



**THE HUMANE SOCIETY  
OF THE UNITED STATES**



**HUMANE SOCIETY  
LEGISLATIVE FUND™**

# **Investigation of Sloth Encounters in Hauppauge, N.Y.**

Undercover investigation at notorious exhibitor reveals sloths fighting, rough handling and staff using punishment to manage sensitive wild animals

## Horrific abuse documented at Larry Wallach’s Sloth Encounters

On Nov. 4, 2023, an investigator from the Humane Society of the United States went undercover as a paying customer at Larry Wallach’s Sloth Encounters in Hauppauge, New York. The investigator documented staff hitting sloths, stressed sloths kept in crowded conditions fighting with one another, and a sloth with a flesh wound struggling when Wallach roughly grabbed his head.



Two sloths fighting on an overhead branch (left). One sloth appeared to suffer a torn flesh wound near his chin (right).  
*Photo by the HSUS, 2023.*

The HSUS and Humane Society Legislative Fund have filed a complaint with the U.S. Department of Agriculture asking for termination of Wallach’s Animal Welfare Act license and an investigation into Sloth Encounters for alleged Animal Welfare Act violations. The alleged violations include handling sloths with physical abuse, causing sloths stress and trauma, housing incompatible sloths together, allowing public handling of animals in a manner that risks harm to the animals and the public, failure to provide animals with suitable housing and enrichment, and feeding sloths an inappropriate diet.

In 2022, after years of exploiting tiger cubs for cub petting, Wallach switched his business model to use one of the wildlife selfie industry’s latest fad animals—the sloth. Wallach converted a former pool supplies store into a sloth’s worst nightmare where customers can pay \$50 to spend half an hour holding, feeding and petting several of the seven sloths housed at the location. In the HSUS investigator’s video, Wallach allowed public handling of juvenile and adult sloths and encouraged the public to rub the stomach of a pregnant sloth, who was unable to isolate herself from paying customers. According to Wallach’s website, encounters with sloths are offered six days a week at 30-minute intervals from noon to 5:30 p.m. for up to 20 people at a time.

## Summary of investigation findings

Animal behavior and welfare expert Jay Pratte provided a scathing statement after reviewing the HSUS investigator’s video. Pratte has worked for over three decades with organizations across North America—including private sanctuaries, rehabilitation agencies, traveling circuses, government institutions and both accredited and non-accredited zoos—on improving animal welfare.

Pratte’s statement (included at the end of this report) details the facility’s deplorable and unsafe conditions, noting:

- The aggression between sloths and consequent injuries is a result of too many animals confined in a small space.
- Repeated use of punishment leads to chronic distress and impairs long-term learning and coping mechanisms.
- Allowing the public to invade the sloths’ enclosure, poor monitoring of contact with customers, and inappropriate handling causes anxiety, fear and aggression, resulting in acute and chronic distress.
- The animals are exposed to an unsafe variety of potential pathogens and parasites as visitors are allowed unrestricted access to the animals’ enclosure.
- The diet for sloths described by the owner/staff does not represent best practices and can cause poor health, a shortened lifespan or death.
- A singly-housed kangaroo and two capybaras—both reclusive species—had no appropriate means to evade customer attention and were kept in cages that were too small. The enclosures lacked environmental complexity and appropriate substances that would allow the animals to engage in species-typical behaviors. These circumstances are likely to create acute and chronic psychological distress.

## Sloths repeatedly hit with spray bottle; sloth grabbed by neck

In the HSUS video, a sloth named Priscilla pursued a sloth named Eddie on overhead branches in the small, dark sloth encounter room. A staff member who kept a spray bottle in hand (apparently to address frequent fights between the sloths) repeatedly sprayed Priscilla in the face with water. When Priscilla reached Eddie on the branch, the two began fighting. The staff member hit the sloths with the hard plastic top of the spray bottle more than 20 times, causing Priscilla to fall to the floor.

Priscilla narrowly missed falling on a customer who moments earlier had been seated under the commotion while holding another sloth. After Priscilla fell to the floor, Eddie retreated on the overhead branches and staff noticed that he sustained an injury in the fight. Wallach then roughly grabbed Eddie by the head and neck, causing a visibly distressed Eddie to struggle as he attempted to bite and claw Wallach in an apparent effort to remove himself from Wallach’s grip. The video revealed a flesh wound on Eddie’s chin. Wallach shrugged off the incident, falsely claiming to the customers and staff that fighting is just what sloths do and continued with the sloth encounters.



This sloth leans back and reaches out for a branch that is not there. According to animal expert Jay Pratte says, this is in a futile attempt to remove himself from a stressful encounter. *Photo by the HSUS, 2023.*

While customers were holding the sloths during the encounters, Wallach encouraged customers to “let go” of the sloths and walk around without supporting the animals, as though a sloth clinging to customers while they move about is some sort of a parlor trick, when in fact the sloth could be injured if a customer moved unexpectedly and caused the sloth to fall to the floor.

Expert Pratte noted: “The animals can be observed stretching out limbs to reach branches when being clutched and petted by visitors. The animals’ attempts to remove themselves from unwelcome situations are ignored to the point where they can be observed attempting to bite customers and staff.”

## Kangaroo and capybaras suffer in barren cages



A kangaroo (left) and two capybaras (right) kept in cramped, barren cages in the store front and used in unmonitored public interactions as visitors enter their cages. *Photos by the HSUS, 2023.*

Wallach also offers close encounters with a solitary kangaroo, two capybaras and a solitary cockatoo. The animals are kept in cramped, barren cages in the storefront.

Pratte’s criticisms of conditions for the kangaroo, capybaras and cockatoo include a lack of proper social groupings, no appropriate means to evade customer attention, and cages that are too small and lacking in environmental complexity.

The capybaras, a semi-aquatic species, were not provided with a pool—a basic requirement that allows them to express species-typical behaviors. Instead, they had a small metal tub in their enclosure that was layered with an excessive buildup of feces.

## Wallach’s history of animal abuse, neglect and violating the law

Between 2010 and 2023, the USDA issued 28 Animal Welfare Act citations against Wallach, including three repeat and three critical. Critical violations are defined as non-compliances with federal law that have a serious or adverse effect on the health or wellbeing of the animal. In a 2013 [consent decision and order](#), Wallach’s AWA license was suspended for six months for [unsafe handling of juvenile tigers](#), failure to provide veterinary care to an injured tiger, and causing trauma and stress to a young tiger among other problems. In 2017, the Nassau County SPCA in New York confiscated a frail and chronically malnourished wallaby who Wallach kept in a filthy, feces-filled cage in his garage with no food or water and without adequate heat. Wallach’s USDA citations include:

- Subjecting [sloths to excessive noise](#) by allowing 10-plus people to roam freely and speak loudly in the sloth room. One sloth attempted to bite a customer and the animal’s hair was “puffed up,” which can

indicate behavioral stress and discomfort. The sloth could also potentially cause harm to members of the public (2023).

- Lying [to federal inspectors after](#) a member of the public was bitten and/or scratched by a sloth named Edward during an encounter in 2022. The person required immediate medical care by a medical professional. Following the bite, the Suffolk County health department issued an animal confinement order for the sloth, which Wallach signed. In a subsequent USDA inspection, Wallach claimed to know nothing about a bite incident. The USDA issued Wallach a critical Animal Welfare Act citation. The inspector wrote, “According to the health officials, had the incident involved one of the other more recently acquired sloths, euthanasia and rabies testing of the sloth would likely have been required for public health purposes” (2022).
- Providing [false information](#) to inspectors about how he allows the public to feed sloths (2022).
- Housing a sloth in his cluttered garage where the animal was [exposed to hazards](#) (2021) and keeping baby sloths at the [unapproved homes](#) of his brother and girlfriend (2022).
- Keeping the [humidity level too low](#) for sloths, who are very sensitive to temperature and humidity, which apparently caused one sloth to repeatedly scratch his skin (2023).
- Inappropriately bottle-feeding a [nursing joey](#) (baby kangaroo) in a manner that can cause aspiration pneumonia (2023).
- Allowing a tiger cub with a [fractured bone](#) in the animal’s front paw to play, run and jump on and off furniture (2021).

Consistent with Wallach’s history of ignoring regulations, local authorities [charged Wallach](#) in 2022 with illegally keeping and selling wild animals such as sloths and kangaroos and failing to obtain necessary local permits to operate his Sloth Encounters business. In 2023, the New York Supreme Court [ordered Wallach](#) to cease exhibiting animals and operating as a pet store. Wallach has ignored the court’s order and continued peddling these cruel encounters and was found in [civil contempt](#) by the court in July 2023. Wallach [pled guilty](#) in 2023 to a [state criminal charge](#) of illegally possessing and transporting three Nile monitor lizards.

## A cruel industry targets sloths

According to HSUS research, nearly 130 facilities in the U.S. engage in the despicable practice of offering close encounters with sloths—a reclusive tree-dwelling animal uniquely unsuited for use in public interactions. **A sloth being petted and handled may appear compliant when the animal is actually frightened, because sloths respond to fear by holding still.** Handling by people, or just being close to them, can cause a sloth’s blood pressure to rise. Sloths are nocturnal animals whose natural sleep cycle is disrupted by public handling. To help feed the demand for captive sloths, more than 700 wild-caught sloths were imported into the U.S. between 2016 and 2020 (an average of 140 per year), according to data compiled from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s Law Enforcement Management Information System.

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## Conclusion

This undercover investigation proved once again that buying public encounters with wild animals perpetuates a cruel and heartless industry that hurts animals and puts the public at risk. The Humane Society of the United States encourages the public to avoid patronizing facilities that offer interactive experiences with wild animals and to refrain from sharing or liking images posted on social media of people handling wild animals, which [studies](#) show is detrimental to conservation efforts and serves as free advertising for the callous [exotic pet industry](#).

## Expert's statement on animal care deficiencies at Sloth Encounters

Animal welfare and behavior consultant Jay Pratte reviewed video footage taken at Larry Wallach's Sloth Encounters and provided the following statement to the HSUS:

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November 24, 2023

To Whom It May Concern:

I have reviewed video concerning sloths, capybaras, a kangaroo, birds, and reptiles kept at Sloth Encounters in Hauppauge, New York.

### Sloth

In my professional opinion, there are too many sloths in the sloth enclosure for the space, height, and minimal complexity within the enclosure. Sloths are not a gregarious or "social" species to begin with; forced proximity in overcrowded surroundings would result in competition for resources within their own "territory." There are minimal concealment opportunities for these animals to evade one another or visitors if they choose. The space in the sloth enclosure is not very high for a canopy-dwelling species, has only a minimal number of perching/climbing branches or structures, and few canopy-like areas where individuals can feel concealed and safe. The inadequate complexity is apparent in how quickly one of the animals is able to chase after and injure another.

It is considered best practice, when housing animals in groups, to ensure that there are more resources (number of dens, perching spots, opportunities for feeding, water, etc.) than there are animals.

Further indication that the population density is too high for such a small area, which is also lacking in environmental complexity, is the observable aggression between individual animals and the consequent injuries. One incident was observed in the small amount of footage provided, and the staff can be heard discussing "scabs" from previous injuries. It is unclear how the previous injuries occurred, but there is a high chance that injuries occur regularly between individuals. Staff are clearly aware of the issues/conflicts, referring to one male as "The Bully", then indicating that he is definitely "her bully" after the provoked female retaliates and injures him. Further, staff are armed with spray bottles to deter conflict between individual animals (and likely to mitigate the sloths' biting of staff and customers; see below), which implies that this is not an uncommon occurrence.

The inability to avoid conflict and evade other animals or customers would create psychological distress. Even if animals retreat to one of the kennels, to a corner, or to the floor (which is entirely atypical for this species), people can still approach and reach these animals. Customers are allowed and encouraged to rub a pregnant sloth's belly; this animal should be allowed to isolate herself and not be subjected to constant customer attention/contact. Repeated exposure to overpopulated conditions, conflict with other animals, and an inability to evade contact or conflict with humans or other animals, are all factors likely contributing to chronic psychological distress. Chronic distress results in permanent neurological changes and long-term physical health and psychological learning issues.

Sloths are quiet, reclusive, nocturnal species. They are highly sensitive to temperature changes based on their physiologic and metabolic needs; as such, choice in temperature variations, perching locations, and positioning opportunities are important to their wellbeing. The environment the animals are housed in does not provide enough opportunities for appropriate self-regulation.

Further, constant exploitation by staff through allowing public invasion of their enclosure, poorly monitored contact by customers, and inappropriate handling creates situations that these animals are not genetically predisposed to adjust to. The animals can be observed stretching out limbs to reach branches when being clutched and petted by visitors. The animals' attempts to remove themselves from unwelcome situations are ignored to the point where they can be observed attempting to bite customers and staff. An inability for sloths to remove themselves from situations that cause anxiety, fear, or aggression results in acute and chronic distress.

Customers can be heard discussing their own pets and have come in off the street. The sloths (and other animals) are exposed to an unnecessary and unsafe variety of potential pathogens and parasites as visitors are allowed unrestricted access to the animals' enclosures. Examples of common and easily transmitted health risks that could lead to illness or death include, but are not limited to: distemper, leptospirosis, toxoplasmosis, fleas, ticks, and intestinal parasites. Further, some customers appear visibly uncomfortable in situations, or are encouraged to let go of the sloths while they are on the person's body, risking injury to the animals if guests startle or move unexpectedly, potentially injuring an animal or allowing it to fall to the ground.

Punishment techniques are used to manage the sloths. Staff can be observed spraying the sloths in the face with water, swatting at the animals, and even striking them with the water bottle. Punishment techniques impair both short- and long-term learning. Repeated use leads to chronic distress, permanent physiological changes, and impairs long-term learning and coping mechanisms. The animals may also experience injuries from the use of physical punishment methods.

Sloths can cause significant injuries to other animals (as observed in recorded footage), and have been reported in this facility (as well as other facilities engaging in similar practices) to injure visitors and/or staff. Visitor contact opportunities with sloth species are not a community standard; Such practices cause unnecessary distress and injuries.

The proffered diet described by the owner/staff is not representative of sloths' genetically predisposed and physiological needs, nor does it represent best practices in either the zoo or private industries (see references). Sloths are primarily folivorous (leaf-eaters) and require diets heavy in leaves and fiber from whole-leaf sources to maintain proper GI and overall health. Example diets are included in the references, along with recommendations that sloth caregivers should carefully manage sloth dietary needs under a professional nutritionist's guidance. This facility is offering inappropriate foods (i.e., fruit, rice) as the bulk of the animals' diet; private and professional zoo guides advise that sloth nutrition and GI health are carefully managed and monitored. Failure to follow community standards will result in poor health and wellbeing of the animals, will likely shorten their lifespan, and can lead directly to death.

#### References:

Sloth Nutrition Guide and care

[https://nagonline.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/2021\\_Sloth\\_Nutrition\\_Guide.pdf](https://nagonline.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/2021_Sloth_Nutrition_Guide.pdf)

<https://pethelpful.com/exotic-pets/pet-sloth-care>

### Injuries caused by sloths

- <https://www.mlive.com/news/saginaw-bay-city/2023/03/sloth-bites-teen-during-visit-to-michigan-pet-store-ruining-lifelong-dream.html>
- <https://www.utahbusiness.com/feds-cite-seaquest-in-layton-after-multiple-guests-bitten/>
- <https://mix949.com/peta-files-complaint-over-sloth-bite-other-issues-at-minnesota-aquarium/>

### Kangaroo and Capybaras

The spaces for the kangaroo and capybaras are very small and lacking in environmental complexity. No appropriate substrates are present that would allow the animals to engage in species-typical behaviors. The capybaras are lacking an appropriate pool, as recommended in easily procured care manuals (see references).

Kangaroos and capybaras are both reclusive species that are currently housed in a high-traffic area with no appropriate means to evade customer attention. There is only one open shelter space for the two capybaras, which provides no opportunity for evasion or concealment as visitors are allowed to walk right into the animals' space. The small enclosures and lack of environmental complexity provide minimal opportunities for either the kangaroo or capybaras to engage in natural species-typical behaviors. These circumstances likely create acute and chronic psychological distress.

Both species are recognized as gregarious and social. The singly-housed kangaroo and the pair of capybaras are not housed appropriately for their genetic social expectations: both would live in large, multigenerational groups. Lack of appropriate species-typical social environments will result in chronic psychological distress. Chronic distress causes permanent neurological and physiological changes, resulting in compromised wellbeing, potentially shortened lifespan, and in severe instances can result in myopathy, learned helplessness, and death.

There is a high risk of disease and injury to the animals through unavoidable contact with guests, like the concerns described above affecting the sloths.

Kangaroos and capybaras, both in the wild and under human care, are documented to have injured people. Bite wounds are serious and can lead to significant infections and health complications in humans.

### References:

Capybara Care Manual

[https://assets.speakcdn.com/assets/2332/capybara\\_care\\_manual\\_2021.pdf](https://assets.speakcdn.com/assets/2332/capybara_care_manual_2021.pdf)

### Injuries caused by capybaras and kangaroos

- <https://www.abc4.com/news/local-news/peta-calls-out-utah-aquarium-that-was-cited-after-several-guests-bitten/>
- [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349870572\\_Injuries\\_and\\_infection\\_caused\\_by\\_capybara\\_bites\\_in\\_a\\_human](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349870572_Injuries_and_infection_caused_by_capybara_bites_in_a_human)
- <https://www.wcnc.com/article/news/watch-kangaroo-attacking-girl-at-alabama-zoo-caught-on-camera/275-438051878>
- <https://people.com/human-interest/kangaroo-kills-man-blocks-paramedics-from-saving-him/>



### Cockatoo

Vocalizations heard in the video may be caused by distress, though are likely strident attempts at seeking attention. The cage is small and lacks environmental complexity. However, the main concern is that this is a highly social species, with the genetic expectations of living within a large flock and regularly interacting with other birds. As of 2023, the USDA/APHIS monitors bird care and welfare under AWA standards. Singly-housed birds are now subject to the same USDA requirements and considerations that apply to singly-housed primates (or other social mammals, i.e., kangaroos and capybaras).

Members of the public have access to this animal without a protective barrier in place. Cockatoos can be incredibly volatile birds, particularly if experiencing chronic distress from poor housing and lack of appropriate social interactions. They do bite and can cause significant injury.

### References:

Injury caused by cockatoo

<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/girl-bitten-cockatoo-bird-paradise-mandai-wildlife-group-rendered-first-aid-3553931>

### Reptiles

Several reptile habitats appear to have no UV light provided. Turtles stacked themselves on top of one another on a tiny plastic shelf, clearly indicating a need for more terrestrial space.

Jay Pratte, MAIS



Pratte is an animal behavior and welfare consultant for the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, Bear Care Group, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries, the Humane Society of the United States, Indiana’s Attorney General office, and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. He holds a bachelor of science degree in zoology and behavioral psychology from the University of Alberta, with a master’s of Interdisciplinary Studies in zoo and aquarium leadership from George Mason University.

For more than three decades, Pratte has worked with organizations across North America on improving animal welfare, including private sanctuaries, rehabilitation agencies, traveling circuses, government institutions and both accredited and non-accredited zoos. Pratte has mentored animal caregivers in China, Kenya, Romania, Scotland and Viet Nam to assess management programs for animals under human care. Pratte regularly collaborates with international rescue and welfare agencies Animals Asia and Wildlife SOS, improving behavior-based management programs and animal welfare for animals rescued from illegal trafficking or other human activities.

Pratte has published numerous papers on exotic animal care, welfare, behavior and training. He was an adjunct professor at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, teaching courses and labs in animal behavior, as well as his signature special topics course, “Animal Welfare and Human Influence.” He regularly attends and hosts workshops, symposia, and conferences dedicated to improving animal care and welfare. Pratte is an expert federal witness in several high-profile Endangered Species Act cases, dedicated to strengthening protections for big cats and other exotic species. Pratte is currently director of an AZA-accredited zoo.