



Exotic Animals in Private Hands in Ohio



API's investigation into the private ownership of exotic animals and roadside zoos and menageries in Ohio revealed the appalling conditions in which some of these animals were kept as well the dangers that such animals present to public safety. Key findings include:

- **Poor Conditions:** Animals kept in inadequate conditions; pens that were too small, which failed to allow animals to express normal, species-specific behaviors.
- **Lack of Enrichment:** Pens that were barren or lacked appropriate structures and furnishings and did little, if anything, to stimulate the animals' natural behavior, resulting in stereotypical behavior.
- **Lack of Companionship:** Animals who were housed alone.
- **Cruel and Inappropriate Treatment:** Animals' teeth and claws surgically removed; animals left to roam inside houses; nonhuman primates treated like human children.
- **Dangerous Public Contact:** The offering of "close encounters" in which the public was allowed to have direct contact with dangerous animals; ineffective barriers to protect the public from having direct contact with the animals.
- **Reckless Behavior:** Owners placed the public and themselves at risk through irresponsible behavior.
- **Animal Attacks:** Reports of attacks and injuries inflicted by exotic animals on owners and others.

Ohio currently has no state laws regulating the private ownership of exotic animals.

Examples of Poor Conditions / Animal Mistreatment



• **Stump Hill Farm:** This facility was open to the public by appointment and hired out its animals for events. It had been cited by the USDA on a number of occasions over the years for failing to provide minimal standards of care for its animals, including failure to provide environmental enrichment; failure to provide minimum space; failure to provide veterinary care; and failure to provide drinking water. Animals housed at this facility included bears, big cats, and primates.

Many of the bear pens were extremely small, dark, barren, and cramped. Small, makeshift wooden huts appeared to be the only form of shelter. There was no water to bathe in and no trees or branches for the animals to scratch. A number of the animals displayed stereotypical behavior, including pacing and swaying. (See Fig. 1)

A number of big cats were kept in small, cramped pens similar to those housing the bears. The animals' movements were severely restricted and some displayed stereotypical behavior, pacing inside the small pens. Like the bear pens, no wooden structures or water in which to bathe were



FIG. 1: Many animals, including this bear, were confined to small, barren environments that failed to meet their physical and psychological needs. (Stump Hill Farm, OH)



FIG. 2: This chimpanzee had no teeth. It is common for owners to have their exotic animals de-clawed, de-fanged, or both in an attempt to limit the potential danger the animals pose to humans. (Stump Hill Farm, OH)



FIG. 3: This run-down site was open to the public and gave school tours. These two Arctic foxes were kept in an inadequate, small, wire-constructed pen with a wire floor. (Hope's Heaven Sent Zoo & Etc., OH)

Many deficiencies are noted among licensed facilities each year, but fewer than 1% are charged for violations, and an even smaller number have their license suspended or revoked.



FIG. 4: This snow monkey was kept in solitary confinement and given root beer and candy in return for performing "tricks" in front of visitors. (Hope's Heaven Sent Zoo & Etc., OH)

visible inside the cat pens.

Several primates were housed alone, including a 26-year-old chimpanzee. (See Fig. 2)

- **Hope's Heaven Sent Zoo & Etc:** This was a run-down site, with numerous animals, both exotic and domesticated species. Many of the animals were kept in appalling conditions; enclosures were poorly constructed and poorly maintained. A cougar housed on his own had a dilapidated wooden hut, made of pallets, as his source of shelter. Nearby, two Arctic foxes were kept in an inadequate, small, wire-constructed pen with a wire floor. Some animals displayed stereotypical behavior, pacing and circling inside their pens. (See Fig. 3)

One primate, a snow monkey, was housed on his own. There was a plastic pipe that ran into his pen, down which the owner poured root beer and candy for him. (See Fig. 4) A candy machine was kept on-site for visitors to purchase "treats" for the animals. This site was open to the public and gave school tours.

- **Private Owner B:** This owner, a representative of an outspoken organization that actively lobbies against the banning of the ownership of exotic cats, housed a number of exotic animals in unsuitable conditions in the overcrowded living room of a small house. Four humans lived in this house along with two servals, a lemur, a bush baby, three birds, and at least two snakes. The ring-tailed lemur and bush baby were housed on their own in small cages on the floor. The ring-tailed lemur displayed severe stereotypical behavior, circling around the confines of his small cage. (See Fig. 5) The servals ran loose in the house. (See Fig. 6) Outside, a six-year-old cougar was kept on his own in a small pen attached to what appeared to be the garage. The pen was barren. The cougar did not have his canine teeth. The owner claimed that the cougar's jaw had been broken, presumably when the teeth were removed.

Examples of Threats to Public Safety / Reckless Behavior



- **Siberian Tiger Conservation Association:** API investigators were placed at serious risk during their time at this facility. They signed up for a one-day training program to work with large exotic cats. At the time of this visit, the establishment had lost its USDA exhibitor's license because a number of people had been attacked and injured by the cats during so-called "close encounters." The facility was no longer officially open to the public; however, despite the attacks and the subsequent loss of her license, the owner continued to hold "close encounters" with tigers by allowing the public to pay for a "training and education" session. This activity, which was advertised on the facility's website, had apparently continued to occur without a USDA license and, as of the preparation of this report, no official action had been taken by the USDA.

The owner's behavior towards her visitors was irresponsible and reckless. API investigators were allowed not only to hand-feed cats, but were also taken into an enclosure containing three adult tigers and encouraged to touch, stroke, kiss, and even sit astride the animals.

On one occasion, the owner put her arm and hand inside a tiger's mouth. (See Fig. 7) API investigators were then encouraged to stick their arms in the tiger's face to be licked. At one point, the tiger grabbed one of the investigator's arms. On two occasions, a tiger jumped at an investigator. One tiger grabbed an investigator's leg and tried to bite him before being pulled away.

Other incidents that happened during the day involved one tiger putting her mouth around the owner's leg. She smacked the tiger on the nose after this incident, which was inappropriate and could potentially have caused further problems. Another tiger put her mouth over the fingers of one of the students while she was splashing water in a trough.

According to the *Kenyon Collegian* and the USDA, in October 2000, a ten-year-old boy was knocked to the ground and bitten on the leg by a tiger at the Siberian Tiger Conservation Association (then known as the "Siberian Tiger Foundation") while participating in a "close encounter" at the facility. This was the tenth incident in seven months in which people were bitten or otherwise injured by tigers at the facility.

- **Tiger Ridge Exotics:** This facility housed a number of tigers, lions, and bears. The behavior of the owner during API's visit was reckless and irresponsible. He entered a number of enclosures containing bears and lions, opening gates that led directly from the animal areas into the areas used by the public, with little apparent concern for safety. The facility had no safety areas within the various outdoor enclosures housing bears and large cats. This meant that for a short period of time, there was no effective barrier between the animals and API investigators. (See Fig. 8) The gate to one of the enclosures containing two lions and a bear actually opened outward, an unsafe set-up.



A young bear was used to attract people driving past the facility. He was at the front of the property in a location furnished like a children's play area. The area was surrounded by a low fence made from three crudely-placed electric wires. (See photo above) The owner jumped around on a trampoline with the bear cub.

The owner also entered a pen containing two bears, one of whom had attacked him in the past. The bears were on the other side of the gate,



FIG. 5: This lemur was deprived of space and companionship. He showed abnormal behavior, circling frantically inside the confines of his small cage. (Private Owner, OH)



FIG. 6: Some private owners even allow their exotic "pets" to roam freely inside their homes, like this serval in Ohio. Not only is this unsuitable for the animals, it poses a danger to humans as well. (Private Owner, OH)



FIG. 7: The owner put her arm in a tiger's mouth, then encouraged participants at her "close encounter" to stick their hands in front of the tiger's face to be licked. (Siberian Tiger Conservation Association, OH)



FIG. 8: The owner risked the safety of visitors by opening gates that led directly into the pens of dangerous animals. (Tiger Ridge Exotics, OH)

which the owner appeared to simply push behind him without locking. One of the bears grabbed his arm with his mouth, forcing him to step backwards. After getting the bear to stand for "treats," the owner stuck his face into the bear's face. (See *Masthead photo*) He then opened the gate and stood there with the gate open while trying to get one of the bears to perform a trick.

The owner also took API investigators to a basement area. One pen contained two tigers, and another a jaguar. The owner acknowledged that the animals were aggressive. When the owner went into the jaguar pen, he used a pole to control the animal. Yet on both occasions he opened and shut the metal gates with API investigators on one side and the animals immediately on the other. The animals behaved very aggressively, and the jaguar leapt at the gate as it was closed.

During API's visit, the owner of this facility was bitten by a lynx. The animal was sitting on the lap of one of API's investigators, who was inside the animal's pen at the suggestion of the owner. When the lynx put her mouth around the investigator's arm, the owner of the facility reached out and the lynx grabbed his arm with her teeth and bit him, inflicting a bleeding wound. The owner described how a number of his animals had attacked him, including a bear, monkey, and jaguar.

API's Recommendations

Faced with the evidence uncovered by this investigation, and the rising tide of attacks and injuries nationwide, API is calling for four key steps to be taken as a matter of priority:

- Ohio must act now to pass laws that ensure that the private ownership of exotic animals is prohibited.
- The breeding, selling, and display of exotic animals at roadside zoos and menageries must end.
- The public must be educated about the safety threats and animal welfare concerns associated with roadside zoos and exotic "pets," and be shown that wild animals do not belong in private hands.
- Where exotic animals cannot be transferred to a genuine sanctuary, existing owners must, at a minimum, increase the standard of care being provided to ensure the safety and well-being of the animals and the public.