



Objective: to ban the private ownership of wild and exotic animals.

Introduction

West Virginia passed legislation in 2014 banning the ownership of dangerous wild animals. A dangerous wild animal refers to a mammal, bird, reptile, amphibian or aquatic animal, including a hybrid, that is dangerous to humans, other animals or the environment due to its inherent nature and capability to do significant harm.¹

The law excludes wildlife, livestock, and domestic animals but may include bears, big cats, canids, primates, constrictor snakes greater than six feet and venomous snakes, and alligators and caimans.²

The Dangerous Wild Animal Board will determine which animals are to be banned. West Virginia joins 44 other states that have protective dangerous wild animal laws.³

The Federation of Humane Organizations of West Virginia (FOHO WV) agrees with the state legislature in opposing the private ownership of wild and exotic animals.

Wild and exotic animals are not pets

Few individuals have the training

necessary to properly care for wild and exotic animals. Therefore those animals held in captivity should be handled by only the most highly trained specialists.

Individual hobbyist cannot begin to meet the physical, social, emotional, and veterinary needs of wild and exotic animals. As a result, many of these animals are housed in inadequate and often poorly constructed housing.

They receive little to no veterinary care because few veterinarians are skilled in caring for chimpanzees, lions, large constrictor and venomous snakes, macaques, bears, and other wild and exotic animals.

Once the infant animals begin to mature, they can become difficult to handle posing a threat to their owners and to anyone who comes into contact with them. The tragedy of Travis the chimp⁴ is one such example.

Dangerous wild animals are often set free when their owners can no longer handle them or become tired of their care. These animals can wreak havoc on native wildlife, domestic animals, and humans. Additionally, wild and exotic animals can carry zoonotic diseases that can be

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passed on to human, such as rabies, tuberculosis, herpes B virus, and salmonella.

Pet store owners selling snakes, especially, fear they will be put out of business because of this legislation. The legislation is not intended to harm anyone's business, as it allows for the licensing of dealers and exhibitors through the Animal Welfare Act.⁵

Professionals oppose private ownership

Experts at the Association of Zoos and Aquariums⁶, the American Veterinary Medical Association, the United States Department of Agriculture⁸, and the National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians⁹ oppose the private possession of exotic and wild animals as pets. Many have banned the private ownership of some exotic animals and others require special permits and licenses for individual ownership¹⁰.

Individual hobbyists cannot begin to meet the physical, social, emotional, and veterinary needs of wild and exotic animals . . . By banning state-wide the private ownership of wild and exotic animals, the public will be protected and the animals will be accorded adequate and appropriate treatment.

Incidents in West Virginia

According to The Humane Society of the United States¹¹, the following incidents have been recorded in West Virginia.

November 29, 2008 Pocahontas County

A 250- to 300-pound pet Bengal tiger escaped from an exotic animal farm owned by David Cassell after squeezing through a hole in chain-link cage fencing. Employees at a local ski resort saw the animal's footprints; county and state officials were notified and the tiger was tracked into the Monongahela National Forest where she was ultimately shot and killed by Cassell.

October 16, 2007 Greenbrier County

A deer hunter reported seeing a 250- to 300-pound male African lion in the woods. The lion paced within 15 feet of his vehicle for about 40 minutes, then circled his tree stand. The Department of Natural Resources confirmed this was the second report they had received about the lion.

May 2006 - Pocahontas County

A 400-pound Asian brown bear belonging to David Cassell escaped from his/her enclosure and was never found.

May 7, 2005 - Huntington

A leashed pet monkey who had been taken to a shopping center bit a 13-year-old girl in the parking lot. A woman holding the monkey's leash had indicated that the animal was friendly; but when the girl and her father approached to pet the monkey, the monkey jumped on the girl's leg and bit her kneecap and finger. The girl was treated at a hospital.

July 4, 2003 - Buckhannon

A pet lemur who had escaped while the owner was out of town was found asleep in a tree and recaptured by police and an animal control officer.

July 27, 2001 - Martinsburg

A pet monkey believed to be a rhesus macaque, kept in a trailer park, escaped and bit two children and a teenager. The bite victims underwent testing for herpes, tuberculosis, HIV, and other conditions.

August 15, 2000 - Sprague

A pet chimpanzee escaped from his cage for three hours, biting a teenager on the hand and biting a neighbor who had tried to restrain the 150-pound animal. The same chimpanzee had escaped two years previously (see July 6, 1998).

July 6, 1998 - Sprague

A pet chimpanzee escaped from his enclosure and jumped into a postal truck, forcing the driver to flee and

causing the truck to crash. The chimp followed the postal worker out of the truck where the two grappled until the chimp's owner intervened.

As with some of these events and others around the country, the escaped wild animals are often killed.

Conclusion

FOHO WV is not against zoos, sanctuaries, and other reputable organizations housing wild and exotic animals humanely and professionally. Such organizations attempt to replicate natural habitats and offer stimulation to the animals they care for.

However, by banning statewide the private ownership of wild and exotic animals, the citizens of West Virginia will be protected and the animals will be accorded adequate and appropriate treatment.

Endnotes

1. www.legis.state.wv.us/bill_status/bills_text.cfm?billdoc=HB4393%20SUB%20ENR.htm&yr=2014&sesstype=RS&i=4393
2. *ibid.*
3. www.humanesociety.org/news/news_briefs/2014/03/WV-gov-signs-bill-restrict-private-possession-dangerous-wild-animals.html#_Uy4ZhvdV7s
4. www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/02/17/travis-the-chimp-shot-dea_n_167527.html
5. www.legis.state.wv.us/bill_status/bills_text.cfm?billdoc=HB4393%20SUB%20ENR.htm&yr=2014&sesstype=RS&i=4393
6. www.aza.org/Education/KidsAndFamilies/detail.aspx?id=276
7. <http://atwork.avma.org/2012/06/12/walking-on-the-wild-side/>
8. <http://awic.nal.usda.gov/zoo-circus-and-marine-animals/exotic-animals-pets>
9. Comments from the National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians (NASPHV) on "Proposed Revision of HHS/CDC Animal-Importation Regulations"
10. www.humanesociety.org/assets/pdfs/wildlife/exotics/state-laws-dangerous-wild-animals.pdf
11. The Human Society of the United States Factsheet: Flirting with Disaster: Private Ownership of Dangerous Wild Animals