



Lions And Tigers And Bears! In My Neighborhood?!? Oh My!!

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Photo courtesy of Brian Loflin



Large cats, like this African lion, are now illegal to possess as a pet within the United States because of the newly passed Large Cat Public Safety Act (2022). However, other potentially dangerous animals, such as wolves, bears, hyenas, and crocodiles are not prohibited by the law, but perhaps should be considered.

The first time I brought Caesar home he was quite a hit with my neighbors. I worked at a small zoo in northern Indiana, and Caesar was a newborn African lion. Caesar's mother wasn't taking proper care of her cub and just like all newborn domestic cats, lion cubs are not able to care for themselves. So, I became surrogate mom and took on those duties for this little furball.

Caesar required constant care with feeding, urination, and defecation. Like I said, my neighbors thought he was the cutest thing. Well, most of them. Some neighbors thought it was a terrible idea keeping an African lion in a suburban neighborhood, even if he was only a cub.

Caesar was only 3 pounds at birth; his eyes didn't open until he was 10 days old. Caesar would travel with me back and forth between my job at the zoo and my home. In those early weeks, most of my neighbors wanted to help bottle feed him, and when he was about 3 months old, I let him go outside more and more so he could play and learn his environment.

Neighbors I didn't even know would come by to play with him. Caesar would pretend stalk, pounce, wrestle, and play hide and seek, all of which amused my neighbors, but those behaviors were instinctual play behaviors for lions. Most people did not mind his playful antics because he was small, cute, and easy to manhandle.

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However, lions grow fast and by six months, Caesar was fully weaned and eating 10-15 pounds of raw meat each day. By eight months, he was nearly 150 pounds, getting stronger by the day, and my neighbors began expressing more concern about having Caesar in the neighborhood. He was no longer cute and cuddly, but was instead becoming a formidable opponent.

In fact, even our “play” sessions at the zoo typically ended on his terms. If I needed to leave but Caesar wasn’t done playing, I would drag him into his cage and attempt to leave. However, before I could shut the cage door Caesar would jump on my back and wrap his front legs around my chest as I attempted to exit his cage. I, then, would have to drag him back into his cage and try again.

This process would continue until Caesar decided to quit. It was at this point that Caesar became a full-time zoo resident. Too many neighbors expressed fear of having him at my house, and I have to admit, he had gotten much more difficult to control. Although a few neighbors hated to see Caesar leave the neighborhood, most were happy to see him return to the zoo full-time.

THAT WAS THEN...

Today, stories like mine can no longer occur. President Biden signed a bill into law in December 2022 titled Big Cat Public Safety Act, which makes it unlawful for unlicensed people to own, breed, and transport lions, tigers, leopards, cheetahs, jaguars, cougars, and their hybrids.

The bill was initiated due to the Netflix television series “Tiger King,” a seven-part documentary that highlighted roadside zoo attractions, such as paying to hold and be photographed with “large cat” cubs. The goals of the law are to help put an end to cruel and inhumane treatment endured by large cat species from the cub petting industry, and to reduce potential disastrous interactions between wild animals and humans.

However, the law only prohibits large cat species. It does nothing to protect other species such as smaller felids like ocelots, canids such as coyotes or wolves, or bears, hyenas, apes, smaller primates, and reptiles.



Photo by Scott Henke

Exotic pet owners will bring their “pets” to cities and ask passersby if they would like to take a photo with their pet for a price. Here, the author’s sons take a photo with a python in New Orleans.

In fact, in February 2023, my kids were approached by a young woman in downtown New Orleans with a 14-foot rock python wrapped around her body. She wanted to know if my kids would like a photo holding her snake—for a price, of course. Such species are not prohibited by the Big Cat Public Safety Act, and can be brought to public places for profit, or just to show off one’s unusual pet.

However, people could inadvertently provoke an attack by their own body language when they’re near animals. Animals often provide us clues about how they’re feeling or if they wish for an encounter to end, but inexperienced people either don’t understand or they ignore these cues.

Examples of such signals are seeing a llama or guanaco, a wild version of a llama, drop its ears behind its head rather than maintain them upright. This is a sign that the animal is becoming aggravated and will soon spit on its unknowing victim. Likewise, human behaviors can be misunderstood by animals as well.

For example, staring directly into a monkey’s eyes is considered a threat by monkeys that often results in a slap or an attack. What many people do not realize is that a camera lens can be perceived as a “big eye” to a monkey. In such cases of attacks, animals are considered vicious by people, when in fact, the animal was behaving normally for its species.



Sometimes, even a person who has much knowledge with wild animals may experience an unfortunate encounter. In 2003, Roy Horn, who was half of the famous magician duo Siegfried and Roy, was attacked by one of his own white tigers while they were performing on stage in Las Vegas. Speculation has been offered as to why the tiger attacked its trainer, but most believe it was just a tiger being a tiger.

Television has been guilty of glamorizing the ownership of exotic animals. Shows such as “Tiger King,” “Beary Tales,” “Dr. Oakley, Yukon Vet,” and “Dr. K’s Exotic Animal ER” have excited people into wanting to get an exotic animal as a pet.

Such romanticizing of wild animals by television is not a new phenomenon; television has done this for decades. Ask your grandparents if they recall a show called “Gentle Ben,” where a young boy raised a wild black bear with his game warden father, or “White Fang,” the story

of a young man taming a wolf in the Alaskan wilderness. Both shows enticed people into inquiring how to obtain black bears and wolves, respectively.

Texas pet law states that exotic animals can be privately owned as long as the owner has a certificate of registration for the animal that was issued by the Texas Department of State Health Services. This includes animals considered dangerous, such as wolves, bears, reptiles, and non-human primates. With the passage of the federal Big Cat Public Safety Act, large wild cats can no longer be owned.

However, some Texans believe that certain exotic animals are too dangerous to be allowed as pets. This belief was supported in 2021 when a Bengal tiger escaped from its owner and roamed freely through a neighborhood in Houston, Texas.

After the incident, the public appeared divided concerning the logic of the exotic pet ownership law. Some people argued that wild animals belong only in their natural habitats and should never be al-

lowed as pets. Others argued for individual property rights and believed that if a person wanted a dangerous animal as a pet, then he or she should be allowed to own one. Yet another group agreed with the individual rights argument, but did not want a dangerous wild animal living in *their* neighborhoods.

So, this begs the question; what do Texans truly want? Should people have the right to own whatever animal they desire? If so, should exotic and potentially dangerous animals be required to be maintained in escape-proof housing or should they be allowed to roam freely?

What species would make you uncomfortable if owned by your next door neighbor? Should exotic animals and their housing be regulated and inspected to verify humane care and safety to the public? If so, what agency should do the inspections and how often? These are the questions that I, and my M.S. student, Harry Rakosky, would like to answer.

We are conducting a study through the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute (CKWRI) of Texas A&M University-Kingsville. The study’s main goal is assessing the attitudes of Texans concerning the right to maintain dangerous wild animals as pets.

Our objectives include determining: 1) whether or not Texans believe that dangerous wild animals should be kept as pets, 2) what species of exotic animals Texans currently maintain as pets, 3) the level of comfort that Texans have concerning various species of dangerous animals, and 4) the level of comfort of Texans concerning ownership of dangerous animals within various distances of their own home.

Now it is your turn. Your opinion matters to us. Please go to www.ckwri.tamuk.edu and click on the link “Should Texans Be Allowed To Own Dangerous Animals As Pets?” to take our survey.

The survey requires about 5-10 minutes of your time, but we believe it will be 5-10 minutes of well-spent time. Our study will provide Texas lawmakers with information that can be used to better serve the public concerning exotic pet ownership. Thank you for assisting us. 🙏



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