Wouldn't it be cool to have a Tiger?

There are many people who answer, "Yes" to this question and far too many who go beyond the realm of rhetoric to making it a reality. In the April 2014 issue of National Geographic Magazine, an article titled, "Wild Obsession" by Lauren Slater makes mention that the estimated number of captive tigers in the United States is at least 5000, the majority of which are privately owned. Most of us can see that private ownership of a wild by nature giant land carnivore / predator is very problematic, especially with concerns about individual / public safety and health, logistics, the welfare of the animal, etc. However, there are those who (for various reason beyond the scope of this article) tend to downplay the reality of cohabitating with a tiger, such as the need to supply the approximate 11,000 pounds of meat this adult tiger will consume in a year (average 30 lbs. / day).

Aside from the dangers to the people involved, and in proximity to privately owned large predators, it is a very real animal welfare issue for those tigers and lions. As a former USDA-APHIS-Animal Care Veterinary Medical Officer, I inspected most of the USDA Licensees in Indiana for compliance with the Animal Welfare Act (AWA), and have seen the conditions many of these animals are forced to endure. The AWA is a set regulations and standards that are required when one is engaged in certain activities having to do with regulated species of animals. These activities and species include, but are not limited to, the exhibiting and breeding of *Panthera spp.* It must be remembered that the standards in the AWA are minimum standards. They are a floor to not fall below; they are not high standards. Most of the licensees I inspected struggled to meet the minimum standard, and the tigers were kept in facilities and conditions that barely at best met the minimum federal standard. Thus the animals exist precariously on a fine line between minimally accepted animal welfare conditions and poor unacceptable animal welfare conditions. It is only in professional zoological parks and rare sanctuaries that the internal facility standards are set well above the standards of the AWA and provide conditions where tigers can LIVE.

To answer any inquiry regarding whether or not one should own a tiger, it is prudent to ask two questions. The first question seems obvious, "Can I own a tiger?" In this day, age and country, the answer to this question is almost invariably, "yes." It is all too easy to buy a tiger on the internet or at an auction. The sources and markets for wild and exotic animals (such as tigers), raise a multitude of animal welfare concerns that should be commented upon in a future One Welfare article from the IVMA Animal Welfare Committee. In addition, as stated in the National Geographic article Wild Obsession cited in the first paragraph above, to privately own an exotic animal in the State of Indiana requires a license or permit, and in a few other states there are no restrictions at all. Therefore, it is legal to privately own a tiger. The specific logistics of owning a tiger, such as the need for a double barrier enclosure with shift cage and the approximately thirty pounds of meat per day the tiger will consume, we will conveniently ignore for now - so "yes," you can own a tiger.

This brings us to the second question, which should be asked - but often is not. Since a tiger is a sentient being, it is imperative ethically necessary to ask, "Should I own a tiger?" Of course this question is bit trickier because it is ethical in nature and requires values and principles to be considered. Many values and principles place a higher priority on ideas, concepts and actions that are larger than satisfying childish notions and selfish desires. The following excerpt from Sigurd Olson's book The Singing Wilderness eloquently indicates the need to use mature thinking to incorporate the second question into the decision process of owning wild animals.

"3. The Red Squirrel

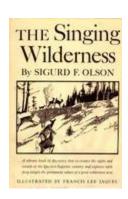
There was a time when I wanted more than anything else in the world to catch a squirrel and have it for my own. I felt then as I did about many things: that if I could actually achieve personal possession, my enjoyment would somehow be complete. I wanted to feed one of the little creatures, care for it, and lavish my affection upon it. The idea that I would be depriving it of freedom never entered my thinking."

So if the ethics of good stewardship of animals are factored in, then to do something that deprives a tiger from living by its natural design or allowing the animal to exist as fully as possible as the animal that it is, then the answer is, "No I should not own a tiger".

When there is a conflict between the first question being, "Yes, I can own a tiger," and the second question being, "No, I should not own a tiger," then the second question will supersede the first by its ethical nature, and provide the conclusive answer: "No, I should not own a tiger."

Unfortunately, it seems that when it comes to deciding whether or not to privately own a wild animal such as a tiger the second question is rarely asked and if asked not answered. So tigers will be privately owned just because people can. Because the ethical concerns are imperative to the welfare of the animal and those concerns are unlikely to be considered then perhaps most states have it right by placing a ban or partial ban on privately owned large wild predators such as tigers. Our neighbors to the East in Ohio found out in a tragic way that their laws and regulations concerning the private ownership of wild predators needed revamped when nearly 50 tigers, lions and bears had to be shot by local law enforcement officers in 2011 when the owner released the animals from their enclosures before committing suicide. I believe Indiana should also put regulations in place that ensure the answer to the second question supersedes the first and prevents the private ownership of tigers just because someone can.

All Excerpts From



Singing Wilderness

Sigurd F Olson Category: Nature"

http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/print/2014/04/exotic-pets/slater-text