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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Animal welfare advocates applaud Congressional action to restrict possession of dangerous big cats

Washington, D.C. – Yesterday, the Animal Welfare Institute, Big Cat Rescue, Born Free USA, the International Fund for Animal Welfare, The Humane Society of the United States, Humane Society Legislative Fund and the **Performing Animal Welfare Society** celebrated the reintroduction of the Big Cat Public Safety Act (BCPSA), [H.R. 1380](#), in the U.S. House of Representatives. Championed by Representatives Michael Quigley of Illinois and Brian Fitzpatrick of Pennsylvania, the bill would ensure that unqualified individuals are prohibited from obtaining and keeping dangerous big cats like tigers, lions, leopards and cougars.

The public is increasingly concerned about the plight of captive big cats and the sponsors of the Big Cat Public Safety Act have made it clear that they are listening. By reintroducing the BCPSA, Reps. Quigley, Fitzpatrick and 52 bipartisan cosponsors are calling for an end to the unregulated trade and nationwide abuse of captive big cats—an issue that continues to garner national headlines. The most recent shocking incident that put the community and first responders at risk occurred just two weeks ago when officials in Houston, Texas, discovered an adult tiger in a small, filthy, unlocked cage in a back room of an abandoned home.

“From irresponsible breeding to inhumane living conditions and public exploitation, the mistreatment of big cats comes in a variety of forms,” said Rep. Quigley. “By introducing the Big Cat Public Safety Act, we are working to address a serious issue that causes immeasurable animal suffering and introduces inexcusable threats to human safety. State laws regarding private ownership of big cats are inconsistent or nonexistent, which is why a uniform federal law is necessary to end this dangerous industry once and for all.”

“The Performing Animal Welfare Society is proud to be supporting this important bill to end the abuse of captive big cats and ensure public safety,” said Ed Stewart, president of the Performing Animal Welfare Society (PAWS), which rescues and provides lifetime care for captive big cats and other wild animals at its 2,300-acre ARK 2000 sanctuary in San Andreas, California. “The problem of rampant big cat breeding in the U.S. all too often lands right at our door. Of the 16 big cats we care for at PAWS’ ARK 2000 sanctuary, some were bred for the exotic ‘pet’ trade and others were ruthlessly exploited for operations that charge the public to handle and take photos with mistreated cubs. There is a captive big cat crisis in this country. We need to pass the Big Cat Public Safety Act now.”

In addition to keeping dangerous big cats out of private hands, the bill would prohibit the use of big cat cubs for the public to pet, feed, take photos with and play with. Allowing the public to handle and be photographed with tiger and lion cubs is an unscrupulous practice that has caused misery for untold numbers of animals and is the primary cause of surplus tigers flooding the U.S. exotic animal trade.

The abuse begins when the babies are prematurely and forcibly separated from their mothers, usually during or immediately after birth. The cubs can be used for public handling until they are just a few months old, at which point they are often discarded. Some end up warehoused at poorly run roadside zoos and pseudo-sanctuaries, or in the hands of unqualified people with private menageries. More babies must be continually produced to fuel this lucrative business. The practice also poses a safety risk; even very young big cats have sharp teeth and claws that can inflict serious injury, and a number of tiger cubs used for photo ops have been found with ringworm infections.

Surplus tigers discarded by cub-petting operations can also fuel the illegal market for animal parts used in traditional Asian medicine. The rampant breeding of tigers in the United States, the lack of a system for tracking them nationwide and the reality that tigers are often worth more dead than alive mean there are ample opportunities for these animals to enter the black market. In addition, such exhibitions damage the credibility and influence of the U.S. in working with other nations on international tiger conservation efforts.

Facts:

- Since 1990, there have been at least 375 dangerous incidents involving big cats in the United States. 24 people have been killed, including four children, and hundreds of others have sustained critical injuries. In many cases, the animals were shot and killed, often by first responders who were not equipped to handle these situations but needed to protect the public. Among the most dramatic examples was an October 2011 incident in Zanesville, Ohio, in which the owner of a private menagerie released dozens of big cats near a community, requiring law enforcement to kill the cats and risk their own lives.
- Big cats are wild animals and they suffer when kept as pets. They are often purchased as babies by private owners who are not able to manage them once they're fully grown. Consequently, the animals often languish in grossly substandard conditions, deprived of sufficient space, adequate veterinary care, a nutritious diet and behavioral enrichment.
- Roadside zoos and other substandard exhibitors routinely separate babies from their mothers prematurely so they can charge the public to pet and play with the cubs. This is a cruel and unhealthy practice that can cause lifelong physical and psychological problems—or even death—for the cubs. Young cats, who very quickly outgrow their usefulness in the cub handling industry, end up warehoused at substandard zoos, sold into the exotic pet trade or possibly even killed and sold for parts. All the while, the vicious cycle of constant breeding churns out more babies to be exploited.

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