



Exotic Animals in Private Hands in Washington



API's investigation into the private ownership of exotic animals and roadside zoos and menageries in Washington 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.
- **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.

NOTE: API's investigation was conducted in 2005. In 2007, using the evidence gathered as support, API was able to successfully pass legislation in Washington that prohibits the future possession and breeding of certain exotic animals such as large cats, bears, wolves, nonhuman primates, and dangerous reptiles.

Examples of Poor Conditions / Animal Mistreatment



• **Olympic Game Farm:** At this facility, visitors drive through areas containing a number of exotic species. Lions, tigers, cougars, and wolves were kept in a series of pens with wire roofs. The access road for cars ran alongside the front and back of these pens. Outside areas were small and lacked meaningful enrichment. Shelters were not completely closed off, so the animals had no privacy but rather were always on display for visitors.

The main drive-through bear enclosure was a large grassed area, although the landscape appeared to be essentially barren, with just a few metal corrugated structures as shelter, almost as if to keep the animals on permanent display. The bears lined up along the fence line and begged for



FIG. 1: Bears enjoy bathing and swimming, yet at this facility, this water trough was too small for the animals to climb into. (Olympic Game Farm, WA)



FIG. 2: This bear lived in a poorly maintained pen and this trailer provided little privacy or shelter from the elements. (Olympic Game Farm, WA)



FIG. 3 & 4: Three cougars were kept in small, barren pens that ran right through the wall of this house and opened out into the living room. These are totally unnatural and unsuitable conditions for dangerous wild animals. (Private Owner, WA)

Exotic “pet” owners are abusing the system and obtaining USDA licenses with ease. While claiming that they are exhibiting the animal to the public, the reality is that the animal is being kept as a “pet.”

This is why USDA licenses should not be exempted under state and local laws governing exotic animal ownership issues.

treats. (See Masthead photo) There were no large water troughs visible for the bears to sit or bathe in. One concrete trough was so narrow that the bears could only sit next to it and dangle their paws in the water. (See Fig. 1)

At another location, a group of four bears was kept in a smaller grassed area. Attached to the fence, on the outside of the enclosure, was a metal trailer with metal bars. The trailer had a line of chicken wire around it, attached to metal poles stuck in the ground, providing a very crude and ineffectual safety barrier. A bear sitting in the trailer was able to stick his paws through the trailer bars. The trailer gave the bears little in the way of privacy or shelter from the elements. (See Fig. 2)

- **Private Owner D:** This individual, a leading representative of an organization that advocates the keeping of exotic animals as “pets,” kept three cougars and a group of bobcats in pens that lacked space and enrichment. Three narrow pens, each housing one cougar, ran right through the wall of the house into the living room. Gates (without locks) opened out into the living room. The outside pens were small and lacked climbing structures. (See Figs. 3 & 4) The pen for the bobcats also lacked enrichment, containing only a few shelter boxes.

- **Private Owner F:** This individual kept a cougar, a tiger, and two bears in deplorable conditions. The pens were small, barren, dirty, and muddy. There was no attempt at environmental enrichment. The animals’ physical and psychological welfare were severely compromised.

A five-year-old tiger and five-year-old cougar were kept in separate small, barren pens topped with wire, creating a low roof. Both pens were extremely muddy and had pools of water. The cats displayed severe stereotypical behavior (pacing and head weaving).

Two bears existed in appalling conditions. They were kept separately in small pens that were low and open-topped. There were no structures or enrichment in these pens. The bears lived on muddy ground on which were strewn a few stones, old plastic eating containers, tin cans, and other debris. There were no shelters to protect them from the elements and no raised platforms to allow them to get respite from the muddy ground that had pools of water. The bears must have suffered greatly from boredom and frustration. This location was lauded as an appropriate facility in which to place a needy exotic animal by a leading representative from an organization that advocates the keeping of exotic animals as “pets” and claims to be the “responsible” face of private ownership. (See Fig. 5)



- **Private Owner G:** This individual no longer wanted his five-year-old “pet” cougar and was trying to find a home for him. He had originally bought the cougar from a local pet shop.

The owner claimed that he could no longer care for the cat, and the animal had started to show signs of aggression; apparently the owner had recently been attacked. The cougar was living in a small, barren, unsuitable pen in the yard, which no one had entered or cleaned out for about a month.

Concern was expressed by another private owner about whether the roof would collapse when it started to snow. There was no perimeter fence or safety area attached to the pen. It had a low roof and lacked enrichment. The cougar displayed stereotypical behavior, pacing inside the pen. (See photo below left)



FIG. 5: These squalid conditions were home to a “pet” bear. The pen was extremely small and contained no shelter, platform, or enrichment; the ground was covered in mud and debris. (Private Owner, WA)

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



- **Outback Kangaroo Farm:** The public, including children, were placed at risk by being allowed to walk among kangaroos, touching and feeding them. There were no safety barriers, although kangaroos are very powerful animals and can cause serious injury. (See Figs. 6 & 7)

Visitors could also spend time in a room with lemurs. This showed a lack of responsibility towards public safety, particularly with infant animals around. Primates are extremely protective of their young. API investigators were even encouraged to hand-feed the lemurs and to stand up so that the lemurs would climb onto their backs. During this encounter, the owner admitted that the adult male lemur had bitten a previous owner.

- **Private Owner D:** During API’s investigators’ visit, this individual placed herself and others at risk through her reckless and irresponsible behavior. She entered her bobcat enclosure and was attacked twice by one of the bobcats. She encouraged the cats to go through a gate into what was supposed to be a lock-out area. The gate to the lock-out area was not secure, allowing the bobcat who had already bitten her to escape through the gate and attack her again.

The woman also opened the gate to one of her indoor cougar pens, which meant there was no barrier between the cougar and the woman’s visitors in her living room. (See Fig. 4) Later, the owner encouraged both API investigators to hand-feed fresh meat to the cougars through a gap between the gate post and the metal gate. The cougars were hungry; they growled at each other and used their paws to try and grab the food from the investigators’ hands. The gap was wide enough for hands and paws to fit through. One of the cougars stuck out his paw and swiped at one of the investigators while he was trying to give him a piece of chicken.



FIG. 6: Infant animals are continuously bred at many facilities not only as a source of extra income but also to be used as an attraction for visitors to pet and hold. (Outback Kangaroo Farm, WA)

- **Private Owner G:** Poor safety at this individual’s home meant that children, neighbors, and the wider community were at risk. This person kept a cougar in a small pen in his backyard. There was no safety fence surrounding the pen or a lock-out area attached to the gate. The gate



FIG. 7: Public tours involved visitors, including children, being allowed to wander among kangaroos and wallabies to pet them. A kangaroo kick can cause serious injury. (Outback Kangaroo Farm, WA)



FIG. 8: A private owner recklessly entered the pen of this bear to "show off" to visitors. He kept his bears in solitary confinement in deplorable conditions. (Private Owner, WA)

opened directly onto the garden. The daughter of the owner was able to walk up to the cougar's cage. There was nothing stopping the child from sticking her hand through the fence or preventing the cougar from escaping when the gate was open. This situation was a disaster waiting to happen. (See photo at the bottom of page 2)

- **Private Owner F:** Reckless behavior and child endangerment were problems at this individual's home. API investigators saw a small child linger around a tiger pen; the safety fence was not in good repair. They also saw the private owner enter the enclosure of one of his two bears. The bear jumped at him and with his paws around the man's back and waist, threw him against the fence and then continued to hold on tightly to him. The man called for the gate to be unlocked and then managed to move towards the gate, still with the bear holding on to him. He was eventually able to pull himself away from the bear's grip. This man was lucky that nothing more serious happened — this time. (See Fig. 8)

API's Recommendations

Faced with the evidence uncovered by this investigation, and the rising tide of attacks and injuries nationwide, API called for some key steps to be taken as a matter of priority. The first of these, that Washington act to pass laws that ensure that the private ownership of exotic animals is prohibited, was realized in 2007.

Washington's new law, which took effect July 2007, prohibits the ownership and breeding of "potentially dangerous wild animal[s]" — big cats (lions, tigers, captive-bred cougars, jaguars, cheetahs, leopards, snow leopards, and clouded leopards), wolves (but not wolf-hybrids), bears, hyenas, rhinoceroses, all nonhuman primates, elephants, many varieties of snakes, and large reptiles (crocodiles, alligators, caimans, and gavials).

Possessors of these animals before July 2007 may keep the animal for the remainder of the animal's life, subject to provisions to ensure public safety.

These steps remain to be performed:

- 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.
- The law must be rigorously enforced by local animal control authorities or law enforcement officers.