

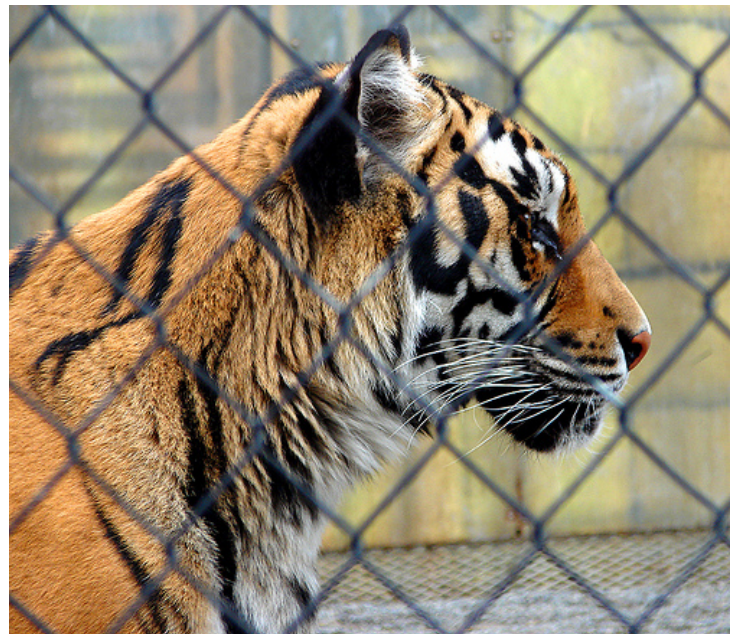


Tigers in Our Backyards

There are an estimated 5,000 captive tigers in the United States, almost twice the number of tigers in the wild in the rest of the world. Only 5% can be found in Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) certified facilities. They rest are in private hands, found in people's backyards or roadside zoos. The private ownership of tigers is a public safety issue, an animal welfare issue, and a conservation issue.

Public Safety

Tigers are wild animals. Even when raised from a cub in captivity, they are not domesticated. Privately owned tigers are a danger to both their owners and the public. When tigers and other exotic animals escape, they pose a danger to the public. Local law enforcement are often the first responders to escaped animals and put their lives on the line to subdue these animals (unfortunately often lethally), despite not having proper training to deal with these scenarios. Exhibitors that offer public contact with tigers also put the public at risk. Between 1993 and 2013, 24 people have been killed by big cats with over 200 more victims of maulings in the United States.



Animal Welfare

Many exhibitors and proprietors of roadside zoos make their living off the exploitation of captive tigers. They offer opportunities to take pictures with cubs or to hold, pet, run, walk, or swim with a live tiger for a fee. They breed the animals to produce unusual color patterns and mutations such as Ligers and Tignons. Real tiger conservation is undermined as these facilities funnel away funds that could benefit wild tiger conservation efforts.

The unregulated breeding of this industry contributes to the extraordinary number of tigers in the United States, and increases the burden on true sanctuaries that have limited space and resources. True sanctuaries are the only places that provide permanent homes for these tigers after they are no longer of commercial value.

USDA regulations prohibit handling of cubs under eight weeks of age because their underdeveloped immune system puts them at risk of disease and over 12 weeks of age because they are considered potentially dangerous. This four week window not only allows for the stressful cub petting activities but also acts as an incentive for the breeders to breed more tigers eligible for cub petting.

Roadside zoos exist in 44 states and while not all have tigers, those that do usually have more than one. Although many of these facilities have a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) exhibitor license, the requirements are unspecific and often result in inadequate living conditions that are unsafe for both the tiger and the owner.



Another consequence of this surplus is the opportunity for breeders to sell tigers to private owners. Many private owners obtain tigers with good intentions, but find out too late that they do not have the resources to properly care for their animal. Tigers require 15lbs of meat each day, specialized vet care, and large enclosures. Many owners are unable to financially provide these necessary requirements, and as a result the animals often live out their lives in squalid conditions without proper care or end up in a roadside zoo.

Conservation

Privately owned tigers serve no conservation value. They are considered “generic tigers” because their genetic lineage cannot be accurately traced. Scientists will never use these generic tigers for breeding or reintroduction efforts due to the unknown risks they may pose to wild populations, including the potential for disease transmission. Only AZA zoos manage captive tigers through Species Survival Plans to ensure healthy, genetically diverse populations of Amur, Malayan, and Sumatran tigers in the United States. The tigers in AZA zoos are carefully monitored to provide a healthy captive population for use in conservation efforts and are under strict regulations to ensure proper care for the animals that is often lacking in non-AZA facilities. Additionally, AZA zoos contribute thousands of dollars every year to on the ground tiger conservation projects throughout Asia.

Sanctuaries

Thankfully there are a number of big cat sanctuaries in the United States whose dedicated owners, staff, and volunteers provide lifetime homes for these unwanted or abused big cats. They are the only refuge for tigers surrendered by owners or seized by authorities.

While many breeders and roadside zoos advertise themselves as sanctuaries, most are not. A true big cat sanctuary does not breed, buy, or sell their animals and do not permit contact with the animals.

For a listing of the best big cat sanctuaries, visit www.tigersinamerica.org.

Current Legislation

There is currently no federal legislation that regulates the private ownership of big cats in the United States. Instead there exists a patchwork of varying state laws. Some states have total bans, while others have no laws whatsoever regarding private ownership of big cats. Even in states that have bans on ownership of big cats, a USDA exhibitor license can be obtained to circumvent the law. Unfortunately, the USDA does not have the resources to inspect all licensed owners to ensure they are complying with terms of the license.