



Big Cat Rescue
12802 Easy Street
Tampa, FL 33625
www.BigCatRescue.org

November 18, 2017

Councilmember David Ryu
Los Angeles City Hall, Room 425
200 N. Spring Street
Los Angeles, CA 90012

RE: Proposed ban on use of wild animals for performances and amusement.

Dear Sir:

On behalf of Big Cat Rescue, both from a public safety standpoint and from an animal welfare perspective, I am writing to support the proposed Los Angeles ban on use of wild animals for performances and amusement.

Big Cat Rescue is the largest sanctuary in the world devoted to big cats that is accredited by the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries. We provide a permanent home to approximately 80 exotic cats ranging from tigers and lions to smaller cats like bobcats and cougars. We have received Charity Navigator's top 4 star rating six years in a row.

One of the many examples of the public safety issue occurred here in Florida. Goya Foods executive Francisco Unanue hired Corinne Oltz of Wild Animal World to bring a 62-pound cougar to entertain his 7 year old and their guests. The party ended badly when the cougar mauled a 4-year-old guest. An investigator for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission told the Herald that the cougar's bite "was a fraction of an inch from going to the brain stem." That would have killed the kid instantly. This was third time that a large cat owned by this exhibitor had caused injury. There is no reason for any child, or adult, to be put in a such a position.

The public does not understand how powerful these animals are and people are misled into thinking that a "handler" can control them with a leash or on command. This is simply not true. These animals act on instinct, and cats in particular are strong willed. A 90 pound leopard, half the weight of a handler, in the wild can carry a 250 pound young giraffe up a tree. No man can restrain an animal that powerful. Multiply that strength five times or more for a tiger or lion.

The animal welfare aspects of big cats used for performances are also not generally well understood. Big cats in large circuses can spend up to 90% of their time in cramped quarters in small traveling wagons. In smaller traveling circus shows they are jammed together in transport vehicles. Below are images from three different smaller traveling big cat exhibitions.




Trainers of big cats invariably insist they only train with “positive reinforcement.” In the case of big cats, this is utter nonsense because it is simply impossible given the nature of big cats. At our sanctuary we do not train cats to do tricks, but we do train them to do certain behaviors that are useful for medical reasons. We are experts in this training, called Operant Conditioning. What we consistently find is that the cats are intelligent and can quickly learn the behavior and know when it is being asked of them. But, they will not do the behavior reliably. They always know what is being asked. They are simply independent and will only do it if they feel like it. The ONLY way to get cats to perform RELIABLY is by physical punishment. EVERY trainer of big cats for performances uses punishment, WITHOUT EXCEPTION.

Societal values typically change slowly over decades, starting slow and then gaining momentum over time. Today, of course, we take women’s suffrage for granted. We forget that it was only 100 years ago that suffragettes were beaten and thrown into jail. It took decades for the thinking of a majority of the population to shift. What we are seeing today around the world and in the United States is an overwhelming change in the way our society views the outdated 19th century concept of performing animals.

Country after country is banning use of wild animals in circuses. After Peru passed such a ban, Big Cat Rescue took in Hoover, the last surviving tiger of 12 owned by a horrible traveling show. Many local governments around the U.S. have responded to the growing recognition among their constituents that wild animals used for entertainment should go the way of other cruel practices like dog fighting and cock fighting that were the norm in the 19th century but have no place in a modern society that has evolved to have compassion and respect for these majestic creatures.

To date the largest local government to recognize this broad based evolution in public values has been San Francisco. Because of its size, Los Angeles has a wonderful opportunity to accelerate the recognition that both public safety and animal welfare dictate ending the outdated and cruel use of wild animals for entertainment. We hope that the city will seize this opportunity.

Sincerely,



Howard Baskin
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