

Call of The Wild

The phone rings. It's a private citizen. It's about a donation...

By *Vicki L. Duckett*, Program Assistant
American Zoo and Aquarium Association

Last year, an elderly woman was mauled by her “pet” deer. In Texas, two children were injured, one fatally, when attacked by “pet” tigers. Even former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich was bitten on the chin by a baby cougar in 1995. Some would say this proves people and wild animals don’t mix. Others see it as a necessary risk. Either way, zoos are being asked by irresponsible owners to relocate displaced and unwanted animals, and sanctuaries from Oregon to Zimbabwe are desperate to find them homes.

Public Relations Director Melinda Mancuso says the Dickerson Park Zoo typically receives calls from the public regarding wild animals. She says the Zoo will actively respond to them under “extenuating circumstances.” That may very well be an understatement. Imagine a lazy summer day, you’re lying in the sun at the community swimming pool, listening to a tiny chorus of blue jays, a soft breeze stirs the treetops, an adult African lion casually strolls by... “We once got a call from someone reporting an African lion running through the streets of Springfield,” explains Director Mike Crocker, “but animal control showed up before zoo officials got there.”

Detroit Zoo’s Terry DeRosa wouldn’t be surprised. The director of conservation and animal welfare says a police officer once phoned him about a speeder; a lion was sprawled across the man’s back seat.

Aside from mischievous felines, both have received a deluge of calls, ranging from snakes and lizards to tigers and black bears. Crocker says he is frequently asked to identify snakes over the phone. He asks the caller to describe the snakes’ size, color and pattern in order to determine if the snake is venomous. On occasion, Crocker has made house calls to rid cars and homes of snakes, and once even drove a woman’s car home for her because, although the vehicle sat idle for several days, she was convinced a snake was still slithering about in its engine compartment. More often, Crocker says, the Zoo receives calls regarding green iguanas and Burmese pythons. People try to get rid of these “pets” when they become too large, he explains. On average, wild animal reports add up to several hundred calls a year at Dickerson Park.

Jim Bonner, director of operations at the National Aviary in Pittsburgh receives several hundred calls a week. He says the questions fall under three different categories: nuisance calls, rehabilitation calls and pet donations. He refers injured wildlife calls to rehabilitation centers, and nuisance calls are often solved using an automatic attendant for commonly asked questions. But what about donations?

“Unwanted parrots are a real issue,” says Bonner, “there is no humane society or shelter for them, and they live 60 to 70 years.” He says Moluccan cockatoos are the most notorious. “Never a week goes by without people trying to donate one to the Zoo,” he adds.

Where Bonner is saddled with cockatoos, Detroit Herpetology Curator Andrew Snider fends off green iguanas. He was receiving so many calls, he was forced to record a message on his voice mail that specifically bars the donation of green iguanas and other frequently donated reptiles. Adopting a similar method, Rick Haeffner, curator of reptiles and fishes at the Denver Zoo, developed a “black list.” A curatorial secretary intercepts many of the donation-related calls, and refers to the list, which screens for certain animals including caymen’s, alligators, Burmese pythons, reticulated and ball pythons, and the infamous green iguana.

Dr. Jan Raines, a veterinarian for the Dallas World Aquarium, says they accept green iguanas, but they must be at least four-feet long. She says the aquarium also accepts arowana fish, but no longer receives pacua because it provided people with “an out.” Raines says there are several reasons why animals are abandoned: size; financial upkeep; and disinterest. The novelty wears off, she says, and they attempt to unload their responsibility elsewhere. Philadelphia Zoo’s Beth Bahner agrees, which is why she takes the opportunity to explain the downfalls of wild and exotic “pet” ownership to prospective holders. The animal collections manager reminds visitors that these cute and appealing “babies” will grow into larger, and possibly dangerous animals. Bahner says Pennsylvania state law does not prohibit exotic pet ownership, but does require they be housed in an outdoor setting. This turns many people off,

Laws regarding Wild Animals/Exotics	States
States that impose a ban on private ownership of exotic animals - non-domesticated felines, wolves, bears, reptiles, non-human primates.	AK, CA, CO, GA, HI, MA, NH, TN, UT, VT, WY
States that impose a partial ban on private ownership of exotic animals - allows ownership of some exotic animals, but precludes others.	CT, FL, IL, MD, MI, NE, VA
States that require the “owner” of the exotic animal to obtain a license or permit from the relevant state agency to privately possess the animal (excluding states only requiring import permits).	AZ, DE, IN, ME, MS, MT, NJ, NY, ND, OK, OR, PA, RI, SD
States that have no license or permit requirements, but may regulate some aspect thereof (entry permit, veterinary certificate) or have no state statute governing this issue.	AL, AR, LA, ID, KS, KY, LA, MN, MO, NV, NC, OH, SC, TX, WA, WV, WI

she says, and cites it as one of many reasons wild animals do not make good pets. She adds that veterinary care for exotics is difficult to find, and even general upkeep may prove problematic. Aside from the obvious expense, she points out that one cannot go to the local pet store and pick up “tiger chow,” or slabs of raw meat.

Nobody knows that better than Marcus Cook. At a dollar per pound, the curator of zoo development for the Dallas World Aquarium buys 1200

lbs of meat per month to feed his five big cats: two black leopards; two tigers; and one white tiger. Although the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) licenses Cook as a Class C exhibitor, he does not put his cats on display. In the state of Texas, there are three wildlife permits. The Class C permit that Cook holds, and Class A and B permits, which go to dealers who buy and sell animals. Cook feels it is some of these dealers who have given exotic animal ownership a bad name. He says these dealers don't research their customers' facilities and thereby promote impulse buying, which later puts the animal at as much risk as the owner. “They have acted irresponsibly in their trade,” he adds.

Currently, the USDA does not place regulations on exotic “pets” because their acquisition is not considered “commercial.” Cook hopes to change that.

He is going before the Texas State Senate to support a bill actively policing the private ownership of dangerous wild animals. Among other restrictions, the bill will monitor housing standards that comply with the Federal Animal Welfare Act. Presently, 12 states outright ban private ownership of exotics and non-domesticated animals; seven states apply a partial ban on exotics, which allows ownership of some animals, but precludes others; 14 states require the owner to obtain a license or permit; and 17 states impose no special sanctions and do not require permits, but may regulate on a local level.

Although their regulatory powers are limited, the USDA does make a very firm stand against exotic animal ownership, citing harm to the animal and public risk. The Animal Protection Institute (API), a non-profit organization based in Sacramento, California, reports more than 190 incidents involving wild animals since 1994. The episodes range from escapees to contractual diseases to injury-related deaths. API says some wild animals carry zoonotic diseases such as Salmonellosis, Monkey Pox, and Herpes B, which can be harmful or even fatal to humans. They also point out that exotic animals need special housing, diet and maintenance.

In addition to the legislative wrangling, there are ethical issues to consider as well. “It's all

about the animals,” says Cook. He says responsible exotic animal ownership involves time, manpower, psychological enrichment, health supervision over parasites and septic control, and at least \$300-\$500 a year per animal for adequate veterinary care.

Terry DeRosa, the director of conservation and animal welfare at the Detroit Zoo says a police officer once phoned him about a speeder; a lion was sprawled across the man's back seat.

San Antonio Zoo Director Steve McCusker says he wouldn't be in the business now if he didn't own wild animals as a child. He notes it would be hypocritical of him to reprimand others for doing the

same. He points out that his individual relationships with these animals are what motivated him to pursue a life-long career caring for and protecting both native and exotic wildlife.

But where McCusker found inspiration, Bahner and others see confinement or worse.

So what about the Marcus Cook's of the world? His five cats may not have found a home otherwise. Perhaps his background makes him a unique candidate, considering he is knowledgeable and capable of tending to the special needs of large felines. And with limited space in sanctuaries, his facility was a welcome sight for both the tigers, and those trying to place them. This is an all-too familiar dilemma for Rick Haeffner. He says he filled his sanctuary quotas to capacity for certain reptiles, and can no longer refer people to those facilities.



Zoos & aquariums frequently receive calls about unwanted cockatoos and green iguanas.

For every Louisiana black bear taken in by some place like the Forth Worth Zoo, or for more than 2,000 animals recovered in 1999 by the Chihuahuan Desert Wildlife Rescue – because most zoos do not accept donations – there are literally thousands of exotic animals that remain in unsuitable conditions each year. ☐