

# Big Cat Rescue: Caring for Jungle Pets

BIG CAT CONTINUED FROM A1

Not everyone gets to scoop out mounds of tiger poop just for the privilege of being near big cats. Volunteers that work at Big Cat Rescue love their jobs. "I came out here the day I retired and thank God every day," Phyllis beamed, admiring the largest cat they have, magnificent Sher Khan. He was inside his enclosure sleeping away on his side, while his companion, China Doll, another rescued tiger, slept on her back. She is beautiful and complacent, totally at home in the surroundings, a big paw on the rebar metal enclosure.

"Carole Baskin, our founder, found Khan at a pet auction. He was emaciated, his baby teeth were rotting. Carole brought Khan here, gave him water therapy, good food, and vitamins. He was not a happy tiger. Then a lady called the center. She wanted to get rid of a female tiger so Carole took in China Doll and she is Khan's perfect companion," Phyllis explained.

Carole Baskin and her husband Howard are real estate investors. Carole originally bought 55 acres within the city limits of Tampa for investment in 1992. The place needed grazing so Carole went to a pet auction to buy alpacas to graze the land, and wound up buying a baby bobcat.

That bobcat passed away just recently at about 20 years of age.

Carole decided to find another bobcat to keep the first company. She accounts on her website how her and her husband went to Minnesota and found 56 bobcats at a "fur farm," where she was shocked by the conditions. Carole brought all 56 bobcats back to Tampa and put them up for adoption.

The adoptions worked until the bobcats reached maturity, and people gave them back.

In 1996 a decision was made that there would be no breeding at the sanctuary. "We are recognized by the Association of Sanctuaries. Laws are so lax in the animal trade," Phyllis lamented.

As a volunteer, she takes people on tours of the sanctuary, but many animals are in their enclosures in areas that are not on the tour. Some have been abused by people or exploited in roadside zoos and circuses.

Jungle cats are bred in captivity for the entertainment industry, and as pets; when the pets are not perfect they go to roadside zoos. Most states have lax or non-existent laws about keeping exotic pets. The entertainment industry wants exotics to draw in paying customers.

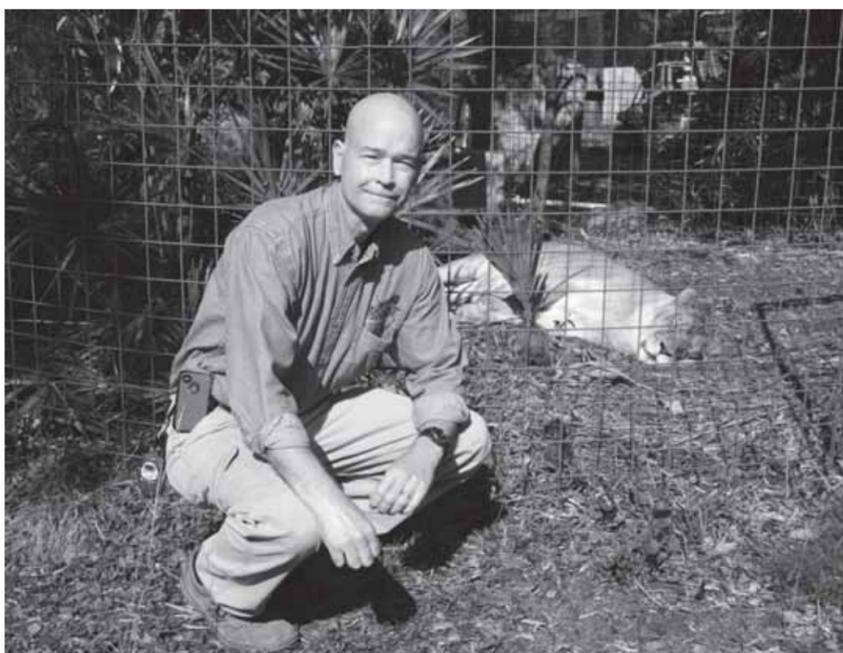
"Every white tiger has genetic problems. It is a double-recessive gene. One white cub was born in India in 1952. You cannot breed white to a golden to get a white. White tigers do not survive in the wild. The mothers don't want them, another tiger can get them," Phyllis said.

Some are critical of the circus life of big cats, like that of the white tiger. Regal jungle animals are paraded into town in small circus cages, sometimes taunted and jeered by crowds. Animal tamers work them inside rings snapping whips, shooting guns, and pushing them with chairs to make their growls ferocious to the audience. Death defying tricks lure in the crowds.

"In Florida we have more tigers in captivity than exist in India. In the



Tigers all have water to play in and enhancement programs that keep them from getting bored at Big Cat Rescue.



Program director Jeff Kremer with a lioness sound asleep and content at Big Cat Rescue.

**Worldwide, trafficking in exotic animals is a \$20 billion dollar business.**  
Phyllis Middaugh, Senior Animal Caretaker at Tampa's Big Cat Rescue

U.S. we have more tigers in captivity than exist [free] in the world," Jeff Kremer, one of Big Cat Rescue's program directors, said. "The legal exotic animal trade in the U.S. is a \$2 billion dollar business."

"Worldwide, trafficking in exotic animals is a \$20 billion dollar business. It is driven by ego and money. You can go 30 minutes from here and swim with baby tiger cubs in a pay-to-play program," he added.

Jeff began as a volunteer at Big Cat Rescue. He was born in the Tampa area, working for Honeywell for 23 years in the aerospace industry. His wife worked as a child

psychologist for 28 years and also volunteers at the center. "We took the plunge. I went on paid staff and we learned to live on \$9 an hour. There is a fine line between making a dollar and caring for animals," he said.

In another moment Jeff's real passion surfaced when he described a three-legged Servall.

The small cat was found on the desert in Arizona. Its leg had been severed and it was abandoned alongside a roadside somewhere. "All our Servalls are former pets," Jeff explained.

Big Cat Rescue is the world's larg-

est accredited sanctuary. There is no breeding, no sales, and no trade of animals. When someone wants to donate a cat to the sanctuary there is a protocol that must be followed: the person or organization must give up their permit.

"If they don't give up their permit then they may just be trading in one pet that has gotten old or ill tempered or has other problems for another. We insist that they give up their U.S. Department of Agriculture permit." Jeff explained that there is a window where exotic cats can be cuddly, thus cute to people.

"Some states allow cuddling with big cats if they are between 8 and 12 weeks old. Florida Fish and Wildlife says you can cuddle with them if they are 40 pounds," he said. "There are different regulations in different states and no one to enforce them. Nine states ban ownership of exotic animals entirely. Florida is the most stringent state for exotic animal regulation and it is number one for big cat mauling and killing. The other is Ohio, which has no regulation at all."

## NATION IN BRIEF

CHIP SOMODEVILLA/GETTY IMAGES



GE Chairman and CEO Jeffrey Immelt delivers opening remarks during the global conglomerate's four-day event American Competitiveness: What Works, at the Andrew Mellon Auditorium Feb. 13 in Washington, D.C.

### NATIONWIDE

#### GE to Hire 5,000 Veterans Over 5 Years

General Electric said Monday that it plans on hiring 5,000 U.S. military veterans within the next five years and will spend \$580 million to expand upon its aviation production in the country.

GE, the largest conglomerate in the United States, said the move is part of an effort to expand domestically and create innovation, according to a press release. The company said that it already employs around 10,000 veterans and will partner with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the largest lobby group in the United States, to sponsor 400 job fairs this year, the release said.

It said it will add 400 aviation-related jobs in manufacturing, as well as in research and development in the next three years. In addition, GE said it will open three new plants in Ohio, Alabama, and Mississippi. CEO Jeff Immelt said the company has "confidence to act and to restore American competitiveness," according to the release.

### MICHIGAN

#### Michigan Militia Members on Trial

Seven members of a Michigan-based militia known as the Hutaree have begun their trial over allegations that they wanted to overthrow the U.S. government. Members of the militia have been charged with rebellion, firearms offenses, attempting to use weapons of mass destruction, and others, according to the Detroit Free Press. If convicted, they could face life in prison.

"These individuals, led by David Stone Sr., wanted an armed confrontation with law enforcement and the federal government," Assistant U.S. Attorney Christopher Graveline said in front of a U.S. District Court jury, according to the newspaper. "They wanted to start the war. ... Patriots rising up against the government."

Tina Mae Stone, a co-defendant and the wife of Stone, who is considered the leader of the group, said, "It was just a bunch of good ol' boys out to have fun," according to WDIV-4 television. "We did survival stuff. I did it mostly to spend time with my husband," she said.

### WEST INDIES

#### Supreme Court Justice Robbed at Knifepoint

Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer and his wife were robbed by a machete-wielding, masked assailant at his vacation home in the West Indies, according to media reports. A spokesperson for the court, Kathy Arberg, said the 73-year-old Breyer, his wife, and others visiting him were not injured in the incident, which occurred last week, reported The Washington Post.

Arberg added that the robbery was reported to local authorities on Nevis—an island with a population of around 12,000, located around 200 miles southeast of Puerto Rico, and is where Breyer's home is located, according to the newspaper. The man stole around \$1,200 from their home and left soon after, reported the St. Kitts-Nevis Observer.

The Observer said the FBI is currently on the island and is investigating the robbery. Assistant Commissioner of Police Robert Liburd told the publication that officials are "vigorously" investigating the robbery. The Supreme Court is on its regular break in February and is scheduled to convene again on Feb. 21.

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