The Performing Animal Welfare Society (PAWS) presents its inaugural list of **10 Terrible Captive Wildlife Incidents** with 10 shocking entries that illustrate why wild animals should not be kept in captivity. PAWS has been advocating on behalf of captive wildlife since 1984, while at the same time providing sanctuary for rescued or retired elephants, bears, big cats, primates, and other wild animals at its three sanctuaries in California. While any captive environment is problematic for wild animals, this list highlights some of the most egregious incidents.

Captive wild animals can be found in a variety of situations, from zoos to tourism and from entertainment to exotic pets. Sadly, 2019 brought appalling examples of cruelty, selfishness, stupidity, injury and deaths, as well as dangerous public interaction with captive wild animals who often pay the price for the selfies shared on social media.

A change in societal attitudes toward the exploitation of captive wild animals, and recent advances – such as prohibitions on the use of exotic animals in circuses and Canada’s ban on keeping whales and dolphins in captivity – are promising. However, this list shows there is much more work to be done.

PAWS’ list is drawn from the numerous international media reports on incidents involving captive wild animals. The list covers nine different countries and a range of species. PAWS’ intent is to raise awareness of the problems created for wild animals in captivity in order to end the exploitation that continues to harm both animals and people. The list is presented in no particular order and includes 10 entries and two dishonorable mentions as follows:

**Emaciated elephant calf’s back legs snap, days after performing for tourists (Thailand)** – One of 2019’s more sickening stories is that of a three-year-old elephant at Thailand’s Phuket Zoo named Jumbo. Despite his skeletal appearance, the calf was forced to pose for photos with tourists, “dance” to music, and “play” a harmonica – under threat of punishment with a sharp, steel-pointed bullhook. Behind the scenes he was chained and sucked on his trunk for comfort, often a sign of distress in elephants. Shortly after the calf’s story went viral, officials ordered Jumbo removed from performances. However, the weakened calf’s back legs snapped as he was pulling himself from a mud puddle, and it took three days before the zoo recognized that Jumbo’s legs were broken. He died shortly after. This is the real cost of wild animal “entertainment” for tourists, whether it’s an elephant performing, painting, or posing for selfies.

*Photo by Moving Elephants*
Bear escapes cub petting attraction and is shot to death (U.S.)
A young bear named Sophie (left) escaped her enclosure during a power outage at Oswald’s Bear Ranch in Michigan and was later shot to death. At Oswald’s, tourists pay to take photos with bear cubs who, contrary to the zoo’s rescue claims, are mostly bred in captivity. Cubs used for photo ops are typically torn from their mothers at a young age and exposed to rough handling and abuse. (The U.S. Department of Agriculture has cited Oswald’s for physical abuse of a cub during a photo session, among other violations.) Once cubs are too old to be handled, they may be sold to other zoos, private owners, or bred to produce more cubs. Unwanted bears may be slaughtered for the exotic meat market or the illegal trade in bear parts. Oswald’s reportedly has killed at least seven bears for being “mean.” As long as tourists continue to patronize Oswald’s or other cub petting operations, this inhumane practice will continue.

China imports 30 wild-caught elephant calves from Zimbabwe for zoos and circus shows (China/Zimbabwe) – In advance of a directive by CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Flora and Fauna) that essentially stops live elephant exports from Zimbabwe and Botswana, Zimbabwe transported 30 wild-caught elephant calves to zoos in China. The country has sold at least 141 wild-caught elephant calves since 2012, primarily to China, despite opposition from elephant experts and conservationists worldwide. Captures are physically brutal, and the severing of critical family bonds leave these highly intelligent and social animals and their remaining families traumatized. Conditions for the calves in Chinese zoos are harsh; some will be cruelly trained to perform in circus-like shows. A New York Times article revealed that U.S. zoos had considered importing wild-caught elephants from Zimbabwe before the CITES decision (others were imported from eSwatini as recently as 2016). All this suggests that the world must closely watch any country that may consider exporting – or importing – wild-caught elephants.

Zoo painfully declaws lion so visitors can play with her (Gaza)
The Rafah Zoo in Gaza continues to spark international outrage. Early in 2019 four lion cubs froze to death during a winter storm. Shortly after, the zoo declawed a 14-month-old female lion named Palestine (pictured), using wire cutters and shears, so visitors could play with the animal. Declawing is an agonizing procedure akin to amputating a person’s fingers at the first knuckle, and it can cause long-term chronic pain and crippling lameness. The Rafah Zoo then pledged it would close, as it lacked funds for food and medical care of the animals. An animal protection group found homes for its 47 animals – only to see the zoo reopen in December with two lions and three new cubs, kept in tiny, substandard cages. And the suffering continues.

Toddler suffers severe injuries at zoo’s behind-the-scenes rhino encounter (U.S.) – Many zoos tout behind-the-scenes animal encounters, which can bring in considerable revenue. These encounters can also go very wrong. At the Brevard Zoo’s Rhino Encounter in Florida, a 21-month-old girl was using a brush to touch the rhinos through the steel bars of the enclosure when she reportedly lost her balance and fell into the enclosure. She was rammed by two of the animals repeatedly, pushing her into the bars with their snouts. The toddler was hospitalized with contusions to her chest, a lacerated liver, an injured kidney and other injuries to her back, chest, abdomen, head, and leg. The girl’s mother was also treated for an injury. This tragic event underscores that wild animals are not an “attraction” to be touched, handled, or used as a prop for selfies.
**Lion breeding-farm horror (South Africa)** – In South Africa, tourists bottle-feed, pet and take photos with baby lions, not knowing that trophy hunters will later shoot those same animals at close range in “canned hunts” held in tightly confined areas. Or they may be killed to supply Asia’s lion bone trade, for use in traditional medicine. Tourists also are unaware of the grisly conditions of the country’s lion breeding farms, where an estimated 10,000 predators languish. In May, more than 100 lions and other animals were found in shocking condition on a lion farm, diseased and crammed into filthy, overcrowded cages; some were near death. Not only does the captive lion industry cause unconscionable suffering, sales of lion parts and bones fuel the poaching of wild lions, whose populations are plunging. There is hope for lions used in tourism: The South African Tourism Services Association has proposed new guidelines to discourage animal interactions and exploitative wildlife industries.

**The dangerous lives and deaths of tigers in zoos (U.K., U.S.)** – In captivity, tigers are unable to engage in innate behaviors such as hunting and establishing their own large territories. Even worse, they can lose their lives when caged with no place to run. At the Busch Gardens theme park in Florida, 13-year-old Bengal tiger Bala died after incurring a major injury from her brother. A 10-year-old female Sumatran tiger, Melati (left), died at the London Zoo while being introduced to a mate brought in from Denmark. Days later, a female Amur tiger named Shouri was killed at the Longleat Safari Park in England when she walked through an unlocked door into an enclosure with another tiger pair. Tigers are critically endangered, with fewer than 4,000 living in the wild.

**Zoo visitors carve their names onto rhinoceros’ back (France)** – Keeping wild animals in zoos does not necessarily promote respect, as evidenced in the actions of visitors at the Zoo de la Palmyre in Royon, France, who etched their names into the back of a 35-year-old rhinoceros. The names “Camille” and “Julien” could clearly be seen on either side of the animal’s body. In a statement, the zoo expressed outrage but defended giving visitors the opportunity to easily touch the rhinos, claiming the interactions raise awareness of the “diversity and majesty of nature.” Clearly, not everyone is getting the message, and the welfare of the rhinos is at risk. In the meantime, three species of rhino are critically endangered due to poaching for their horns and two are extinct in the wild. Other species of rhino remain under threat from poaching and from habitat loss and degradation.

**Escaped exotic cat attacks mother and daughter walking down street (U.S.)** – Exotic pets are a danger to people and often at risk themselves. In Bloomington, Illinois, a mother and daughter were walking down the street when an escaped “pet” caracal – a wild cat similar to a lynx – pounced on the six-year-old child. A witness helped the mother wrest the child away from the cat, who also tried to attack a medium-sized dog. Police responded and shot the animal after it approached an officer. Both mother and daughter were hospitalized and treated for bite and claw wounds. Caracals are powerful wild cats found in Africa and parts of Asia; they can weigh up to 40 pounds. Despite the serious risk they present, caracals are not included in the list of dangerous wild animals prohibited in Illinois. No matter if they’re captive born and hand raised, caracals are dangerous wild animals and should be added to the state’s list.
Russian whale jail (Russia) – Thanks to drone footage, in 2019 the world became aware of nearly 100 wild-caught beluga whales and orcas imprisoned in icy sea pens – a “whale jail” – in Russia’s Srednyaya Bay. Four Russian companies captured the animals from the Sea of Okhotsk in 2018, reportedly intending to sell them to entertainment parks in China, where there are 78 marine mammal parks and 26 more under construction. A single orca can fetch more than $6 million. The Russian government invited experts to assess the animals, who determined the cetaceans could be released to the wild. It took four and a half months to free 97 orcas and belugas. Forty-seven animals were released at their point of capture; 50 belugas were released into Uspeniya Bay (not a native habitat for beluga whales). Russia reportedly may change its laws to close a loophole that allows the capture of wild cetaceans.

DISHONORABLE MENTIONS

Cincinnati Zoo supplies university with wild animal mascots (U.S.) – The shameful practice of using live wild animals as mascots for sports events persists in some places, subjecting captive animals to the stress of loud, raucous crowds. You would not expect an Association of Zoos and Aquariums-accredited zoo to participate in this inhumane practice, yet the Cincinnati Zoo provided a bearcat named Lucy (pictured) for more than 200 University of Cincinnati sporting events since 2008, until her recent “retirement.” In November the zoo acquired a baby bearcat named Lucille who reportedly will succeed Lucy. Properly known as a binturong, this animal is rarely seen in nature because it seldom leaves the forest canopy in its native habitat of South and Southeast Asia. Binturong populations have declined more than 30 percent over the past 30 years. The zoo and UC both need some schooling on how to put animal welfare first and end the archaic use of live mascots.

Discovery Channel’s Man Vs Bear (U.S.) – In 2019 the Discovery Channel aired Man Vs Bear in which humans purportedly vie with bears in feats of strength and stamina. In other words, the show uses trained bears to do tricks for human entertainment. While bears are incredibly intelligent, strong, and sensitive, this type of exploitive programming does nothing to foster a real appreciation of the animals. It also sends a very dangerous message about human interactions with bears, potentially encouraging reckless behavior that can get someone killed. This isn’t the only animal-related controversy for the Discovery Channel, which pulled a scene from the show River of No Return in which a cast member hit a horse with a metal hammer. The Discovery Channel should be better than this.

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