



Exotic Pet Industry

Anatomy of a Sanctuary and the Exotic Pet Industry

One morning in June, a volunteer arrived at Southwest Wildlife around 5:30am to begin work before it became too hot. On the way to showing him the task at hand, the volunteer asked Linda, “Should there be an animal in a cage outside your main gate?” Surprised at the question, Linda said, “Absolutely not.” When the volunteer told her there was such an animal, the two of them headed for the front gate to see what was there.

There, in a crate so small the animal could not even turn around, was an adult African serval. An African serval is a wild cat native to Africa that weighs about forty pounds when full grown. It had been left at Southwest with no note or prior contact. You might ask: How did an animal native to Africa end up in Arizona? The answer is simple and tragic—the exotic pet trade.

How does the serval fit into the exotic pet trade? Breeders breed servals to spotted domestic shorthair cats to get the look of the serval. From there, a series of spotted domestic cats, such as Bengals, are bred to those offspring to get the personality of a domestic cat. If you think this is not a profitable enterprise, look up Savannah cats on the internet. Now, of course the serval is still a wild animal, is not suitable as a house pet, and at some point has outlived its usefulness. Hence it is dumped. In the case of our serval, she was dumped in the searing heat without so much as the slightest concern for her welfare.

Lucky for our serval, she was abandoned at Southwest Wildlife. Southwest Wildlife is a sanctuary accredited by the American Sanctuary Association and the Association of Sanctuaries. An accredited sanctuary is defined by the Animal Center for Excellence as “A place of peace where animals can live out their lives permanently in quality surroundings designed to suit the needs of the species involved. A place free from commercial activity and exploitation, where animals are not bred, sold or traded. A final home where animals receive quality care and housing for life.”

Southwest Wildlife is such a sanctuary. Southwest Wildlife does not breed or sell animals. We do not expose our animals for public entertainment and we do not exploit them for financial gain. We are designated as a 501(c)3 tax exempt organization by the Internal Revenue Service. We provide our non-releasable animals with suitable homes for the rest of their lives. We provide proper nutrition, medical care, and companionship with their own species. In the case of the serval, Southwest has arranged for a suitable home with another responsible sanctuary that already has servals, so that it can be with its own species.

However, this is not the case with all organizations that advertise as sanctuaries. All too many exploit exotic animals for their own financial gain while keeping them in conditions so barbaric as to constitute cruelty of the worst kind. They often extol the purpose for their existence as conservation efforts to save the species. But don't be fooled. Wild animals bred in such conditions will NEVER be released in the wild, nor does captive breeding do anything to preserve the natural habitat of these animals. These so-called sanctuaries are merely perpetuating the exotic pet trade and condemning these animals to miserable lives and hideous deaths.

One of the most gruesome examples of this is what the California Department of Game and Fish discovered in April of this year when it raided a sanctuary called Tiger Rescue, a non-profit refuge for former animal performers. It is reported that the investigators found eleven cubs living in an attic. They then discovered the remains of up to thirty tigers on the property and over fifty dead cubs in a freezer. The California Game and Fish warden described what he found this way: "The residence was filthy...Garbage was strewn about, animal feces was on the floor, and there was a strong odor of animal feces throughout the home." The outside of the home was described by Riverside Animal Control as "equally grim, with rotting animal carcasses and bones strewn about the property, tiger hides stored in a trailer and mounds of trash and animal waste everywhere." It was reported that over seventy exotic big cats were housed there in cramped, filthy cages without adequate food, water, or shelter. With over fifty dead cubs in a freezer, it is obvious the cats were also being bred extensively. The obvious question is: What were these tiger cubs being bred for? There are no good answers. What is most shocking is that this so-called sanctuary is a USDA-licensed facility!!

Before donating to a sanctuary, learn how to identify an accredited, responsible sanctuary. They do NOT breed animals. They do NOT encourage the ownership of exotic animals. They do NOT make animals do tricks for public entertainment. They do NOT endanger the public by allowing hands-on interaction with these animals. They do NOT charge to view these animals. Responsible sanctuaries are not-for-profit organizations that do not sell animals to sustain their existence. If they are open to the public, they present tours for the purpose of education which are operated in a safe manner. They have the requisite licenses and permits as required by city, county and state laws.

Unfortunately, the exotic pet trade is thriving in this country. It is estimated that there are over 60,000 wild animals privately owned in this country. They can be purchased through classified ads, on the Internet, through backyard breeders, traveling and roadside zoos, and numerous other outlets such as pet stores, unscrupulous sanctuaries, and refuges.

You can find ads selling every wild animal imaginable. Here are just a few to illustrate: "Six month old black female bear declawed on front, bottle raised \$150.00"; "Leopards for trade"; "One pair white tigers, female 3 years, male 4 years, beautiful, \$9500.00"; "Male breeder cougar, \$375.00"; "For sale or trade: wolf, coyote, fox pups, mountain lion kittens, baby raccoon and bobcat"; "lions, tigers and bears, Oh my! and more - alligators, birds, binturongs. Also, Himalayan bear cub. Please call with offers"; and "Breeder and shooter bucks". This is just the tip of the exotic pet industry.

Southwest Wildlife has given sanctuary to many exotic pets that have been confiscated by Arizona Game & Fish (it is illegal to possess an exotic or wild animal in Arizona) or given up by their owners when they became too aggressive and/or destructive. These include: an arctic wolf, timber wolves, mountain lions, raccoons, prairie dogs, bobcats, Canadian lynx, coati, and assorted reptiles. All of these animals were once privately owned as pets.

Sadly, some of the most sought-after animals are large cats. It is estimated there are over 15,000 tigers privately owned. You can purchase an adorable little tiger cub for as little as \$300.00. You have heard the horror stories over and over of pet tigers attacking their owners, trainers, and even children of the families who have chosen these animals as pets and allowed interaction with young children. AFTER such an attack, the tiger is THEN deemed dangerous and is either killed outright, sold to canned hunting ranches or traveling/roadside zoos, or simply left in a cage until it dies. This is because there is no place for them to go. There are only so many of these animals that reputable sanctuaries can take.

Unfortunately, there are no federal laws that regulate the private ownership of exotic animals. There are only twelve states that ban private possession of exotic animals. Seven states have partial bans and fifteen states require a license or permit to possess exotic animals. Even those states that have some laws on the books have a problem with enforcement. Once an exotic animal is taken from the owner, what do you do with it? It cannot be released and animal control facilities are not equipped to house large exotics. Since there are so few accredited and responsible sanctuaries, their fate is most often death.

We need the help of the public to put an end to the exotic pet trade. Before you donate money to a sanctuary, ask questions that will tell you if the sanctuary is truly an accredited and responsible sanctuary.

If the answers don't add up to an accredited and responsible sanctuary, do not contribute to it. Your contribution will only perpetuate the cruelty to these animals and compromise the safety of our citizens. You can also help by spreading the word. With enough public outrage, we can demand laws to eliminate the exotic pet trade. Wild animals belong in the wild, not doing tricks and living in cells.