

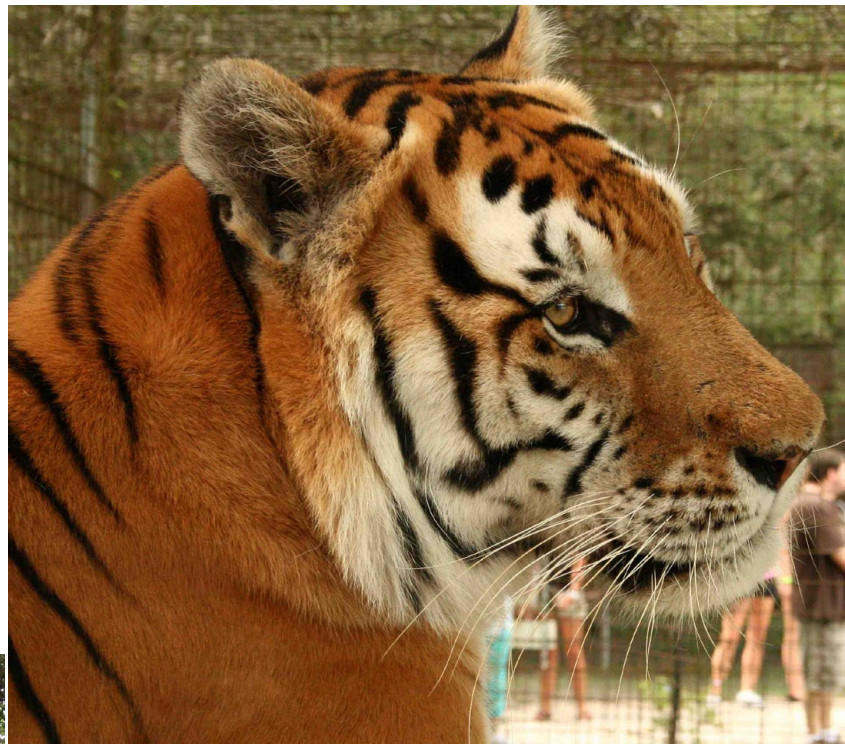


Enjoying Wild Animals Without Circuses or Zoos

how one mother finds unlikely opportunities to teach compassion

by Monica Parodi

Photos courtesy of the Big Cat Rescue,
a non-profit educational sanctuary
www.BigCatRescue.org



Have you ever watched children chase butterflies? It is a glorious sight to see. Their eyes widen with each erratic movement, and they squeal and giggle as they chase this glorious, graceful creature. I've had the pleasure of watching my own children do it on numerous occasions, only to see my youngest son squash a caterpillar on one of those days. It was a great opportunity to teach my child to have compassion for all living things. He did not realize the moving fuzzy thing that looked fun to step on was the same beautiful butterfly he had marveled at earlier.

One day on a road trip with the family of a friend, my son saw an advertisement for the circus and said, "A tiger! Let's go there." I immediately thought of the day with the ethereal butterfly and how this was another opportunity to teach him about respect and compassion. My friend responded with, "We should go. It's a tradition."

My friend is a kind, animal-loving person, and I know that if she had better information, she would have made a different decision. Maya Angelou once said, "When we know better, we do better." It is important to know all the facts, including what goes on behind the scenes. There are many family traditions, like going to the circus or zoo, that might not be the innocent entertainment they seem to be. Our generation is now empowered with so much more information to question these traditions.



It is up to each family to gather information and then decide, morally and ethically, what decisions you are comfortable with for your family. My personal family values and morals widen to include compassion for people and animals, respect for nature and Mother Earth, and I make decisions based on those values.

Exotic animals experience great stress and suffering in captivity. Babies get separated from their mothers. Trainers may behave violently toward innocent animals—and

living in a cage deprives an animal of the free and joyful life he or she would have had in the wild. With big animals, such as elephants and lions, it's impossible to mimic their natural environments when confined. Because my children and I love animals, I can't be okay with poor treatment that occurs for no higher cause other than our entertainment. Attending the circus reinforces the idea it is okay to force wild animals into a life of public entertainment. Circuses do not teach children to value and respect living creatures.

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SO WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES?

What children really want is to spend time with their families. There are many possibilities available, such as sporting events, live shows, museums, science centers, animal-free circuses, and animal sanctuaries (our personal favorite). Sanctuaries, in particular, engage our youth by providing an environment where children can learn about animals, and how they can help make a difference around the world.

I had the pleasure of interviewing Jeff Kremer, the Director of Donor Appreciation at Big Cat Rescue in Tampa, Florida. My children and I planned our entire Spring Break around attending this wonderful place for exotic cats. One of the things Jeff said that stood out to me was "We encourage families to question how an animal lives behind the scenes when making decisions. Knowledge is the foundation for all positive things to happen." Their goal at Big Cat Rescue is to prevent future generations of animals from living their lives in a cage. Big Cat Rescue, along with other sanctuaries, teaches us how we can help resolve conflicts in the wild. We can also learn how to preserve the animal's natural habitats so they can live freely.

On our tour of Big Cat Rescue, as well as through my conversations with Jeff, we learned a lot to reinforce our decision to avoid

circuses, roadside zoos, and petting zoos. It was heartbreaking to learn that there are more tigers in cages in Florida than there are in the wilds of India. The trade of exotic wild animals in the United States is estimated at more than 2 billion dollars annually. These animals spend their lives in cages (most on concrete floors) just for humans to "enjoy."

There are some who argue that viewing these animals is educational. How much education do you really get at a circus, or even at most zoos? I have watched adults at zoos tell their children, "Look at the monkeys!" when they are clearly referring to a gorilla—which is an ape.

If it is an education you seek for your family, I encourage you to watch documentaries that capture the true behaviors and show the real habitat of the wild animal. Observing tigers in a cage is not nearly the same as learning what tigers do in their native home (covering 200 to 300 miles). If you can't plan a trip to observe them in nature, or documentaries are insufficient, then the next best option is to visit a sanctuary. A rich on-line resource you can use when seeking out the country's most highly regarded sanctuaries is The Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries website. (www.sanctuaryfederation.org/gfas/)

CHALLENGE YOU TO DO YOUR RESEARCH

Ask yourself if spending a life in a cage, traveling from town to town, to perform tricks for human beings is the moral way to treat magnificent, wild, and sentient beings. There are so many alternative choices, and I hope that you will consider those as you plan your family's outings and vacations. I know for sure my family will return to Big Cat Rescue, and we look forward to visiting other sanctuaries around the globe. It is



important to be present in our children's lives, and to have connected, quality time together. Consider choosing activities that embrace universal compassion. Even small changes we can make as individuals

make a profound difference. Never underestimate a child's ability to connect with animals, and use every opportunity to teach them lessons in respect, compassion, and love. These traits are the hallmark of a life well lived.