

Captive Big Cat Welfare Issues



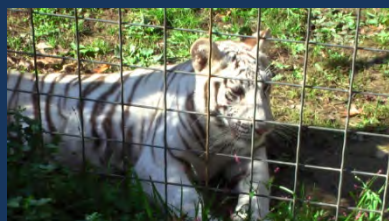
An emaciated lion with protruding ribs, spine, and hipbones. Private owners often fail to provide a proper diet.



Grossly inadequate space for a tiger.



Dilapidated conditions for lions and tigers at a private menagerie.



Breeding white tigers, which are simply an aberrant color variation of Bengal tigers, serves no conservation purpose and has led to serious congenital defects including crossed eyes, club feet, kidney problems, shortened tendons, and near-crippling hip dysplasia. All white tigers are in-bred.

In the wild, big cats spend their time traveling vast distances to hunt, seek mates, and stake out territory. Most species are primarily nocturnal and, with the exception of lions and male cheetahs, are solitary by nature. Housing incompatible animals together in cramped quarters has frequently led to big cats killing their cage mates. Most of the estimated 5,000 to 7,000 captive tigers in the U.S. are held at roadside and traveling zoos, pseudo-sanctuaries, and private menageries where they are subjected to extreme confinement and neglect.

Minimum Requirements for Captive Big Cats

- A large enclosure, preferably measured in acres rather than feet, that provides space adequate to run, stalk, chase, and play
- Tigers and jaguars need pools large enough to submerge in
- Visual barriers that provide privacy from the public and other animals
- Natural substrate, such as soft earth, grass, and mulch
- Large logs to sharpen claws
- Climbing structures, multiple perches, and platforms
- Environmental enrichment offered frequently to alleviate boredom and encourage exploratory behavior and exercise, such as olfactory stimulation (perfumes, spices, and other scents), whole carcasses, materials or toys to investigate and tear apart
- High quality commercially-prepared diet, whole carcasses, or varied meats that include animal bones

Typical Sub-Standard Living Conditions for Captive Big Cats

- Small, barren cages, often 15-feet by 16-feet or less, with floors of concrete, hard-packed earth, or mud
- Declawing, which can result in life-long physical ailments
- No stimulation of any kind
- Fed a nutritionally-deficient diet of muscle meat or chicken and turkey by-products, road kill, and rotten meat donated by local super markets
- Cubs prematurely pulled from their mothers and used for public handling—a common practice at substandard facilities that causes health problems
- Unwanted African lions, including those used in cub handling operations, may be slaughtered for the exotic meat market and surplus tigers may fuel the illegal market for tiger parts and derivatives used in traditional Asian medicine

Problems Caused by Unhealthy Living Conditions

Forced inactivity due to extreme confinement, as well as standing and walking on a hard surface such as concrete, can cause foot, joint, muscle, and circulatory problems; worn, cracked, and ulcerated footpads; poor muscle tone; and overall poor physical fitness. According to research conducted by University of Oxford zoologists, “Among the carnivores, naturally wide-ranging species show the most evidence of stress and/or psychological dysfunction in captivity.” Captive big cats, unable to meet their instinctual needs, exhibit neurotic behaviors such as pacing, tail-chewing, toe-sucking, or excessive grooming.

Weak Animal Protection Laws Cause Immense Suffering in Captive Big Cats

Colton, California	When authorities raided the home of John Weinhart, operator of Tiger Rescue, a facility that charged a fee for the public to have their photos taken with tiger cubs in 2003, they found 11 tiger and leopard cubs in the attic, two tigers on the front porch, 58 dead tiger cubs in a freezer, and about 30 dead tigers decomposing on the property. Thirty-nine abused tigers were seized and relocated to the Performing Animal Welfare Society sanctuary and Weinhart was subsequently convicted of child endangerment and animal cruelty and sentenced to two years in jail and five years of probation.
Sandusky, Ohio	An exhibitor was cited by the U.S. Department of Agriculture for using an unvaccinated 3½ -week-old tiger cub for more than 50 photos with the public in a three day period.
Kauffman, Texas	Three lions were confiscated from an exhibitor who, four months previously, had had a lion and two tigers confiscated. The lions suffered from various levels of ataxia, a condition that causes a loss or impairment of muscular coordination. The female lion had such difficulty holding her head up that a veterinarian warned that she might require euthanasia. The two male lions were also underweight, had multiple open sores, and their coats were dull and dirty. One male had no mane at all and the other's mane was very thin and badly matted.
Dallas, Texas	A tiger who had been shot to death was found in a vacant lot near an apartment complex off the interstate. The tiger had been declawed and was wearing a collar, leading authorities to conclude that she had been someone's pet.
Arkansas	A 400-pound pet tiger was abandoned by her owner in the mountains of north-central Arkansas. The tiger, who the man had acquired when she was 3-months-old, spent four days in the wilderness and trekked 60 miles before showing up back at the man's home.
Detroit, Michigan	A juvenile tiger who had been beaten to death and dumped in a field was found by local residents.
Las Vegas, Nevada	A sick, severely malnourished cougar was abandoned at the Las Vegas Zoo in the middle of the night. The de-clawed and neutered animal had clearly been someone's pet.

