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ARCHIVE

What to do about the big cats

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There are dozens of lions and tigers, some camels, a few elephants and a smattering of bears hidden in plain sight around Kaufman County.

The animals, in sanctuaries or owned by exhibitors, are well-cared for and pose no threat, their owners say.

But state law requires the county to regulate the exotic animals so county commissioners met with animal owners and animal welfare advocates on Monday to discuss what action the county needs to take.

"All you have to do is comply with the state law," said Dallas attorney Skip Trimble who has worked for years on animal welfare issues. "What you did, didn't comply with state law."

The county passed regulations in 2002, but "they just kind of dropped off," Pct. 1 Commissioner Jerry Rowden said, and were never enforced.

The county has several choices:

- Do nothing and risk being out of compliance with state law,
- set-up a system incorporating the law,
- ban the animals
- or some combination.

The animal owners said, for the most part, they would be happy if the county simply adopted the state law.

The issue has become more urgent over the past year. A keeper was seriously mauled at Zoo Dynamics near Oak Ridge and neighbors within a few miles of the site have had animals killed.

Combine residents became concerned about a resident keeping some big cats, either lynx or servile.

Marcus Cook, Zoo Dynamics' owner, said that it is impossible for any of the lions and tigers in the Kaufman County facilities to escape. All are in cages, with the cages surrounded by a perimeter fence. The facilities are regularly inspected by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

"We're inspected more than child care centers or nursing homes," said Doug Terranova, owner of Terranova Enterprises near Scurry.

If you drive down FM 148, near 1390, look up the hill and squint. You may just be able to see Mr. Terranova's two elephants.



Tabby tiger owned by Doug Terranova

Look in the pasture and you'll see camels mixed in with the horses, ponies and cows.

Hidden from street view are cages that house two wolves -- one so old he walks slowly -- homing pigeons and peacocks. In a separate 8-foot-tall chain-link enclosure topped by another foot of razor wire, are several cages with tigers and a lion.

The cats have concrete-floored cages and dog-house-like shelters. The cages are attached to a larger yard with a dirt floor, large tree limbs to climb and other big cat toys.



Tigers in their cage ready for feeding

There is another grassy yard where the tigers are trained.

Mr. Terranova uses the animals in circuses and movies. His elephants and camels have taken the stage in production in the opera *Aida* and the wolves have appeared in *Walker, Texas Ranger*.

On Monday, pigeons roamed the yard. They had been released in Shreveport as part of a movie and had just made their way home.

He said all his animals are listed with the USDA and the agency regularly checks on them. He said an elephant died in January, he reported it and the USDA immediately came out to test for a cause. He said the tests have not been completed, but a virus that can be spread through hay is suspected.

Mr. Terranova said, in general, he is willing for the county to institute the state law, "with a few tweaks."

He is most concerned about a provision of the law that says the animals must be "emotionally" healthy. "How do you decide if an animal is emotionally healthy?"

Zoo Dynamics has been the lightning rod for the county. There is a long-running suit against the company by the Attorney General's office, then animals in the area were killed and, finally, the keeper was mauled in June.

The Attorney General's complaint mainly involves how Mr. Cook exhibits the animals. He has shown tiger cubs as Six Flags Over Texas, the Terrell Heritage Festival and the Mesquite Rodeo, among other places. The public, including children, are allowed to handle the animals and have their pictures taken.

The AG filed the suit in 2002 after a member of the public was injured at Six Flags. Both Mr. Cook and a spokesman for the AG's office said the suit is nearing settlement.

On Mother's Day, Gary Prater, who lives about two miles from Zoo Dynamics, found his horse dead, with a deep slash in its throat. After that he found several dead calves, again with deep slash marks.

Several people in the area said they had seen, or thought they had seen, big cats in the area, so he was immediately suspicious that an animal had escaped from Zoo Dynamics.

Commissioner Rowden said the county had no list of animals at Zoo Dynamics, so county officials couldn't determine if a cat was missing.

If the county adopts the state law, animal owners will have to register them with the county, provide a way to identify specific animals, have proper cages and care, and carry insurance.

Mr. Prater said he will be content if the county just bans any future dangerous animals.

County Judge Wayne Gent wondered exactly what the county needed to do.

"Are we concerned about the health and welfare of the animals or the health and welfare of people?" he asked.

"We're here to protect both," said Bonnie Hill with Kaufman County Animal Awareness.

The commissioners said the item would be on a future commissioners court agenda.

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