



**Testimony regarding H.R. 263, the Big Cat Public Safety Act,
for the House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Water, Oceans, and Wildlife
May 12, 2022**

The Humane Society Legislative Fund and the Humane Society of the United States thank Chair Huffman, Ranking Member Bentz, and the members of the Subcommittee on Water, Oceans, and Wildlife for holding a hearing on H.R. 263, the Big Cat Public Safety Act. On behalf of our millions of members and supporters nationwide, we urge you to support this important bill.

H.R. 263, introduced by Representatives Mike Quigley and Brian Fitzpatrick, prohibits the possession or breeding of big cats such as tigers, lions, or leopards by entities without a USDA license, which will end the keeping of these species as pets. It also prohibits public contact with big cats, such as allowing the public to pet, play with, or have photos taken with a tiger cub, or taking a leopard cub onto a TV talk show. In so doing, this commonsense legislation will enhance public safety, protect first responders, and advance animal welfare.

H.R. 263 will not affect professionally operated zoos—regardless of size, ownership, accreditation, or any other characteristic—or animal sanctuaries. As long as a zoo, defined as an entity that holds a USDA Class C license, does not allow direct contact between the public and big cats, it will be unaffected by the legislation.

In recent years, Americans have become increasingly aware of the presence of captive big cats in residential homes and private menageries across the country, as well as the problems this causes for the public, first responders, and the animals themselves. The private possession of big cats and the rampant breeding of them for public contact activities are inextricably connected. **The United States cannot address the problem of big cats kept as pets without addressing the industry that creates these animals in the first place.**

Captive big cats jeopardize public health and safety

Big cats in captivity pose a clear threat to public health. Since 1990, more than 400 dangerous incidents involving captive big cats have occurred in 46 states and the District of Columbia. Five children and 19 adults have been killed and hundreds of others injured, with some losing limbs or suffering other traumatic injuries.

Big cats in captivity also tax law enforcement personnel and first responders, who risk their lives to protect the public from the consequences of individuals and facilities that are ill-equipped to possess big cats. When captive big cats attack or escape, these professionals must respond, even though they typically lack the training or resources to handle such emergencies.

Today's witness, Sheriff Matt Lutz of the Muskingum County Sheriff's Office, will talk about perhaps the highest-profile of these incidents, which occurred in Zanesville, Ohio, in 2011, when dozens of dangerous wild animals were released from an unlicensed private menagerie and



began entering the adjacent community. In order to protect the public, Sheriff's deputies were forced to shoot and kill 48 animals, including 18 tigers, 17 African lions, and three cougars.

These incidents also create administrative and financial burdens for law enforcement agencies. Training, equipment, appropriate holding facilities, and experts knowledgeable in big cat behavior and handling are not readily available resources for most law enforcement agencies. Especially in this moment of rising crime but falling police force numbers—due to the nationwide wave of officer resignations and early retirements, and a shrinking pool of applicants to replace them—is chasing down escaped pet tigers the best use of law enforcement's scarce resources?

Because law enforcement and other emergency personnel are funded by taxpayers, it is ultimately citizens who routinely foot the bill for costs related to escapes, attacks and/or confiscations that inevitably occur when big cats are kept by unqualified entities. A 1995 incident in Idaho cost \$1 million when the county sheriff's office tracked, shot, and killed 19 African lions who escaped from a private menagerie and confiscated another 27 big cats. In 2001 in Missouri, the cost to recapture an African lion who was loose for four days was \$7,000. In 2007, Knox County, Ohio, residents paid approximately \$5,000 to care for four tigers and two lions after the animals' owner was evicted from the property. In 2020, the state of Indiana paid \$95,676 to remove more than 200 animals—including at least 23 big cats—from a shuttered roadside zoo that used cubs for public handling and was owned by one of the characters featured on Tiger King.

The COVID-19 pandemic has lent additional urgency to the issue of public contact with big cats. Since the pandemic's onset, COVID-19 infections have been documented in captive tigers, lions, cougars, and snow leopards. According to the Centers for Disease Control, the virus can spread between people and animals during close contact. Scientists are concerned that the virus could mutate as it infects different species, potentially producing more dangerous variants.

Due to captive big cats' harmful impacts to public health and safety, H.R. 263 is endorsed by the National Sheriffs' Association, the Fraternal Order of Police, the Small & Rural Law Enforcement Executives Association, and more than 30 other law enforcement organizations and officers.

Public contact is the root of the problem

Untold numbers of captive tigers, lions, and other big cats live in the United States, most of them in poorly run roadside zoos, in private menageries, or in homes as pets. In these settings, the animals are usually kept in small and unsafe cages, fed nutritionally deficient diets, and denied adequate exercise and veterinary care.

This plethora of captive big cats is largely the result of public contact activities in which substandard facilities charge the public to pet, feed, play with, or get their picture taken with infant big cats—known as “cub petting.” Bred specifically for the cub petting industry, the babies are torn from their mothers at birth and are subjected to serious neglect and mistreatment

from handlers. After just a few months, when they have grown too large to be handled, they are warehoused in roadside zoos, sold as pets, or even killed. Meanwhile, in a never-ending cycle, new cubs continue to be produced, used for public contact, and disposed of—all the while increasing the number of captive big cats in our midst. Prohibiting public contact with big cats is essential to curtailing America’s big cat crisis.

Existing law does not thoroughly address the captive big cat crisis

H.R. 263 is not the first time Congress has acted in response to concerns about public safety amid growing private possession of big cats. In 2003, Congress unanimously passed (by unanimous consent in the Senate and by a vote of 419-0 in the House) the Captive Wildlife Safety Act (CWSA) to prohibit the import, export, and interstate sale and transport of captive big cats by private, unlicensed individuals. The CWSA is an amendment to the Lacey Act, which protects big cats and other wild animals by regulating their interstate transport.

However, loopholes in the CWSA still allow unqualified entities to possess big cats. H.R. 263 strengthens the CWSA by targeting the avenues that allow big cats to fall into private hands. By prohibiting the possession and breeding of big cats by entities that do not have a USDA Class C license, and by prohibiting public contact with these species, H.R. 263 creates consistency among the states and more fully addresses the harmful impacts of the commercial trade in big cats.

Unqualified possession does not advance conservation

There is a belief among the U.S. public that big cats bred and kept in substandard conditions help protect their species from extinction... often conveniently reinforced by the substandard exhibitors themselves. This is false. Big cats kept by unqualified parties or used for cub petting do not assist conservation; in fact, they undermine it.

Legitimate captive breeding programs of endangered or threatened species are carefully implemented by professionally run zoos according to scientific guidelines to ensure genetic integrity and species viability. By contrast, substandard facilities, such as those that use cubs for public contact, breed big cats just to produce cubs, without regard to lineage or genetic integrity. In addition, they often breed tigers of different subspecies, purposefully inbreed animals to produce curiosities such as white tigers, and even breed animals of different species, i.e., lions and tigers to produce “ligers.”

A large international market in big cat parts, such as tiger bones, exists for supposed medicinal products. Because in the United States the disposition of captive big cats is largely unregulated, they are easy targets for this trade. In August 2018, a [New York man was sentenced to prison for trafficking lion and tiger parts](#). Perhaps counterintuitively, parts from captive big cats also increase poaching pressure on wild populations by fueling the demand for these products and providing cover for parts from wild cats. Further, the large and unregulated population of captive big cats in the United States undermines our nation’s credibility and hampers U.S. efforts in negotiations with other countries about big cat conservation issues, such as shuttering tiger mills (facilities where tigers are bred and slaughtered for their parts).



Legitimate zoos and sanctuaries would not be affected

H.R. 263 narrowly targets the small number of exhibitors and breeders at the heart of the U.S. captive big cat problem, while the vast majority of zoos will be unaffected. Most zoos operate successfully without allowing physical contact or close proximity to big cat cubs. Only a handful of unscrupulous operators offer interactive experiences with big cats, yet due to the never-ending cycle of breeding to produce cubs for use in these activities and then disposing of them when they grow too big, these facilities have a disproportionate impact in creating surplus big cats. They, like hundreds of other facilities, could operate successfully without the excessive breeding of big cats that causes so much misery for the animals and leads to the large population of untracked animals.

The Humane Society Legislative Fund and the Humane Society of the United States urge the Committee on Natural Resources to pass H.R. 263 without delay to bring us measurably closer to the end of the chronic animal welfare and human safety threats associated with the exploitation of captive big cats.