

investigative report



Reckless Tiger Cub Petting Zoo:

The Humane Society of the United States Investigates GW Exotic Animal Park

For approximately 4 months in the summer and fall of 2011, a Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) investigator worked as an animal caretaker at GW Exotic Animal Park (“GW”) in Wynnewood, Okla. where hundreds of animals – most of them dangerous exotics such as tigers, lions, bears, chimpanzees and other primates – are caged in barren conditions, bred to provide infant animals for public photo shoots and “play time” sessions and often cared for by workers who have little-to-no experience handling large carnivores or primates.



The HSUS investigation of GW revealed a commercial operation—that often seeks donations for “rescued” animals—that endangers both animals and the public along with possibly violating federal and state laws and regulations:

- Tiger cubs were punched, dragged, and hit with whips during “training.”
- Visitors, including children, were bitten, scratched and knocked down by tiger cubs, some of whom were too mature to be used for public handling or photo shoots. U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) **regulations** prohibit excessive handling of cubs and prohibit unsafe contact with juvenile tigers (e.g., those over 12 weeks). One tiger named Sarge was used in a photo shoot at GW despite being nearly a year old and capable of inflicting severe injuries to the public. The owner of GW told park staff that allowing Sarge to interact freely with patrons was “very illegal” even though photo sessions conducted that same day had allowed such interaction. GW’s park manager told staff that if patrons ask the age of a tiger, “...just say they’re, they’re just a couple months old. You’re not lying, you’re not telling the truth... couple months old. That’s all they need to know. Ah, don’t tell ‘em it’s sixteen-weeks-old and that cat over there we’re going to play with later is eighteen-weeks-old, the one over there is a month older...”
- Tiger cubs – some whose eyes had not even opened – were passed incessantly around to park visitors despite their cries of distress violating USDA regulations which state that animals may not be handled in a manner that causes trauma, behavioral stress, physical harm or unnecessary discomfort and that young animals may not be handled in a rough or excessive manner. Tiger cubs were hauled around the country to malls and fairs for photo shoots.



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Free: twelve week old tigers, bottle raised, very gentle; Barbary lions, seven months old, great looking cats, four males and one female. USDA. 405-207-1168. OK 6-1-07

Tigers, lions, bears, 12 weeks and up, free to USDA licensed facilities only. Not given as pets. Need to lighten the load. All are in excellent shape and health. 405-207-1168. Oklahoma 7-1-07



- Five endangered tigers died during the HSUS investigation, including:
 - Hobbes, whose body was picked up by a worker from a “bone museum” in Oklahoma City who commented that it would be a shame to let the tiger’s skin go to waste
 - Two sick tigers who never received veterinary care were killed and their bodies buried in a horse enclosure—a worker confirmed GW’s method of tiger euthanasia was gunshot and described it as “pretty gruesome”
 - An infant tiger who had somehow sustained a head injury while living in the GW owner’s house was buried by the HSUS investigator and another worker
 - Tony, a tiger who reportedly belonged to the assistant park manager
- Unwarranted breeding of tiger cubs resulted in the need to offload animals who had outlived their usefulness to GW – many of whom were placed in substandard facilities such as **Stapp Circle S Ranch** in Indiana, **Big Cats of Serenity Springs** in Colorado and **Forever Wild** in California.
- Tiger cubs were removed from their mothers immediately after birth and taken into the GW owner’s house to be hand-raised.
- Staff reported that tiger cubs were “donated” to other parties in exchange for a “donation” to GW as a means to skirt federal prohibitions on interstate sales of the animals.

Other investigation findings:

- Three federally-protected hawks died during the investigation – one was placed, still alive, in the dumpster by a worker ordered to do so by GW’s owner and assistant manager; a GW manager acknowledged that the facility was not allowed to possess migratory birds.
- The USDA cited GW for failure to provide proper veterinary care to a sick baboon and a New Guinea singing dog. The baboon died during the investigation.
- The investigator was informed about a sick serval who went without veterinary care for weeks before being euthanized.
- Tigers and lions were bred to create hybrid “ligers” despite conservationists and accredited zoos decrying such breeding.
- Bear cubs were used for public “play” sessions even though GW’s state wildlife license prohibits such activity.
- Toddlers and other children were routinely placed inside an enclosure with unrestrained adult wolves and wolf hybrids.
- Bears went without water in temperatures soaring above 100 degrees.
- A horse was shot five times before finally being killed to feed to the big cats.



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The incident was described to the HSUS investigator by a coworker: "...and Scott takes the horse and we put it by the Dumpster...and Davie goes — 'POW!' Hits the motherf***** right here...blood start gushing out of his nose...three fingers [width] under his eyes...the nose...horse ran crazy...he start gushing blood everywhere...on Davie, on the f***** cars parked over there...the dumpster was covered in blood...'shoot again Davie, shoot again'. 'POW!' Again. F***** horse wouldn't die...'POW!' Third time, still no man, f***** the horse was kicking, the f***** blood squirting everywhere. Fourth time, 'POW!' F*** no! The fifth one he finally f***** shot it...God damn!"

- GW management instructed workers to hide a non-native spotted skunk purchased at an Ohio exotic animal auction in the primate house under dirty laundry to avoid detection by state wildlife inspectors because GW did not have authority to possess the animal and had already been given a warning about possessing the skunk.
- An escaped python which workers guessed was part of the traveling show was discovered loose in the park near a tiger enclosure.
- Six baby skunks, five baby raccoons, one adult skunk, a coatimundi, a parakeet, a baby peacock, a goose, a groundhog, a rabbit, an iguana, and an adult raccoon also died during the investigation and a one-eyed bobcat was destroyed.
- During the investigation, GW claimed it would have to close down because it could not pay its water bill during an extreme heat wave. The HSUS investigator questioned the park manager about the situation and was told that the report was simply "an advertising ploy...to get people to generate money," and that "news crews help us out."

GW is currently under investigation by the USDA for the deaths of 23 tiger cubs during a 13-month span in 2009-10. GW's owner claimed that the cubs died from "bad formula" but the FDA found no problem with the formula.

In 2006 GW was **fined \$25,000 by USDA** for failing to provide adequate veterinary care, failing to protect the public during animal handling and failure to provide an adequate number of trained staff.

As a result of its investigation, HSUS has filed complaints with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service for investigation into potential violations of the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act, Endangered Species Act, Lacey Act, and Rhinoceros and Tiger Conservation Act; with the U.S. Department of Agriculture for violations of the Animal Welfare Act; and with the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation for violations of GW's state commercial wildlife license.



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