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United States Department of Agriculture
Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service

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Position Statement

Large Wild and Exotic Cats Make Dangerous Pets






Large wild and exotic cats such as lions, tigers, cougars, and leopards are dangerous animals. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) believes that only qualified, trained professionals should keep these animals, even if they are only to be pets. Care and handling of these wild and exotic cats should be left to trained professionals who have the knowledge and means to maintain them properly.

APHIS' Animal Care (AC) program is responsible for enforcing the Animal Welfare Act, which includes regulating and inspecting exhibitors of wild and exotic animals. AC personnel have seen too many instances where wild and exotic cats kept by untrained people have not only harmed people but suffered themselves due to poor care. .

Although USDA does not regulate the ownership and care of large wild and exotic cats as pets, State and local laws may apply in some situations.

Human Safety

In most instances, the average person does not have the knowledge or experience to handle such an animal safely at home or in public. Some owners take their animals into inappropriate public places and situations, such as schools, parks, and shopping malls. Because of these animals' potential to kill or severely injure both people and other animals, an untrained person should not keep them as pets. Doing so poses serious risks to family, friends, neighbors, and the general public. Even an animal that is friendly and loving can be very dangerous. In AC's experience, unsuspecting children and adults have been seriously injured or killed, even when the animals involved were "only playing."





The Animal's Well-Being

The average person lacks the specialized equipment and expertise to provide properly for the containment, medical care, husbandry, and nutrition of a large wild or exotic cat. AC has seen this lack of expertise result in the unnecessary suffering and premature death of animals. Some owners request otherwise unnecessary surgical procedures in an effort to make their animals more suitable as pets, although even declawed and defanged animals are still highly dangerous. Owners may find it difficult to obtain appropriate veterinary care for the animal because few veterinarians are qualified and willing to care for large wild and exotic animals that are individually owned.

Large wild and exotic cats obtained as pets are usually acquired as appealing cubs, but when the animals are fully grown, owners often become dismayed at the high cost and difficulty of providing for their upkeep. As a result of these difficulties, or because the animal has either attacked someone or otherwise shown aggression, the owners may try to find a new home for their animal. Placement of these unwanted animals is difficult because most zoos are unwilling to take them and few sanctuary facilities exist. Many of these cats end up being killed for their pelts and meat.

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Additional Information

You can find more information on APHIS and AC on the Internet at www.aphis.usda.gov/ac or by writing to

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