

February 21, 2018

Representative Connie C. Rowe
Alabama State House
11 S. Union St., Suite 537-E
Montgomery, AL 36130-2950

Re: Letter of Support from Born Free USA on House Bill 253

Dear Representative Rowe, and Members of the Committee on Agriculture and Forestry,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this letter in support of House Bill 253. My name is Prashant K. Khetan, Esq., and I am the CEO and General Counsel of Born Free USA, a non-profit organization that seeks to end the suffering of wild animals in captivity, rescue individual animals in need, and protect wildlife in their natural habitats – by keeping wildlife in the wild and encouraging compassionate conservation globally. Born Free is an industry leader on the issue of wild animals in captivity, having devoted years to advocating for major reform to the private ownership and trade of big cats and wolves, among other “exotic pets.”

On behalf of Born Free and its Alabama supporters, we would like to address proposed House Bill 253. Born Free supports passage of this Bill, which would ban the sale, trade, or breeding of certain big cats (such as lions, tigers, and leopards) and wolves. Although H.B. 253 has exceptions, notably the exception for wildlife sanctuaries is limited to ones that provide care for animals *and*: (a) do not conduct “commercial activity” or use animals “in any manner in a for-profit business or operation;” and (b) do not allow direct contact between the public and animals or use the animals for entertainment purposes. We see too often meaningful legislation that is crafted with an exception for “sanctuaries,” when in fact those facilities do not engage in compassionate conservation of species. In addition, H.B. 253 contains criminal penalties for violations. Not only is this Bill a reasonable solution to real problems of ownership and the trade industry for big cats and wolves, but it is needed as similar bills at the federal level languish.

As you are no doubt aware, the trade in exotic animals is a multi-billion dollar industry. Across the United States, millions of exotic animals – including lions, tigers, cougars, and wolves – are bred, bought, and sold for private possession. They are kept captive in private homes as “pets,” in roadside zoos, and in menageries. But, the exotic pet trade poses grave dangers to the animals, as well as to human health and safety. By their very nature, exotic animals are unpredictable and are incapable of being domesticated. Domestication of a species can only occur after thousands of years, so no exotic animal can ever truly be tamed – even if the animal is born into captivity.

Unfortunately, Alabama is no exception to incidents involving big cats and wolves. According to Born Free USA's Exotic Animal Incidents Database, there have been multiple attacks by exotic pets in Alabama. In Birmingham, in 2003, a pet timber wolf bit an 8-year-old child on the leg. Also in Birmingham, in 2004, a 5-year-old boy was bitten by his family's pet wolf. Animals such as wolves and tigers may be cute when they are young, but they grow to be strong and aggressive. When they become too big to handle, they are often confined in isolation or sometimes simply turned loose, endangering the local community and nearby wildlife. A wild animal cannot – and should not – be domesticated.

Due to Born Free's extensive knowledge of the consequences of private ownership, trade and breeding of big cats and wolves, we respectfully request that this Committee pass House Bill 253.

Thank you for your consideration of this matter.

Sincerely,

/s/ Prashant K. Khetan

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