

Written Testimony Submission in Favor (FAV) of HB 53

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Dear Chair Bartlett, Vice Chair Davis, and Members of the House Judiciary Committee,

On behalf of Born Free USA, a global wildlife conservation and animal welfare organization with expertise on legislation that promotes human public health and safety and protects wild animals from exploitation, I write to you today in favor of passing HB 53. It is crucial that Maryland adds zebras, kangaroos, wallabies, and wallaroos to the state's existing list of dangerous wild animals that are prohibited for trade, breeding, and possession.

According to Born Free USA's Exotic Animals Incidents Database, which offers evidence of potentially dangerous incidents with wild animals in captivity, 96 human deaths occurred from 1990-2025 and 685 human injuries occurred from 1990-2025 due to escapes or attacks involving wild animals. These attacks have occurred irrespective of animal species, size, age, background, habituation to humans, within or outside of an enclosure, and with or without the humans involved having previous wildlife handling experience, including zookeepers, veterinarians, animal trainers, and exotic pet owners. These figures are also likely severe underestimates, as our database only includes those incidents reported in the public domain.

Further, we collected almost 200 incidents with zebras, kangaroos, wallabies, and wallaroos over the last few years. We noticed an uptick in dangerous incidents directly involving these species recently (particularly with kangaroos and wallabies), including animal escapes and attacks on humans, which may require intervention from first responders like police officers, firefighters, and paramedics to resolve.

First responders are not usually trained on how to handle wild animals. Consequently, these incidents put first responders in danger while depleting taxpayer resources to combat immediate threats that could put lives in danger. Examples of just some of these time consuming and risky mitigating strategies include shutting down major roads to corral loose animals, take any action needed (e.g., lethal force) to protect human lives and stop potentially dangerous animals, and track down permits to investigate the legality of wild animal ownership in various states.

Relevant incidents have included kangaroos escaping an exotic animal farm in 2024 and running into oncoming traffic, only to be fatally struck by a vehicle in Amarillo, Texas; an eleven-year-old boy suffering several scratches and at least one bite from a pet kangaroo in San Antonio, Texas in 2025; and a 56-year-old zoo employee found dead in a kangaroo and wallaby enclosure in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina in 2025, after allegedly “rough-housing” with the animals.

Zoonoses, or diseases that may be transferred from animals to humans, also pose a major health concern. There are more than 200 known types of zoonoses, which comprise a large percentage of new and existing diseases in humans. Zoonoses can spread to humans through direct contact or through food, water, or the environment.

By allowing the keeping of wild animals, the state of Maryland is endangering public health and safety and potentially sacrificing the lives of animals should one of them escape or initiate an attack. Despite common beliefs, wild animals retain their natural instincts and remain unpredictable; even when kept and bred in captivity for their entire lives. The poor welfare and high stress level we often see wild animals endure in private possession further enhances the chances of aggressive outbursts.

On behalf of our expert organization and thousands of supporters across the U.S., I implore you to pass HB 53 to preserve human public health and safety and alleviate the suffering of wild animals that are not evolved to cope with the limitations present in captivity to prevent future tragedies (both human and animal) from occurring on your watch.