats are the result of interbreeding domestic and wild cats to produce Savannah cats (Serval/domestic cat), Bengals (Asian leopard cat/domestic cat), Chausies (Jungle cat/domestic cat) and Safari cats (Geoffroy's cat/domestic cat).

The Big Cat Sanctuary Alliance opposes the breeding, selling, and possession of domestic/wild hybrid cats.

Background

The private ownership of hybrid cats has gained popularity in the United States in recent years as people seek out novel pets. However, the hybridization of these cats does not result in domestication, nor does it make them suitable to be kept as pets. Their wild cat lineage means that the natural behaviors and characteristics of those cats are still present, even in later generations.

Hybrid cats are known for being extremely difficult to maintain in captivity. They require more physical and mental stimulation and tend to display more predatory behaviors than domestic cats. Hybrid cats can be destructive, destroying furniture, clothing, and other personal items. Both males and females retain the instinct to mark their territory with urine, a foul-smelling and unsanitary issue for which most owners are unprepared. Other common problematic behaviors include inappropriate elimination (outside a litterbox), excessive vocalization, and aggression toward people and animals. Other pets in the home and the neighborhood may be at risk of injury as a result of aggression by a hybrid cat.

Unfortunately, when these natural behaviors become too much for owners to handle, they often get rid of the hybrid cat. They may try to surrender the cat to a rescue or sanctuary, set them loose, or even euthanize them – simply for expressing natural wild behaviors.

Lack of sufficient regulation

Some countries have implemented restrictions on owning hybrid cats, such as requiring an owner to acquire a license or only allowing hybrid cats as pets after a specific number of breeding generations. In Australia, the import of Savannah cats is strictly forbidden because of the extreme risk they would pose to native wildlife and the environment. Within the United States, Georgia, Hawaii, Nebraska, and Rhode Island have the most restrictive laws on owning hybrid cats as pets. Unfortunately, these state laws have done little to discourage the breeding and selling of these cats. Breeders who supply hybrid cats generally conduct their sales over the internet, making it difficult to locate these businesses and enforce state laws.

Inadequate welfare

It is challenging for private owners to provide hybrid cats with adequate conditions and care. The wild species used to produce hybrids have evolved to roam expansive territories and engage in high energy activities such

as hunting. Hybrid cats retain these characteristics. Life inside a private home does not provide opportunities for adequate exercise, the expression of natural behaviors, and the mental stimulation these cats need. Boredom, restlessness, and frustration lead to unwanted behaviors. When a cat becomes destructive or unruly, they often will be leashed or caged and kept in isolation. They may also face other punishments from frustrated owners.

The breeding process itself is harmful for the cats. Wild and domestic cats are not natural breeding partners, and domestic cats are sometimes attacked and even killed by the wild cats. Genetic differences between wild and domestic cats can lead to difficulties in producing live births. Gestation periods often differ, resulting in kittens being born prematurely or undersized, if not stillborn, and the wild mother rejecting them.

Early generation cats, who essentially are still wild, are the foundation of breeding programs. They are used to produce more generations of hybrids. These founder animals may spend their lives in cages and never be socialized or treated as “pets.” Due to lack of oversight, there is no guarantee that cats used for breeding are receiving adequate care, nutrition, or veterinary attention, or that living conditions meet their needs.

Health Problems

Hybrid cats often experience unexpected health problems. Compared to domestic cats, they have an increased incidence of medical issues such as irritable bowel disease that causes chronic diarrhea, heart disease, thoracic wall deformities, degenerative eye disease, easily dislocated joints, gingivitis, and mouth lesions. These can be highly painful for the cat and very expensive to treat.

Threats to people and animals

Hybrid cats are frequently purchased from breeders as kittens when they are small and docile. As these cats reach sexual maturity, they exhibit an entirely new set of behaviors and can become aggressive toward humans and other pets in the household, sometimes causing injuries. Even later generations of hybrids possess a far more unpredictable temperament than that of the average house cat. They also are much more accomplished hunters. If allowed to roam outdoors, hybrid cats can be devastating for local wildlife.

There are no rabies vaccinations approved by the U.S. Department of Agriculture for use in hybrid cats. This has led the National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians to conclude that hybrid cats should not be kept as pets.

Danger to wild cat populations

The desire to breed hybrid cats encourages the removal of exotic cats from their natural habitats and promotes illegal trade. A position statement by the veterinary group American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP), which strongly opposes the interbreeding of domestic and wild cats, concludes that the “development of hybrid cats does not enhance the welfare of either species.”

Effects on rescue organizations

The breeding and trade of hybrid cats ultimately places a burden on rescue organizations. When owners can no longer tolerate the wild behavior of these hybrids, they often will try to surrender them at a shelter or sanctuary, or simply release them into the community. Domestic animal shelters may not take these cats and most wild cat sanctuaries do not accept hybrids, leaving few options. Sanctuaries that do take in hybrids commit to providing a lifelong home for these animals and they assume all the costs of their care. The expense of caring for hybrid cats that require specialized medical attention, such as surgeries and specific diets, adds to the financial burden.

An estimated 4 million pets are euthanized each year because there are not enough homes for them. If there is a home available for a pet, it should be for an appropriate domestic animal – not a hybrid cat bred as a novelty.

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For media inquiries, please email Media@BigCatAlliance.org.**