

Guest Editorial

What is a True Exotic Animal Sanctuary?

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Responsible Exotic Animal Ownership

The last few years has brought an increased number of so called exotic animal 'sanctuaries' that supposedly rescue abused, neglected, and unwanted exotic pets and circus animals. At the same time, the number of abuse cases and convictions in courts does not seem to be on the increase. The number of private zoos and educational facilities which don't claim their display animals are rescues, seems to be on the steep decline as well.

So what is going on? If most of the exotic industry is rescuing their animals, how can the breeders survive? Or is this all just one big fraud to get donations out of an

unsuspecting public under the guise of rescuing exotics in need? Are most sanctuaries really pseudosanctuaries or as the industry insiders call them, *scamtuarries*?

Each of these 'rescuers' has their own definition of the term 'sanctuary' that fits what they happen to be doing at their facility.

To help the potential donors, reporters, and legislators sort through all the exotic animal rescue/sanctuary lingo, we decided to define what a true exotic animal sanctuary is and is not.

True Exotic Animal Sanctuary

- Is honest, ethical and doesn't lie about the source of its animals.
- Only takes animals nobody else wants, ones that truly have no other place to go.
- Is not political; it does what is truly best for the animal instead of what fits their own agenda with the animals just becoming the props to accomplish their personal goals.
- It rescues animals on a first come first serve basis.
- It takes in animals in need of being rescued/rehomed regardless of the age or species, versus selectively rescuing the animals the sanctuary is missing in their collection or animals that come with the big media exposure—which means donations.
- Doesn't breed animals.
- Doesn't buy animals.
- Doesn't kill animals except in medically necessary euthanasia.
- Doesn't have to be the final place for the animal if a better home can be found to suit the animal's need, be it in a private pet or zoo sector. The sanctuaries should consider what is best for the animal. Any well socialized

animal brought up in a home and capable of adjusting to a new owner/family would definitely have a happier and more rewarding life if put back into a pet environment. If a sanctuary takes in an animal from this situation and realizes it would be happier in a home environment, the sanctuary should do everything in its power to find it a good new pet home. Many sanctuaries claim they are the final home for all their residents, but for specific animals that may not be what is best.

- Small exotic cat species or cubs, pups, and kittens usually do not need rescuing. They are marketable and there are enough responsible private pet homes available for them where the new owner will cover all of the cost of taking care of them.
- Any sanctuary that rescues cute small exotics or babies without adopting them out to a proper new home is wasting the space and money that could be used to adopt an animal that truly has no other place to go.



Ah, the pet life! Scott gives Pebbles a treat.

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- A true exotic cat sanctuary would have mostly adult orange tigers, few adult lions and cougars. All other exotic cat species are marketable and almost never are in need of a rescue unless it is a rare confiscation of an illegally kept or abused animal by authorities. Even then, the sanctuary could eventually free up the space by adopting them out to a private zoo or pet self-supporting new home.

- Exotic cat ‘sanctuary’ full of small cats of different species is unlikely to be a sanctuary; it is a personal collection of somebody who is asking the public to support their pets.

- Housing retired circus tigers while the circus pays for their upkeep is not a rescue; it is a business transaction of a circus boarding their animals at another facility for a fee. This is not any different than boarding your dog long-term at a kennel.

Does Exotic Animal Sanctuary Need to be Federally Tax-exempt Non-profit 501(c)(3)?

Many exotic animal bans exempt sanctuaries that are 501(c)(3). Unfortunately, many legislators do not engage their brain when passing these laws, since being a registered tax exempt charity has nothing to do with animal welfare or public safety. All this means that fewer people are paying the taxes and there are more facilities for the donors to do their tax write offs. From a realistic point of view, a facility doesn't have to be non-profit to be a true sanctuary. What does tax status have to do with animal welfare and the ability to take care for animals?

Many people abuse this loophole to get financial support for their own pets. Some truly do it because there was a ban with no grandfathering clause in their community and becoming a tax-exempt sanctuary was the only way to keep their pets. People who do this usually keep a low profile and do not fraudulently solicit the public to pay for their pets.

There is however a huge community of irresponsible pseudosanctuaries in the US that buy or breed too many personal pets for different reasons and then realize they have no means to support them. They eventually form a federally tax-exempt sanctuary, put their friends and family on the board, rescue few high profile media cases, then push for the bans on others (such as for-profit businesses and pet owners), using them as scapegoats claiming that is where their ‘res-

cues’ came from.

That said, there are some honest exotic pet owners, zoos, or exhibitors who got in over their heads and who ask for help for the good of the animals.

We will not judge the sanctuary that started with their own pets and then turned non-profit and started rescuing after that if they are honest about their beginnings and the extent of the original commercial or pet activity.

The issue is dishonesty. Most sanctuaries won't disclose to the donors what percentage of their animals were their personal pets and how many are true rescues.

And what constitutes a rescue? Most ‘rescues’ are really simple adoption/rehoming cases. Not many came from horrible near death conditions as many sanctuaries claim.

Too many of the major exotic animal sanctuaries fit into the potentially fraudulent category, misleading their donors about the condition and source of their animals. Here are some hints to help you to decipher their lingo:

Exotic Animal Pseudosanctuary Vocabulary

1. Animals *saved from fur farm* means that it was cheaper to buy their exotic kitten at the fur farm than from the pet breeder. By buying from a fur farm, an owner (before

becoming a sanctuary or sometimes after) not only acquires the cats cheaper, they are also supporting the very business they are trying to badmouth by giving them money. If the sanctuary truly was rescuing, they would buy the full grown breeder cats, not the cute fluff balls. Some fur farms never had any intention of being fur farms. Some states ban exotic pets but if one wants to keep or breed bobcats or lynx, all they have to do is to get a fur breeders license. So some rescues from fur farm may be completely bogus because the fur farmer doesn't pelt any cats. He sells all kittens to the pet market.

2. *Saved from the auction* is the same as saving from the fur farms. Babies are cheaper and full-grown big cats are not allowed on the auction premises, so anybody going to auction is there to buy a baby.

3. *Saved from a circus* usually means that a major circus placed the tigers at the sanctuary and is paying for their upkeep.

4. *Saved from a breeder* usually means, it was purchased from the breeder as a cub or kitten before a ‘bad person’ could buy it.

5. *Saved from the pet trade* or *born into the pet trade* usually means this was a personal pet of the sanctuary owner they bred or purchased themselves before they turned into non-profit sanctuary.



Former photo cub, Bam Bam gets a foot massage as he lounges on his hammock.

6. *Throw-away photo cubs* are the well socialized cubs everybody wants. They are either acquired by the sanctuary from their exhibitor friends at 4 months of age, which is the age at which USDA/APHIS rules prohibit public contact. USDA/APHIS, U.S. Department of Agriculture, is the federal agency that regulates the commercial activity and exhibitions of many domestic and exotic animals, and it oversees the implementation of the Animal Welfare Act (AWA.) Other sources of photo cubs are the sanctuaries themselves. They breed them while claiming the mothers arrived pregnant. These people want to have it both ways: breeding their photo cubs and getting money exhibiting them and then claim they rescued them to get even more money. This is unfair to the honest breeders and exhibitors who have legal tax-paying animal business and who in the end find loving homes for their photo cubs. Business people need to be more picky about placing their animals to make sure they don't place them with one of the sanctuaries that will make up fraudulent story about how abused the photo cub was.

7. *Saved from canned hunts* is a very common lie to get money from the donors. Canned hunts of big cats are illegal in the US. If these sanctuaries truly are saving cats from these illegal places, then they need to report them to proper authorities instead of keeping their identity secret. Exposing them will result in the illegal hunt facilities (if they exist) to be prosecuted and shut down. *What about the breeders, pet owners, zoos and educators that occasionally adopt?*

There are many instances when non-sanctuaries adopt animals. These places usually don't take an animal that just needs home. Usually they adopt it because they need one for their breeding, zoo, or educational program or to replace the one of the same species that just died.

These places are not true sanctuaries, since 'rescuing' is not at the core of their activities and they are selective which animal they rehome or adopt. However they serve an important role by offering the home to the animal that would otherwise have to take a valuable true sanctuary space.

What are the main problems of sanctuaries?

Even the people who went into sanctuary business with the purest of intentions, sometimes end up with hearts bigger than their wallets or donation flow. This can often



result in excessive population and substandard care. Sanctuaries, even if incorporated as non-profit, must be run like a business with donations secured and enough money set aside for a year worth of animal care in case donations dry up or a serious medical emergency occurs. Anything else is irresponsible. Wise owners, whether pet owner, zoo, or sanctuary, should not take more animals than they can afford to feed and care for.

Sanctuaries often lose a sight of the fact they should be in it for the animals. Some get greedy or too political, attacking fellow animal owners and discrediting them to get more donations for themselves. They often adopt animals for political reasons: often a pet home might be available but a sanctuary that has more clout in the public eye steps in to take the animal preventing a responsible pet owner from doing the same. This is simply stupid, wasting sanctuary space with animals that can be in a pet home with individual attention, as opposed to an overcrowded sanctuary.

Final Thoughts

Self-proclaimed labels are useless, that includes the label, sanctuary. What matters is what you do and who you are, not what you call yourself. It would be nice to see this industry self-regulate, get ethical and honest, and play fair with all other private owners. If you call yourself a sanctuary but most of your animals are your own purchased ex-pets, then you need to be honest with the public and your donors, so they know the truth about what animals are true rescues. If they still want to donate and pay

for your pet collection, then it is fair. Lying and making up abuse stories that blame pet owners as the main problem to solicit donations is fraud and once discovered, makes everyone with an exotic animal look foolish.

By making up stories of abuse, the sanctuary owners are also giving ammunition to extreme animal rights groups. The stories of supposed abuses/rescues are used as a tool to ban loving exotic owners under the common wisdom of exotics being abused in private hands and sanctuaries supposedly being full. Yes, many sanctuaries are full, but they are not full of true rescues.

The pseudosanctuaries are also sucking up the money away from the true dedicated honest sanctuaries, and are diverting the funds that should go toward the care of truly needy animals.

Just like with domestic dogs and cats, many true sanctuaries are simple private owners who take in animals that are in need of a home, accept them as a new family member, and never ask for a dime. These are the silent rescuers, the silent majority.

Some good sanctuaries are big non-profit sanctuaries which never forgot their roots as a private pet owner or breeder. They realize that since they are in the sanctuary business, it makes sense that is what they hear about is needy animals, but needy animals only makes a small percentage of the exotic animal population.

Why would anybody with a happy spoiled loved exotic pet call a sanctuary? As a healthy person will not go to an emergency room, a sanctuary will not see or hear about the well cared-for pets. •