



April 19, 2022

### Steering Committee

John Madigan, Chair  
*Crown Ridge Tiger Sanctuary*

Emily McCormack, Vice Chair  
*Turpentine Creek Wildlife Refuge*

Meredith Whitney, M.S.,  
Secretary/Treasurer  
*International Fund for  
Animal Welfare*

Bobbi Brink  
*Lions, Tigers and Bears*

Catherine Doyle, M.S.  
*Performing Animal  
Welfare Society*

Jonathan Kraft  
*Keepers of the Wild*

Kathryn Bertok  
*Carolina Tiger Rescue*

Kristin Leppert  
*Global Federation of  
Animal Sanctuaries*

Leticia "Trish" Nichols  
*Black Pine Animal Sanctuary*

Noelle Almrud  
*Cleveland Amory  
Black Beauty Ranch*

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.*

The Honorable Michael B. Quigley  
U.S. House of Representatives  
2078 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Richard Blumenthal  
U.S. Senate  
706 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

### Re: Support for Big Cat Public Safety Act (H.R. 263/S.1210)

Dear Senator Blumenthal and Representative Quigley,

The Big Cat Sanctuary Alliance (BCSA) – and its 16 sanctuary members who provide lifetime care for rescued big cats – strongly support the Big Cat Public Safety Act. Sanctuaries are on the receiving end of the problems that this bill seeks to remedy by prohibiting the private ownership of captive big cats and restricting direct contact between the public and big cats.

When a private owner wants to relinquish a big cat, or a cub petting facility is shut down, sanctuaries are contacted for help. Our members have put their lives on the line to rescue wild cats in need. Often, they encounter dangerous situations where big cats are held in unsafe conditions. At other times they may need to provide emergency veterinary care. They then take on the immense expense of providing lifelong care for the big cats they rescue.

BCSA sanctuary members are found in 12 states, and they are called on to rescue big cats from all over the U.S. Our members are experts in big cat health, welfare, care, and transport. They currently provide sanctuary for about 550 wild cats, including many who were used in cub petting operations or were privately owned. Because safety is the number one priority, sanctuary caregivers do not share the same space with or come into direct contact with the big cats they care for, and public contact is not allowed with wild cats of any age.

**Despite the important service that our sanctuaries provide to their communities and the country, their voices have not been heard on the Big Cat Public Safety Act.**

No one knows better than sanctuaries that cub petting facilities are the source of surplus big cats in the U.S., and that those cats often make their way into private hands. This puts the public and the animals at great risk.

### **Animal health and welfare is imperiled in cub petting operations.**

Cub petting operations charge the public a fee to handle and take photos with baby tigers, lions, and other wild cats. They rely on a steady stream of cubs to maintain their business. Cubs may be purchased from unscrupulous breeders who pay no attention to genetics or animal health, or they are bred on-site. The cubs are forcibly taken from their mothers shortly after birth and hand reared. This ensures they are available for public handling during the few months of their lives that they can be used for profit. It also allows exhibitors to "speed-breed" females – as often as three times per year, which is nearly ten times their natural reproductive rate – and produce more litters. This eventually wears down the females and adversely affects the health of their cubs.

To keep cubs profitable for as long as possible, facility operators may feed them a nutritionally deficient diet to slow their growth. A painful outcome of this is metabolic

bone disease, which causes the bones to easily fracture. The young cats are not treated for this excruciating condition, which is why the disease is often seen in cats that arrive at our sanctuaries – where they finally receive the care they desperately need.

By 12-16 weeks of age, the cubs become too big, fast, and strong to be used for public contact, and they are no longer profitable for their owners. Some may be kept for breeding purposes. Others may be transferred or sold to private owners who cannot provide for their health and welfare needs. They may be sent to roadside zoos to be confined in impoverished cages for the rest of their lives. Other cats simply “disappear.” And the never-ending cycle of breeding, exploiting, and discarding big cats continues.

**Cub petting and private ownership of big cats threaten public health and safety.**

The risk of a big cat causing human injury or death is highest when the cats are privately owned, used as props for photos, petted, or otherwise in direct contact with people (Nyhus et al., 2003). Cub petting relays a dangerous message to the public – that it is safe to interact with big cats. Some people will find them desirable as “pets”, not believing the animals will grow up to be the dangerous predators they are. Since 1990, more than 400 serious incidents involving captive big cats have been recorded in the U.S., and they are found in nearly every state. Children and adults have lost their lives and scores of others have sustained traumatic injuries. First responders to big cat incidents are put at tremendous risk, and law enforcement agencies are forced to expend already-strained resources.

Public handling of captive big cats poses the risk of exposure to diseases that are transmissible to humans. These risks are exacerbated when the cub is stressed from continual handling, irregular feeding, and sleep deprivation, which further compromises their already weakened immune system. In addition to suffering bite and scratch wounds that can become infected, people can contract serious bacterial infections and parasites such as ringworm.

**Cub petting operations undermine legitimate conservation efforts.**

Cub petting does not help conserve endangered species like tigers. When people pay to handle tiger cubs, they get the false impression that these animals are plentiful and not in need of conservation. This deflects attention and donations from serious efforts to save tigers, of which fewer than 4,000 remain in the wild.

BCSA sanctuary members have direct experience with the animal welfare and public safety problems created by the private ownership of big cats and the unrestricted breeding of these animals for cub petting operations. Based on the collective experience of our members and the need for change, the Big Cat Sanctuary Alliance strongly supports the Big Cat Public Safety Act.

Sincerely,



John Madigan  
Steering Committee Chair  
Big Cat Sanctuary Alliance

**BCSA Sanctuary Members**

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| Big Cat Rescue – Tampa, FL                       | Keepers of the Wild – Valentine, AZ                   |
| Black Beauty Ranch – Murchison, TX               | Lions, Tigers and Bears – Alpine, CA                  |
| Black Pine Animal Sanctuary – Albion, IN         | Performing Animal Welfare Society – Galt, CA          |
| Carolina Tiger Rescue – Pittsboro, NC            | PrideRock Wildlife Refuge – Terrell, TX               |
| Cedarhill Animal Sanctuary – Caledonia, MS       | Safe Haven Wildlife Sanctuary – Imlay NV              |
| Crown Ridge Tiger Sanctuary – Ste. Genevieve, MO | The Wildcat Sanctuary – Sandstone, MN                 |
| Elmira’s Wildlife Sanctuary – Wimauma, FL        | Turpentine Creek Wildlife Refuge – Eureka Springs, AR |
| Forest Animal Rescue – Silver Springs, FL        | WildCat Ridge Sanctuary – Scotts Mills, OR            |

**Reference:** 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.