

MEMBERS' FORUM

THE TIGER SSP: ZOOS, PRIVATE OWNERSHIP, AND ACCREDITATION: *"The Right Thing to Do"*

"Members' Forum" is a periodic feature that provides AZA members an opportunity to express their views about articles that have appeared in *Communiqué* or general issues of interest or concern. If you are interested in submitting an article for publication, please contact Tim Lewthwaite, AZA Publications Manager, at tlewthwaite@aza.org. Articles submitted for Members' Forum do not necessarily reflect the opinions and policies of AZA or of the institutions for which the authors work.

The following article looks at the issues of private ownership of exotic animals and AZA accreditation.

It was not that long ago that the zoo world looked in the mirror and realized we were little more than menageries of exotic animals. Upon reflection, we have embraced changes in standards of welfare, husbandry, exhibition and interpretation that reflect changing societal thinking about the environment, animal cognition and animal welfare. We improved and matured, and today, AZA's vision is clear: "a world where all people respect, value and conserve animals and nature."

To this end we have developed some of the world's most effective programs for animal welfare, conservation, education, and research and some of the strictest accreditation requirements. But we have forgotten one important detail. There are more captive exotic animals outside AZA than inside, and many are housed in unacceptable conditions. In the case of tigers, there are likely more

in non-AZA sites than in all the forests of Asia combined.

We should be concerned. First, the trade in exotic animals is a multi-billion dollar industry that is draining the world's forests to feed our voracious appetite for better-than-my-neighbor pets. Second, outbreaks of monkey pox and avian flu highlight the enormous human health implications of the trade. Third, these animals rarely contribute to the conservation of wild species, but may create a false impression to the caring but naïve public sector that good is being done. Fourth, to the general public, a zoo is a zoo is a zoo. We are all brought down by those who practice poor animal care.

As an organization we treat the private sector as a different category, as if our responsibility for nurturing and giving humane welfare to animals ends at our gates. To be fair, individuals among us, and the AZA itself, take a strong public stand on these issues. But for practical purposes, collectively we have done little to address the problem.

In an ideal world, existing laws and institutions would address this challenge. But the Animal Welfare Act, Endangered Species Act, and Lacey Act do not do this effectively, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Department of Agriculture have too few resources to meet the overwhelming enormity of the problem. We suggest that AZA expand its accreditation process to include an evaluation of each zoo's participation toward educating the public, supporting legislation, and providing information at state and federal levels to raise the standards of care of privately owned exotic animals. We hope as a community "that speaks for animals" we will decide that this is a priority, based upon the conviction that it is the right thing to do.

If we truly want to pursue a world where all people respect, value and conserve animals and nature, we need to start by creating standards for ourselves that deliver what we preach and enforce them evenly and vigorously in all AZA zoos. We can not tell others how to treat animals if we have not clearly defined our own standards of care for our animal collections. If AZA manages to create a public image as the group "that speaks for animals" by rejecting and distancing itself from private ownership (and its own members when they are not in compliance), then we as a community will be in a much stronger position to argue for policies to help improve the living conditions of privately owned animals.

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