As one of the world’s leading animal welfare organizations, IFAW works in more than 40 countries to safeguard wild and domestic animals. With international headquarters in the United States and representation in 15 countries, IFAW works both on the ground and in the halls of government, promoting practical solutions to animal welfare and conservation challenges that advance the well-being of animals.

Go to www.ifaw.org/bigcatadvocates to learn more.
Keeping big cats in private hands is a global wildlife conservation issue.

Private possession and breeding of big cats contributes to the interstate traffic in those species and may contribute to illegal international wildlife trade. There is no way to know how many U.S.-born big cats are disposed of or when their parts are illegally sold into black market trade. This is a particular threat to tigers. Recently, the World Bank’s Global Tiger Initiative called upon the U.S. to phase out its private captive tiger population for this very reason.

Keeping big cats in private hands is a fiscal and enforcement nightmare.

Big cats cost $5,000-$6,000 a year on average just to feed, and need huge spaces to roam. Many big cat owners, even those with good intentions, quickly realize they are in over their heads. Local law enforcement and other first responders are neither trained nor financially equipped to deal with the likes of a 300-pound tiger, and taxpayers must pay the cost when animals escape or otherwise jeopardize the community. Furthermore, the USDA does not have the resources to adequately inspect big cat licensees and enforce Animal Welfare Act compliance. It is also exceedingly difficult to distinguish between prohibited wildlife species that are possessed, bred, sold, or transported in interstate commerce from those that are not. Adding to this difficulty is the fact that a recent audit of the USDA by the Office of the Inspector General found that 70 percent of USDA licensees with four or less animals are actually “pet” owners just using their USDA license to take advantage of USDA exemptions in state laws.

Keeping big cats in private hands is an animal welfare issue.

Big cats are wild animals and suffer when forced to be handled “pets”. Private owners are not able to manage them once they’re fully grown. Consequently, the animals are frequently abused and left to spend their entire lives in cages with barely enough room to move. Meanwhile, unscrupulous exhibitors—including those with USDA licenses—intensively breed big cats to feed the trade, where tiger cubs and other felids are prematurely taken from their mothers in order to be constantly held and photographed for paying customers. After the cubs grow too big, they can be left to spend their entire lives in cages with barely enough space to roam. Many big cat owners, even those with good intentions, quickly realize they are in over their heads.

Isn’t keeping exotic pets a state issue?

Not at all. Possession and breeding of big cats is a federal issue because both activities have substantial and direct effects on interstate commerce. Big cats are frequently bred and used for public exhibition across the United States. They are also sold and transferred throughout the states to supply the exotic pet trade. Federal oversight is necessary.

Can’t unwanted big cats just be placed in wildlife sanctuaries?

As much good as they do, sanctuaries are not the answer. Since 2001, IFAW has worked with reputable sanctuaries to rescue more than 150 tigers, lions, and other big cats from unsanctioned shelters, bankrupt sanctuaries, and other unsafe living conditions across the nation. But we cannot simply rely on sanctuaries to take in all these animals – most are nearing or are at capacity and lack financial reserves for more than a few months of operating expenses.

What will happen to the big cats currently in private possession?

Anyone who currently has a big cat (lion, tiger, leopard, snow leopard, clouded leopard, cheetah, jaguar, and cougar, or any hybrid of these species) would simply be required to register their animals with the USDA. While private owners are not able to manage them once they’re fully grown, the animals are frequently abused and left to spend their entire lives in cages with barely enough space to roam. Moreover, unscrupulous exhibitors—including those with USDA licenses—intensively breed big cats to feed the trade, where tiger cubs and other felids are prematurely taken from their mothers in order to be constantly held and photographed for paying customers. After the cubs grow too big, they can be left to spend their entire lives in cages with barely enough space to roam. Many big cat owners, even those with good intentions, quickly realize they are in over their heads.

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The incident at Zanesville, Ohio—where 22 people (including 5 children); and over 200 additional humans have been mauled or injured—was a tragedy, which led to the animal being shot by authorities. The incident took place at a sanctuary that breeds and frequently transports its big cats for public display.

October 2011: the owner of a backyard menagerie in Ohio opened the cages of his tigers, lions and other exotics before killing himself, giving police no choice but to shoot and kill nearly 50 animals—all of them big cats—before they could enter populated areas of the community.

August 2005: a teenager in Kansas was attacked and killed by a 550-pound Siberian tiger held on a leash during a school photo shoot.

October 2001: a three-year old in Texas was killed by one of his relative’s pet tigers as he was preparing to take a photo with the animal.

The incident at Zanesville, Ohio—where 38 big cats and other wild animals were released from their cages—was a tragedy, but isn’t this bill taking things too far? Zanesville was, by far, not the first time that tragedies involving big cats have occurred. Unlike Zanesville, many incidents have resulted in human tragedies. In the name of public safety, animal welfare, wildlife conservation and economic security, it is time for a federal solution. Congress should take action and pass the Big Cats and Public Safety Protection Act before another incident occurs.

Does this mean we won’t be able to see tigers in zoos anymore?

No. The bill would make it illegal to possess any big cat except at facilities accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums because they have strict and standardized safeguards in place for proper care and handling of big cats. This bill also exempts reputable sanctuaries and circuses that do not allow public handling of animals in exhibition.

Aren’t big cats raised in captivity just like domesticated pets?

Unlike companion animals who have been domesticated over centuries, big cats always retain their natural instinct to hunt and attack and cannot ever be “tamed”. It doesn’t matter that they were born in the U.S. or have been bottle-fed and around people their entire lives: a wild animal will always be a wild animal.

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