



## CLAWING AT THE CAGES: BIG CATS IN ZOOS (2024)

**Webpage:** [bornfreeusa.org/clawingatthecages](https://bornfreeusa.org/clawingatthecages)

**Type of Resource:** Report, photographs.

**Campaign Focus:** Animals in Captivity.

**Objectives:** To explore the significant concerns surrounding big cats in captivity, including their social and behavioral needs not being met (and often entirely disregarded) in zoos, health issues due to inbreeding, failure of zoos to contribute to the conservation of big cats in the wild despite decades of breeding them in captivity, insufficient monitoring of these captive populations, and facilities continuing to engage in dangerous activities with big cats, both in violation of, and in compliance with the Big Cat Public Safety Act of 2023. We illustrate these issues with several case studies and photographs throughout the report to highlight the suffering and exploitation evident in each big cat's story.

## KEY FINDINGS

Due to the inbreeding and habituation to humans, big cats kept in zoos are generally not candidates for release into the wild. Therefore, ongoing breeding programs simply serve to ensure that zoos remain “stocked” with these animals. Our analysis revealed that the monitoring of data on big cats in captivity is incomplete, with substantial numbers of individuals disappearing from studbooks – the databases ostensibly responsible for tracking living big cats in captive facilities. We also discovered that zoos around the world have killed healthy big cats due to overcrowding, lack of perceived usefulness to breeding programs, human error/enclosure failure which allowed their escape, or when attacked by members of their own species in their enclosures.

## SUMMARY

The very act of keeping big cats in a captive environment, with the extremely small enclosure sizes, unnatural social groupings, and near-constant presence of humans and other animals, directly conflicts with the stated objectives of most zoos (including prioritizing animal welfare) and does nothing tangible for big cat conservation in the wild. As a result, the health and welfare of big cats is severely compromised in zoos, as indicated by the high mortality (particularly in infants), occurrence of fatal trauma caused by conflict with enclosure companions, and recognizable signs of stress in the form of stereotypic behaviors (e.g., long periods of time spent pacing).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

We call upon the zoo industry to take immediate steps to safeguard future generations of big cats by phasing out their presence in zoos. We also call upon the public to stop supporting the zoo industry by not going to venues that hold these majestic animals captive.

Get involved in Born Free USA's campaigning and advocacy work. Visit our [Action Center](#) to take action on this and other important issues.

