



Exotic Animals in Private Hands in North Carolina



API's investigation into the private ownership of exotic animals and roadside zoos and menageries in North Carolina 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 handled roughly and inappropriately; teeth and claws surgically removed; nonhuman primates often treated like human children, kept in diapers; animals left to roam inside houses.
- **Overbreeding:** The continual breeding of certain species to provide a constant supply of young animals for attractions and photo opportunities.
- **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.
- **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.

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

Examples of Poor Conditions / Animal Mistreatment



- **Charlotte Metro Zoo:** Animals housed here included a number of big cats such as tigers, lions, and leopards; bears; and various species of primates, including a chimpanzee, baboons, and macaques. Many of the animals were kept in inadequate conditions: pens were small, barren, and lacked meaningful enrichment. Some animals displayed stereotypical behavior, such as circling, pacing, and rocking. The facility had been cited by the USDA on a number of occasions for failing to provide minimal standards of care for its animals, including failure to provide environmental enrichment, failure to provide shelter, failure to erect a perimeter fence, inadequate feeding, and more.



FIG. 1: *Animals were often kept in poor conditions that lacked appropriate structures and enrichment for the species. In a barren, muddy, and wet cage, there were no raised platforms to allow the cats off the ground. (Charlotte Metro Zoo, NC)*



FIG. 2: *Bears were kept in barren concrete pits with a visitors' "gallery" above so that people could look down and throw food at them. There was no shelter, forcing them to be on permanent "display." (Cherokee Bear Zoo, NC)*



FIG. 3: These bears were kept in appalling conditions. The pens had concrete floors and were extremely small and barren. One pen had no shelter. (Santa's Land, NC)



FIG. 4: Animals are often confined to small and barren environments that fail to meet their physical and psychological needs. This tiger displayed marked stereotypical behavior, pacing inside his small, concrete prison. (Triangle Metro Zoo, NC)

The large cats lived in different size enclosures and pens with either earthen or concrete floors. For many animals, there was little in the way of structures and meaningful enrichment. Some cats displayed stereotypical behavior, pacing inside their pens. On the day of API's visit, it was raining. One pen containing three tigers was very wet and muddy. There were no raised platforms that would allow the cats to be off the ground. (See Fig. 1)

One leopard was found on his own in a small metal trailer covered by a blue tarpaulin sheet. (See Masthead photo) Another leopard was kept in a very small, barren pen under the porch of an on-site private residence.

Some of the primates were housed in pairs, but others were kept singly, with no opportunity to socialize. Enrichment methods were not substantive and pens were not suitable for the species they housed. Some pens had concrete floors and lacked height and space. A number of the monkeys displayed stereotypical behavior such as pacing, rocking, circling, and repetitive jumping.

Some animals were handled roughly and treated aggressively by the facility's owner and his partner. The owner told API investigators that the best way to stop a monkey from biting was to gag her by shoving fingers down the animal's throat. He also smacked one tiger on the face after the tiger bit him. His partner roughly handled infant monkeys.

-
- **Cherokee Bear Zoo:** This facility contained a number of bears, primates, and tigers. The animals were housed in poor conditions and music blared constantly throughout the zoo.

The bears were kept in concrete pits with a visitors' "gallery" above them so that people could look down and throw food at them. There were a number of these pits, all in a row, containing either two or four bears. The pits were made entirely of concrete. There were no shelters visible. The bears had no privacy, and were forced to be on display the whole time and were literally "performing" for their food. (See Fig. 2)

The conditions for the primates and a tiger failed to meet the animals' physical and psychological needs. Most of the primates were kept in circular cages with concrete floors and a roof. These cages were small and barren. The baboons in particular suffered in such a confined space. The tiger pen was small, with a concrete floor; a depression in the ground was used as a water area. Otherwise, the pen was barren. There was no shelter available for the animal.

-
- **Santa's Land:** This theme park and petting zoo housed a number of animals, including bears and cougars. Many of the animals were kept in poor conditions, in small and barren pens. (See Fig. 3)

Four adult black bears were kept in pairs in two extremely small, dark pens, with low roofs and concrete floors. The only structures in one of the pens were a small raised wooden platform and a shallow concrete container that appeared to be the bears' only source of water and was almost empty. There was no shelter.

Two cougars were housed in a small, dark, concrete pen with a covered roof. There was no shelter, just a raised wooden platform. The only other structure in the pen was a concrete water bowl.

-
- **Triangle Metro Zoo:** Animals kept here included bears, big cats, and

primates. Many of the animal pens were inadequate: small and barren with a concrete or shiny artificial surface. The pens were clearly designed for appearance and ease of cleaning, not to meet the needs of the animals. They lacked enrichment, some only containing a water trough. (See Fig. 4)

Two bears were housed in a small closed-topped pen with an artificial floor. There was a depression in the surface for a water area. The only items in the pen were a small metal hut attached to one side, a log, and a metal bracket (possibly used to hold a bucket). A plastic tube allowed the public to feed the bears. Otherwise, the pen was empty.

Two lions were kept in a very small, barren pen with an artificial floor. There was a small brick building attached for a shelter. The only other item in the pen was a water trough. There were no structures or enrichment. A tiger, who displayed stereotypical behavior, was kept in a similarly small and barren pen nearby. (See Fig. 4)

Examples of Threats to Public Safety / Reckless Behavior / Child Endangerment



• **Charlotte Metro Zoo:** The owner of this facility behaved recklessly during API's investigators' visit and took risks with public safety. He performed tricks with tigers in front of visitors, sitting on one tiger's back and sticking his face into the mouth of another. On one occasion, an adult tiger on a leash was on display in a non-secured area. The owner put his arm, and then his head, into the tiger's mouth. He then walked the tiger, holding only the collar, back into his enclosure. (See Fig. 5)

Tigers, lions, and monkeys were bred on-site and used in photo shoots and taken to fairs. It appeared that some, if not all, of the tiger cubs and infant monkeys were removed prematurely from their mothers for commercial purposes. The animals were raised inside an on-site private residence. Despite acknowledging the potential dangers that tiger cubs and infant monkeys pose to the public, the owner appeared to regularly take these animals out to let visitors see them and for photo opportunities.

API investigators were invited into an on-site private residence to see the infant monkeys and tiger cubs who were kept in the house. All the animals had their teeth and claws. Incidents took place at the house while API investigators were present that posed a serious danger to a five-year-old girl living there. On one occasion, a tiger cub climbed onto the girl and grabbed her with his paws. Her mother had to push the cub away. The child climbed out of reach onto the back of the sofa. The child was nervous around the animals and at one point asked her mother not to let the tiger cub bite her if she got off the sofa. The tiger cub bit the mother's foot.

Underneath the porch of the house, an adult black leopard was kept in a small pen. From the porch, the child would be able to stick her hands through the wire directly into the pen and touch the leopard. (See Fig. 6)

The mother was irresponsible to allow this interaction. Not only was the child's safety at risk, but the animals themselves were at risk from the actions of the child. On one occasion, the child was pulling one of the monkeys around roughly on his leash and swinging him in the air, shouting and laughing while she did it. Her mother made no attempt to stop her.

• **Cherokee Bear Zoo:** A number of incidents took place during API's visit

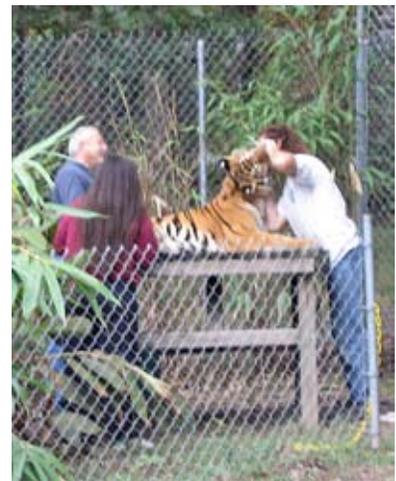


FIG. 5: The owner performed tricks with tigers in front of visitors such as putting his arm and then his head into this tiger's mouth, as seen here. (Charlotte Metro Zoo, NC)

The Animal Welfare Act (AWA) requires that there be a sufficient distance and/or barriers between the animal and the general viewing public so as to assure the safety of animals and the public.



FIG. 6: This child was at risk from a leopard who was kept in a cage under the porch of this house. (On-site Private Residence at Charlotte Metro Zoo, NC)



FIG. 7: 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)



FIG. 8: The public, including children, were openly encouraged to touch bears. One of the staff told visitors: “Our insurance company says no petting. However, if you decide you want to pet them, keep in mind we’re not liable, okay. Now they will bite, but if you decide you want to pet them, I suggest you might want to pet them on the back, away from the head area.” (Santa’s Land, NC)

that raised concerns about the risks this zoo took with visitors’ safety.

The zoo placed the public at risk by allowing direct contact with dangerous animals during photo sessions. Two five-month-old tiger cubs were used in these sessions. People were allowed to bottle-feed the tiger cubs while having their photograph taken. The cubs had been de-clawed in their front feet but still had their teeth and were capable of inflicting serious bites. The cubs were not put on leashes for the photos but were roughly handled by the collar. There was no safety area attached to the pen, allowing the cubs direct access into public areas if they escaped. Following one photo session, a staff member left a tiger cub unsupervised and unleashed outside of her pen.

In addition, a group of children was actually allowed to stick their hands through the bars of the tiger pen to touch the tiger cubs. The cubs started to jump up at the children, who became nervous; their parents called them away. (See Fig. 7)

- **Santa’s Land:** This facility took risks with public safety by allowing zoo visitors, including children, to have direct contact with dangerous animals. Two seven-month-old bear cubs were put on public display during feeding time. Adults and children gathered for the event, where there was only an ineffective safety barrier (a low single rail circling a platform). The gate to the bears’ pen was opened and the cubs were allowed to run out unrestrained onto the platform directly in front of the public. The animals climbed two poles and a staff member held out a bottle of fruit punch for them to drink. It was only then that the bears were leashed. A staff member openly encouraged the public to touch the bears, even though they were told the animals could bite. When the bears climbed down from the poles, children reached out and started to stroke the bears. After a while the gate was opened and the bears were led back inside their pen. The gate was left open while the leashes were removed. (See Fig. 8)

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:

- North Carolina 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.