

Big Cat Rescue Celebrating 20 Years Helping Exotic Cats

By Alicia Squillante

Located just east of the Veteran's Expressway and alongside the Citrus Park Mall resides Big Cat Rescue, a well known sanctuary for exotic cats of all shapes and sizes. The sanctuary, which began in 1992 by founder Carole Baskin, is celebrating it's 20 year anniversary this November. While no celebrations are currently lined up for the momentous occasion, the volunteers and staff of Big Cat Rescue want to continue to impress the importance of the sanctuary to captive exotic cats; the ones that currently call the sanctuary home, and the ones that someday might.

The beginnings for Big Cat Rescue were humble, as many beginnings are. Baskin and her late husband, Don, came upon Windsong the bobcat kitten. Windsong had been a pet, and when the owner's wife could no longer handle the bobcat, Baskin's agreed to take the kitten. Windsong would be the first in a long line of exotic cats helped by the sanctuary. A year later the couple discovered a breeding facility in Minnesota that raised small exotics like bobcats and lynxes to eventually become pets for people. Those that weren't sold were killed for their fur.

Horrified at the terrible conditions the cats were forced to endure, the couple bought all 56 kittens and transported



Cameron the lion and Zabu the white tigress are bona fide best friends. They came from a roadside zoo attraction that hoped to breed the two to create white ligers.



Shere Khan was the product of inbreeding to create a white tiger, only he came out the typical orange. He was kept by an animal hoarder in deplorable conditions until Big Cat Rescue saved him.

them back to Florida. For a while the Baskins cared for and sold the kittens, thinking that they were helping the cats find good permanent homes. Time passed, however, and Carole Baskins realized that the kittens she gave away



Nikita came to Big Cat Rescue from a facility in Ohio. He had both his claws and teeth removed so he would be more pliable as people would pet him and take pictures for a fee.



were being brought back because they were becoming too much to handle. That, coupled with wisdom only time can bring, Baskins decided in 1997 to disallow breeding and to spay and neuter all the animals currently in the sanctuary. Still guilty over her early ignorance, Baskins admitted that her mindset regarding the sanctuary had changed drastically over the years and that she feels that the focus of Big Cat Rescue is now in place. "While I am not proud that it took me years of seeing increasing amounts of abuse to reverse the beliefs that I accepted as a novice, I believe the experience from those years has been

heavily responsible for the success we have been having," said Baskins on the sanctuary's Website.

Although the history of Big Cat Rescue can be dramatic in and of itself, during a recent excursion through the park, Jeff Kremer, director of donor appreciation, was a wealth of information regarding the cats living in the sanctuary and the welfare of cats still kept as pets or used for entertainment. For instance, did you know that a liger is the crossing of a male lion to a female tiger? You might have, but did you also know that the union is not something that occurs in the wild and can produce kittens with genetic defects? What's worse is that the liger cubs are much larger than a typical tiger cub and often times kill the mother during birth.

Did you know that there are no white tigers in the wild? Most of the white tigers currently alive today have their ancestry traced back to one tiger named Mohan. So impressed with the blue eyes and white coat, Mohan's handlers began breeding and inbreeding to produce more white tiger cubs. Unfortunately, like with ligers, the inbreeding can cause genetic defects and deformities which can diminish the quality of life of the cats.

It's these facts and more that the staff and volunteers of Big Cat Rescue want the public to be aware of. While there have been great strides towards ending exploitation of exotic cats, there is still much more work to be done. Big Cat Rescue will continue to fight for the welfare of cats everywhere, both large and small. To learn more about the cats of Big Cat Rescue, to check tour schedules, or to donate please visit bigcatrescue.org.

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