

A LIFE SENTENCE



THE SAD AND
DANGEROUS REALITIES
OF EXOTIC ANIMALS
IN PRIVATE HANDS
IN THE U.S.





Primates are highly intelligent and social animals. Keeping them as "pets" in unnatural and solitary conditions produces disturbed behaviors, such as self-mutilation, as this snow monkey displays. (Private Owner, OH)



These bears were kept in small, barren, concrete pits, with no shelter, and were forced to "beg" for the amusement of the public. Those bears who "performed" were rewarded by being thrown treats. (Cherokee Bear Zoo, NC)

The Problems with Private Ownership of Exotic Animals

Across the United States, millions of exotic animals are kept captive in private homes and in roadside zoos and menageries. These animals — including, among other species, lions, tigers, cougars, wolves, bears, monkeys, and venomous snakes and other reptiles — pose grave dangers to human health and safety.

Every year, people are attacked and injured by exotic "pets" or exotic animals in roadside zoos; some of the attacks are fatal, and children are too often the victims. In addition, the deplorable conditions in which privately-owned exotic animals are often kept raise serious animal welfare concerns.

By their very nature, exotic animals are incapable of being domesticated or tamed. Not only are exotic animals inherently dangerous and unpredictable, but most people cannot provide the special care, housing, diet, and maintenance they require. That's why groups as diverse as the American Veterinary Medical Association, the United States Department of Agriculture, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Animal Control Association, and the American Zoo and Aquarium Association have all opposed the private ownership of certain exotic animals.

The Animal Protection Institute Investigation

In response to the critical threats that the private ownership of exotic animals poses to animal welfare and public safety, the Animal Protection Institute (API) launched a groundbreaking investigation, including a comprehensive report and recommendations for steps that lawmakers and communities must take to address this urgent issue.

Throughout the summer and fall of 2005, API investigated private homes and federally-licensed roadside zoos and menageries that housed exotic animals in North Carolina, Ohio, and Washington — three states that at the time had no laws addressing the private ownership of such animals. In 2007, using the evidence gathered as support, API was able to successfully pass legislation in Washington prohibiting the future possession and breeding of certain exotic animals.

API's investigators focused on the safety issues surrounding how these animals were kept, what contact the public and others were allowed to have with dangerous animals, and incidents involving attacks and injuries to humans, including owners. We also examined how owners provided for the needs of exotic animals by analyzing, among other things, how the animals were housed, what type of enrichment was provided, and whether the animals had direct contact with others of their kind.

Our investigation has revealed disturbing new evidence — evidence that demonstrates just how critical it is that lawmakers and communities take up the issue of private exotic animal ownership nationwide.

API uncovered the shocking conditions in which exotic animals are kept, the suffering they endure, and the inadequate and inappropriate care and treatment they receive, as well as the real threats that exotic animals pose to public safety. Especially troubling is the fact that the majority of instances of inadequate care and treatment did not violate any current federal law or respective state law.

Examples of the serious public safety and animal welfare problems API found include:

- **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.
- **Child Endangerment:** Children placed at risk of attacks and injuries from dangerous exotic animals in private homes and at facilities open to the public.
- **Reckless Behavior:** Owners placing the public and themselves at risk through irresponsible behavior with dangerous animals.
- **Animal Attacks:** Reports of attacks and injuries inflicted by exotic animals on owners and others.
- **Poor Conditions:** Animals kept in inadequate conditions, including pens that were too small, that lacked shelter from the elements, and that 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 provide a natural environment for the animals, resulting in dysfunctional and stereotypical behaviors.
- **Lack of Companionship:** Animals who were housed in solitary confinement, denied contact with others of their kind.
- **Cruel and Inappropriate Treatment:** Animals handled roughly and inappropriately; animals who had teeth and claws surgically removed; nonhuman primates treated like human children; animals left to roam inside houses.
- **Overbreeding:** The continual breeding of certain species to provide a constant supply of young animals as attractions and for photo opportunities.



In addition to housing this serval in a small pen, this wild cat's owner admitted to being a breeder and stated that he made a living from breeding animals rather than exhibiting them. (Burnette's Pet Farm, OH)



The owner performed reckless tricks, such as riding this tiger, for visitors. (Charlotte Metro Zoo, NC)

Children were allowed to stick their hands through bars to touch these large tiger cubs. These cubs were also taken out for “photo ops” that included direct contact with the public. (Cherokee Bear Zoo, NC)



A low electric wire fence was the only barrier between bears and visitors' cars at this drive-through "farm." (Olympic Game Farm, WA)



At "Primate Picnics," owners gathered to eat, talk, and socialize, while proudly displaying their monkeys in human baby clothes. This one had pierced ears and was dressed like a ballerina. Other primates displayed signs of stereotypical behavior, rocking and circling inside traveling cages. ("Pet" monkey at Primate Picnic, IL)

API's Recommendations

The lesson learned from this investigation is clear: the only way to put an end to the suffering and dangers that exotic animal ownership poses to humans and nonhumans alike is to stop the private possession, breeding, trading, and sale of these animals for personal profit and amusement.

Four steps must follow from this investigation:

- States 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 animal welfare concerns and public safety threats 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.

The time has come to end the private ownership of exotic animals in the United States. API calls upon legislators and communities to act now to ensure that strong and effective laws are passed to address this critical issue before yet another tragedy occurs.

RESOURCES

We have many resources available for learning more about the problems of exotic animal ownership, including:

- Our comprehensive report, *A Life Sentence*
- Our investigative DVD, *A Life Sentence*
- A list of incidents involving exotic "pets" and exotic animals in roadside zoos
- An overview of laws related to the keeping of exotic animals in captivity in the U.S.
- Resources for lawmakers and others interested in changing exotic animal laws at the state and local levels
- Model legislation on the issue of private ownership of exotic animals

To learn more, go to www.bornfreeusa.org, call (800) 348-7387, or e-mail info@bornfreeusa.org.

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