

# Site visit report: The Humane Society of the United States documents close encounters of the cruel kind at Tiger Safari in Tuttle, Oklahoma

On March 28, 2021, an HSUS investigator attended a “VIP Encounter” at Tiger Safari and videotaped an extremely distressed 6-month-old Asian small-clawed otter as he was being held for a group of maskless zoo-goers to touch and photograph. The distraught otter could be heard crying loudly in a back room long before he was presented to the customers, who’d paid extra to pet and photograph several wild animals. The otter screamed and struggled, clearly suffering throughout the “encounter” session with about 20 people. The facility discouraged patrons from wearing masks despite the fact that otters are susceptible to COVID-19. The otter’s handler attempted unsuccessfully to quiet him by covering his face with her hand, blowing in his face, bouncing him up and down, and holding him aloft.



Tiger Safari’s VIP Encounters are conducted four times daily, seven days a week, which means the otter is forced to endure this stressful ordeal on an ongoing basis. Otters are an exceptionally social species, so the fact that this otter is the only one of his species at Tiger Safari no doubt adds to his trauma. Otters are also semi-aquatic animals, but Tiger Safari does not have an exhibit for otters and appears to keep its solitary otter in a back room when he isn’t being forced to interact with the public.

## Wildlife experts condemn treatment of otter

Animal behavior and welfare consultant Jay Pratte as well as zoo curator Christie Eddie reviewed the encounter video and provided extensive comment (**full statement at end of document**), concluding:

- *“The Asian small-clawed otter in the video is clearly exhibiting signs of significant distress, both in its vocalizations and behavior.”*
- *“It is our expert opinion that otters should not be used in public contact encounters, and in this particular instance that the otter is enduring both acute and chronic physical and psychological distress, significantly impacting the animal’s health and welfare.”*

- *“Animals that are restrained for interactions can suffer from myopathy ... and in severe cases myopathies can be fatal.”*

## Otter encounters

- Otters are one of the latest “fad animals” used by roadside zoos across the country as they stampede to profit from the selfie craze.
- As with all animals used for public encounters, otters are paying a heavy price for their popularity. For example, according to a U.S. Department of Agriculture inspection report, a 9-week-old otter at G&J Traveling Petting Zoo in Mississippi died in October 2020 as a result of stress from public handling.<sup>1</sup>
- Otter encounters also poses a risk to public safety. Otters are energetic, semi-aquatic animals with sharp claws and powerful jaws for eating mussels, snails and crabs. According to USDA and local reports, injuries to people have resulted when otters are forced to interact with the public:
  - On Feb. 7, 2021, in Ethel, Louisiana, a woman was bitten during a swim-with encounter, drawing blood, at Barn Hill Preserve.<sup>2</sup>
  - On Dec. 26, 2020, another visitor to Barn Hill Preserve, participating in the otter swim experience, was bitten on the thumb, breaking the skin.<sup>3</sup>
  - In July 2020, a small child was bitten by an otter during a public feeding at SeaQuest in Trumbull, Connecticut.<sup>4</sup>
  - On Sept. 30, 2019, an otter bit two people during a public handling event at Debbie Dolittle’s Indoor Petting Zoo in Tacoma, Washington. The otter, who was a frequent biter according to a zoo staffer, bit a woman on the hand causing a puncture wound and bit a man on his wrist, leaving a bloody scrape wound.<sup>5</sup>
  - Four visitors were bitten during public interactions with an Asian small-clawed otter at SeaQuest in Fort Worth, Texas between February and June of 2019.<sup>6</sup>

## Encounters with other species at Tiger Safari

In addition to the otter, Tiger Safari carried or passed around a kangaroo confined in a bag and other species susceptible to COVID-19, including a ferret, lemurs (one of whom a handler held upside down by his tail), and a fennec fox who appeared to be either exhausted or sedated.



## Otters are susceptible to COVID-19, yet Tiger Safari encouraged visitors to remove their masks

- Mustelids (otters, ferrets and mink) have been documented as susceptible to COVID-19. In fact, four Asian small-clawed otters at the Georgia Aquarium tested positive for COVID-19 in April 2021.
- A [USDA Tech Note](#) recommends protecting susceptible animals by, among other things, asking people to wear masks and “... *suspending hands-on encounters with any of the SARS-CoV-2-susceptible animals.*”
- Despite the USDA recommendation, Tiger Safari has used the otter (and other susceptible species, including a ferret, primates and a fox) for public encounters.
- Not only were masks not required for encounter attendees, but Tiger Safari actively discouraged attendees from wearing masks.

## Then and now

- HSUS’ 2014 undercover investigation at Tiger Safari documented the cruel treatment of tiger cubs and other animals exploited for photographic opportunities, as well as numerous other animal welfare problems at the zoo. The investigation report can be found [here](#). As a result of that investigation, the USDA filed a complaint against Tiger Safari and the facility was ultimately assessed a \$15,000 civil penalty.
- Two tiger cubs who were used for public handling during the 2014 investigation both died at the zoo before reaching two years of age.
- Now, seven years later, Tiger Safari continues to rake in profits off the backs of a parade of unhappy animals subjected to the stress of public handling.

## “Tiger King” connection

- Tiger Safari has traded big cats extensively with Kevin “Doc” Antle, who was featured in the Netflix series “Tiger King” and who was [indicted](#) in October 2020 by the attorney general of Virginia for cruelty to animals and trafficking lion cubs.
- Tiger Safari has acquired at least five tigers, a cougar, a Siberian lynx and a lemur from Antle as well as an African lion from Joe Exotic.

## Statement from experts regarding otter handling at Tiger Safari

Animal welfare and behavior consultant Jay Pratte, MAIS, and Christie Eddie, an animal care consultant, reviewed the video footage from Tiger Safari and provided the following statement to the HSUS:

We have reviewed the following video (animal encounter, 3-28-2021) of the solitary otter used in public interactions at Tiger Safari Zoo, Tuttle, OK.

The Asian small-clawed otter in the video is clearly exhibiting signs of significant distress, both in its vocalizations and behavior. The animal is visibly struggling against the handler and can be observed pulling away from and trying to evade members of the audience. When the distress vocalizations do not diminish, that handler covers the otter’s face with her hand to attempt to muffle the sound. This is neither excitement nor social vocalizing. The handler physically restrains the animal throughout the encounter, ignoring the clear behavioral expressions of distress. The handling and encounter are distinctly aversive for this otter, and the handler and other staff present ignore the visible/audible distress and continue the encounter regardless. It is the responsibility of qualified caregivers to carefully observe animal behavior and provide appropriate outlets and responses to distress, while providing an environment encouraging expression of species-typical behaviors. Per the Association of Zoo’s & Aquariums [AZA] Otter Care Manual, “*The individual animals*

*involved are consistently maintained in a manner that meets their social, physical, behavioral, and nutritional needs.”*

Animals that are restrained for interactions can suffer from myopathy, and may experience respiratory distress, muscle impairment or wasting, stiffness/spasms, and in severe cases myopathies can be fatal. [Rosenhagen] The otter interactions in the video negatively impact the animal’s welfare. *“Animal and human health, safety, and welfare are never compromised.”* [AZA]

Otters are carnivores capable of inflicting severe bite injuries to humans. Both the handler and audience members are at risk in these interactions, particularly since the otter is exhibiting clear signals of agitation and distress. The risk to the people involved is significant; hand-rearing and tractability do not diminish an animal’s natural defense mechanisms. *“It should be kept in mind that otters are capable of inflicting severe bites, particularly sexually mature females, and have been known to turn on their trainers. In general, otters should be trained in a protected contact situation (i.e., keeper and animal should be separated by a mesh barrier).”* [AZA] It is clear that the handlers’ priority is to continue with the interactions, despite the animal clearly communicating its distress and discomfort.

The handler also mentions that the otter is the only one that they have. This is an exceptionally social species; lack of appropriate social structure and interference with the ability to engage in species-typical social behaviors will result in both acute and chronic psychological distress. *“Careful consideration should be given to ensure that otter group structures and sizes meet the social, physical, and psychological well-being of those animals and facilitate species-appropriate behaviors.”* [AZA]

Mustelids have been documented as susceptible to Covid-19; the handlers and guests are mostly unmasked, no hand sanitizer is visible, and the handler can be heard telling audience members that they do not need their masks. Per the USDA Animal Care Tech Note, Guidance for Zoos and Captive Wildlife Facilities: Protecting Susceptible Animals From SARS-CoV-2 Infection, *“Animals may be best protected by: Asking the public to wear a face mask at the facility; ensuring that members of the public cannot come within 6 feet of nonhuman primates, nondomestic big cats, and all species of mustelids (e.g., ferrets, mink, otters); suspending hands-on encounters with any of the SARS-CoV-2-susceptible animals.”* This otter is being placed in a high-risk situation surrounded by guests and face-to-face with an unmasked handler.

It is our expert opinion that otters should not be used in public contact encounters, and in this particular instance that the otter is enduring both acute and chronic physical and psychological distress, significantly impacting the animal’s health and welfare. *“Otters are not recommended as animal handling or off-site education animals.”* [AZA]

#### **References:**

AZA Small Carnivore TAG 2009. Otter (Lutrinae) Care Manual. Association of Zoos and Aquariums, Silver Spring, MD. [https://assets.speakcdn.com/assets/2332/otter\\_care\\_manual2.pdf](https://assets.speakcdn.com/assets/2332/otter_care_manual2.pdf)

U.S. Department of Agriculture Animal Care Tech Note, APHIS 41-35-078, April 2021  
[https://www.aphis.usda.gov/animal\\_welfare/downloads/ac-tech-note-covid-animals.pdf](https://www.aphis.usda.gov/animal_welfare/downloads/ac-tech-note-covid-animals.pdf)

“Capture Myopathy”

[https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.nwrawildlife.org/resource/resmgr/symp\\_2020/handouts/Rosenhagen\\_Vet\\_Th\\_Capture\\_My.pdf](https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.nwrawildlife.org/resource/resmgr/symp_2020/handouts/Rosenhagen_Vet_Th_Capture_My.pdf)

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#### **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 Masters of Interdisciplinary Studies in zoo and aquarium leadership from George Mason University.

For 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 Vietnam 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 is 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.

#### **Christie Eddie, Zoo Curator of Small Mammals**

Eddie manages an extensive small mammal collection consisting of small carnivores, mustelids, primates, rodents and a variety of other species totaling more than 500 individual animals at a prominent Midwestern zoo. She has been an active animal care professional for over 25 years. She consults with Association of Zoos & Aquariums, United States Department of Agriculture and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals in her areas of expertise. She holds a Bachelor of Science in zoology from Iowa State University.

Eddie has served on several national advisory committees that focus on the care and management of small carnivores, prosimians, pygmy hippos, tapirs, and old and new world monkeys. During her many years of service, she has worked directly with three different species of otter, including Asian small-clawed otter, North American river otter and African spotted-neck otter, overseeing daily husbandry, welfare and breeding programs. She currently serves on the national zoo association's Government Affairs Committee and chairs the association's prosimian advisory committee. Through this committee work, Eddie collaborates with local, state and federal agencies, such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture, as well as the North American Primate Sanctuary Alliance, to assess the welfare of and ultimate placement of surrendered or confiscated wildlife.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture Inspection Report, John Mark Johnson, 65-C-0566, October 26, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture Inspection Report, Barn Hill Preserve, 72-C-0238, February 23, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture Inspection Report, Barn Hill Preserve, 72-C-0238, February 23, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture Inspection Report, SeaQuest Holdings, 88-C-0216, March 25, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department, Animal Bite Report, September 30, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture Inspection Report, SeaQuest, 88-C-0216, February 5, 2019 and June 19, 2019.