



Steering Committee

Kathryn Bertok, Chair
Carolina Tiger Rescue

Catherine Doyle, M.S., Vice Chair
Performing Animal Welfare Society

John Madigan,
Secretary/Treasurer
Crown Ridge Tiger Sanctuary

Carson Barylak
International Fund for Animal Welfare

Bobbi Brink
Lions, Tigers and Bears

Christi Gilbreth
Black Beauty Ranch

Kristin Leppert
Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries

Emily McCormack
Turpentine Creek Wildlife Refuge

Letrecia "Trish" Nichols
Black Pine Animal Sanctuary

Lynda Sugasa
Safe Haven Wildlife Sanctuary

Tammy Thies
The Wildcat Sanctuary

Staff

Kathy Blachowski,
Program Manager

The Big Cat Sanctuary Alliance (BCSA) is a non-profit organization that works to end the private ownership and commercial exploitation of big cats and other wild cats, while providing expert resources to its sanctuary members aimed at improving the health and welfare of rescued captive wild cats.

February 12, 2024

House Committee on Environment and Transportation
Room 251
House Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Re: Support for HB 379, Wildlife - Traveling Animal Acts - Prohibition

To Chair Marc Korman, Vice Chair Regina Boyce, and Members of the Committee:

The Big Cat Sanctuary Alliance (BCSA), which is comprised of reputable sanctuaries and highly regarded national and international partner organizations, strongly supports HB 379 to prohibit the use of certain wild animals in traveling shows.

The BCSA's 14 sanctuary members care for nearly 500 wild cats, including animals who were once exploited for "entertainment."

Through experience, we know just how challenging it is – even under the best conditions – to provide captive big cats with a rich and fulfilling life. Certainly, it is impossible to provide a good life for these animals when they are forced to travel and perform.

Big cat sanctuaries offer specially designed enclosures that promote mental and physical well-being. Providing stimulating, environmentally complex environments is critical to ensuring the health and welfare of large felids. Traveling shows cannot replicate these conditions due to the constraints of close confinement, constant travel, and their transient nature.

To be clear, big cats exhibited in traveling shows are not domesticated animals. They are biologically the same as their wild counterparts, instinctively averse to human activity. As such, they are under constant stress due to travel, loading and unloading, training, and exhibition in front of loud crowds. The adverse effects of chronic stress on animal health and welfare are widely recognized.

Despite being far-ranging animals, big cats in traveling shows spend the majority of their time confined in small cages, where they eat, sleep, and relieve themselves. The amount of time spent performing or in training is estimated at 1-9% of the day, with the remaining time spent in small enclosures or cramped transport cages.

During training, handlers exert control over big cats through brutal training methods. They may whip, strike, or use an electric shock device to force an animal to perform as desired and on cue.

Abnormal repetitive behaviors – such as pacing back and forth – are widespread in traveling shows. A response to living in impoverished environments, these behaviors are signs of psychological stress and a strong indicator of poor welfare.

Big cats are extremely dangerous wild animals. (Direct contact between caregivers and big cats is strictly forbidden at our member sanctuaries.) Traveling shows constantly move these powerful felids and hold them in makeshift cages, creating significant risk. Incidents of animals escaping, attacking and killing trainers, and endangering members of the public are not uncommon.

The BCSA further opposes the use of big cats in traveling shows because these acts rely on breeders who disregard animal health and genetic soundness. Consequently, big cats often suffer severe health issues, a problem particularly evident in white tigers. Selective breeding to produce this color variation necessitates inbreeding, which is strongly associated with genetic defects. Several BCSA sanctuary members care for rescued white tigers and other cats with disorders caused by inbreeding. Addressing these health challenges requires specialized long-term care at great expense to sanctuaries.

Wild animal acts do not educate the public or help conserve big cats. There is no educational value in displaying animals who have been denied all that is natural to them and coerced into performing inane tricks. Although scientific research indicates that the exhibition of wild animals for entertainment harms genuine conservation efforts, traveling shows display endangered and threatened species including Asian elephants, tigers, and lions.

A 2019 Monmouth University poll (<https://tinyurl.com/ytf3xduc>) found that a majority of Americans would favor a law to prohibit the use of wild animals in circuses. To date, eight states and more than 175 municipalities have passed legislation addressing this issue. It's time for Maryland to join this humane movement.

The BCSA urges you to support HB 379 to protect the animals and the public, and to end the archaic practice of using captive wild animals for entertainment.

Thank you for your consideration of our comments. We are available to answer any questions or provide additional information.

Sincerely,



Kathryn Bertok
Chair, Steering Committee
Big Cat Sanctuary Alliance

BCSA Sanctuary Members

Black Beauty Ranch
Black Pine Animal Sanctuary
Carolina Tiger Rescue
Cedarhill Animal Sanctuary
Crown Ridge Tiger Sanctuary
Elmira's Wildlife Sanctuary
Lions, Tigers and Bears
Performing Animal Welfare Society
PrideRock Wildlife Refuge
Rustic Acres Wildcat Rescue
Safe Haven Wildlife Sanctuary

The Wildcat Sanctuary
Turpentine Creek Wildlife Refuge
WildCat Ridge Sanctuary

BCSA Partner Members

AAP Primadomus
Animal Legal Defense Fund
Bears, Etc.
Forest Animal Rescue
Four Paws
Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries
Humane Society of the United States
International Fund for Animal Welfare
People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals
Peter Emily International Veterinary Dental Foundation
World Animal Protection