

THE DAY AMERICA REALIZED THERE IS A BIG CAT CRISIS

By Sheriff Matthew Lutz and Jennifer Leon

The incident

It happened October 18, 2011. What started out like any other Tuesday quickly became one of those days in law enforcement that I will never forget for the rest of my life. All these years later, what we had to do that day to maintain public safety still affects my deputies and me.

Local Zanesville, Ohio resident Terry Thompson, owner of a private wild animal preserve on his property, had unlocked and opened the cages of most of his wild animals and then committed suicide by a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head.

It was around 5:15 p.m. with the sun starting to sink when a report of wild animals running loose on Thompson's farm came into my office. At that time, I was in my third year as the sheriff of Muskingum County. Our office had 110 employees. We're the fifth largest county in Ohio at 680 square miles. My job that day, as the lead of the office, was to make the decisions about our response.

Thompson, 61, had recently been released from prison after serving one year on federal weapons charges. He had been cited in the past for animal abuse and neglect. He had been warned repeatedly over the previous decade to get his animals under control. In April of 2005, he was arrested for cruelty and torture of cattle and bison on his property.

I had been to Thompson's property numerous times before. He was a guy who kept to himself but was always willing to push the envelope. I knew he and his wife had lions and tigers and other dangerous, wild animals on their farm, but I had no idea of the vast numbers.

We were very, very, very lucky that Thompson's neighbor was home that afternoon and looked out her kitchen window noticing a tiger and bear in the field. She immediately realized they were loose. If she hadn't been home, I don't even want to put a number on how much worse the incident could have been.



When my first deputies arrived on scene at the Thompson property, they witnessed numerous tigers, lions, bears, and other ferocious animals wandering loose. It was unknown how many animals Thompson kept on the property or how much of a head start they had, but we did know we only had about 90 minutes of daylight left. The deputies reported to me what they were seeing at the farm and I had to give the difficult order: Put down any animal already off the property or close to leaving the property.

It was a heart-wrenching decision to shoot those beautiful animals, but I knew there was no way we could have those types of animals loose in the night in our neighborhoods. We feared the animals would scatter and terrorize Zanesville residents or even cause fatalities, so my officers began dispatching the wildlife with their rifles. About 10 of my deputies from the SWAT team rode in the back of two pickup trucks, while another 10 patrolled the perimeter. We canceled school for the next day for the two districts because the last thing we wanted was kids standing at a bus stop with these animals potentially at large.

When I arrived at Thompson's place, I saw the animals were on the move and showing signs of leaving the property. During the

hunt to locate all of the animals, highway patrol officers cordoned off several roads in the area. It's difficult to convey what an insane night it was. There were 300-pound Bengal tigers that we had to put down. During the chaos, an escaped lion killed a monkey, and bears and lions were charging at horses at Thompson's farm.

When the carnage was over, 48 animals were killed that day: 18 tigers, 17 lions, eight bears, three mountain lions, and two wolves.

Reflections after the carnage

The events that day put a worldwide spotlight on Zanesville and our actions as my deputies had to kill 38 big cats and 10 other loose, wild animals. When I review all of the facts, it's amazing nobody was hurt. If we had not done what we did and those animals had injured or killed someone, the criticism, stress, and trauma would've been 1,000 times worse.

We talk about how lucky we were for the neighbor's phone call that day. This incident would have not only affected our county; it would've affected other counties because those animals can travel great distances in short periods of time. Dozens of predatory big cats and other wild animals at-large, going in all different directions as night was falling. It could have truly been a nightmare.

Law enforcement and other first responders don't go through training for this, and taxpayers pay the cost when big cats escape or otherwise jeopardize the community. We have many hunters in our agency, but you're never trained to shoot exotic animals and have to deal with situations like this. The incident put a lot of needless stress on our community and our officers. It was also a financial burden on our law enforcement agency. While rounding up all of the animals luckily did not drag out over multiple days or weeks, there was still an extra \$8,000 in overtime costs.

We don't go into this line of work to deal with exotic animals. No Ohio sheriff has any deputies carrying around tranquilizing guns. The training requirements for law enforcement are immense and intense and require numerous situations we must prepare for, but rounding up dangerous captive wild animals in somebody's backyard is a situation we shouldn't have to know how to do.

When my officers had to confront these massive beautiful exotic animals they were used to seeing only in a zoo or on television, and had to actually put a scope on that animal to put it down, it leaves an effect. Add to that the hundreds of phone calls that came into our dispatch center from people around the world upset and cussing us out because we killed the big cats and other animals; it was very stressful for everyone in my office. Hearing the news reports and reading newspaper articles full of criticism of our handling of the animals caused a lot of distress and trauma to our folks.

What disturbs me the most is the senselessness of what happened. This incident should never have occurred. It's my professional and personal opinion that it is not worth the risk to public safety to allow individuals to keep these dangerous, predatory animals penned up in cages. Nobody should be able to accumulate exotic animals on his or her property. The question isn't if this could happen again. The question is: When and where will it be?

The solution

Private citizens should not own big cats like tigers and lions. It is completely unnecessary that sheriffs, deputies, and other first responders could be confronted with dangerous big



cats while doing their jobs. Zanesville could happen anywhere in the U.S. An estimated 10,000 to 20,000 big cats are owned as pets or maintained in ill-equipped roadside zoos and traveling exhibits in the U.S. These predators pose a serious risk to public safety and law enforcement.

The probability of dangerous big cats escaping is low, but when it does happen, it creates an extremely high-risk situation. Cats possessed by private owners are frequently housed in dilapidated cages that are unlikely to hold and contain them during natural disasters such as hurricanes, earthquakes, and tornadoes. Law enforcement officers and the public would needlessly be put at risk when such disasters strike.

I'm proud that Ohio took the initiative to turn this tragedy into something positive by passing a law to force private owners of big cats to come into compliance. I've said numerous times in my 29 years that our primary job is to make our community the safest place we can to work, live, and raise a family. Having these creatures in our community unsafely puts families, deputies, and police officers at risk. If an officer is responding to a call at a home, and they go into the home to see what's wrong, and there's a tiger or a lion living in that home, that is a huge and needless risk to public safety.

The private ownership of big cats in America is a problem that requires a federal solution. Federal legislation—the Big Cat

Public Safety Act (H 1818 / S 2990)—has been introduced in the U.S. House and Senate. This bill will basically expand what we've done in Ohio to the rest of the states. It's a common sense and urgently needed bipartisan solution to the problem of dangerous big cats kept in unsafe circumstances. The bill amends the Captive Wildlife Safety Act to prohibit most breeding and phase out the private possession of lions, tigers, and other big cats. It is narrowly focused on privately owned big cats and includes exemptions for zoos, sanctuaries, universities, and traveling circuses. Current owners of big cats are grandfathered in and simply required to register their animals with the USDA.

Many individuals and groups involved in law enforcement and animal control have endorsed the Big Cat Public Safety Act, including myself. You and your office can help end this unnecessary danger to law enforcement by submitting letters endorsing this crucial bill that will ensure big cats live only in secure facilities that can properly provide for them and do not diminish public safety or waste law enforcement resources. 🐾

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