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Many of the wild animals that are popular as pets, such as tigers and lions, are large, powerful and possess sharp canine teeth and claws capable of causing serious injury or death. Many smaller animals can also inflict serious bites and scratches, while a range of reptiles and invertebrates carry potentially lethal venoms. Wild animal pets may also carry diseases, some potentially fatal, that are transmissible to humans. Even when precautions are taken, wild animal pets pose a threat to human health and safety.

The risk that wild animal pets pose to humans through direct attack, caused by loss of handler control or escape, and disease transmission increases significantly because of poor animal welfare conditions, inadequate safety measures, excessive and inappropriate handling and lack of keeper training and expertise.

Hundreds of cases of human illness, injury and death have been attributed to wild animal pets in North America and they continue to occur with alarming frequency.

## Poor Animal Welfare Increases Risk

Many wild animal pets experience poor welfare because their husbandry conditions are inadequate. Deprived of any real ability to engage in natural movements or to express natural behaviors, they become bored, frustrated and stressed making them less content and more unpredictable.

Some animals incessantly search for escape routes, or start to display abnormal behaviours, such as pacing, head weaving or paw-sucking. Others become withdrawn, interacting less and less with their surroundings as time goes by. Disturbed and chronically stressed animals are less predictable and unreliable.

## Handling Can Be Dangerous

Many wild animal pet owners lack expertise or training in the management of dangerous animals. In fact, they often portray extremely problematic animals, like tigers, as relatively harmless and safe to handle. This kind of attitude places both keepers and bystanders at risk. While the genes that contribute to natural behaviours have been tamed in domesticated animals, attempts to do the same in most wild animals have failed. There is a genetic history that has been adaptive for animals in the wild, so when there is a chance to establish a predator-prey relationship, they often do so. Children are often targeted, but adults, even so-called experts, are at risk as well.



In some predators, such as big cats, predatory aggression is a concern. The killing bite - a biting attack using violent shaking or suffocation to kill prey - seems to be hardwired in all predators. An attack can be triggered in a variety of ways, including rapid or unusual movements. For example, if a handler falls or stumbles, the sudden movement may trigger an attack. In 1994, an Ontario youth died as a result of a killing bite from his uncle's pet tiger.

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## The Dangers of Keeping Wild Animals as Pets

### Handling Can Be Dangerous

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Handling wild animals is fraught with risk. In some cases, if an animal is habituated to human contact and has lost all fear of humans, it may be even more dangerous than it would normally be. For many animals, handling can be stressful and cause alarm triggering an escape or defensive reaction which could potentially result in human injury.

Unfortunately, many wild animal pet owners seem unaware of the dangers their animals pose. For example, significant numbers of reptile hobbyists either don't recognize, downplay or ignore concerns about salmonella bacteria (carried by virtually all reptiles) and other diseases that can be transmitted by handling. Yet public health agencies throughout North America have released advisories warning about the dangers posed by the handling of reptiles or surfaces reptiles have touched.

Examples of unsafe practices abound. Throughout Canada, big cat pets are often brought to children's parties or leash walked in public spaces; giant constricting snakes are kept in unsafe conditions in living rooms and basements; monkeys are allowed to roam freely in private residences; and venomous animals, including some of the world's deadliest snakes, are common.

### Inadequate Animal Enclosures and Safety Measures

Wild animal pets, including many dangerous species, routinely escape. That's because they are often housed in poorly constructed cages that incorporate few, if any, of the safety features found in professional zoos. Appropriately strong barriers, double door entry gates, secure containment areas and proper handling equipment are often lacking. In Canada, tigers have jumped out of their cages because fences were too low; venomous snakes have pushed out of their small aquariums because the covers were not properly affixed; and monkeys have escaped and stayed on the loose for long periods of time because their cages were not properly secured.

Providing appropriate, secure environments for wild animals can be expensive and beyond the financial ability of most private citizens. A large mammal enclosure could potentially cost tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars, while properly sized and outfitted small animal enclosures can run into the many thousands of dollars. Unfortunately, poorly constructed, makeshift substitutes are far too common.

### The Risk of Zoonoses

Over the years, as wild animal pets have grown in popularity, the incidence of human disease has also increased. Diseases that can be transmitted between animals and humans are known as zoonotic diseases and they include *Campylobacter*, *E. coli*, *Streptococcus*, *Salmonella*, Herpes B virus and Monkeypox as well as dozens of others.

In their natural state, the range of microorganisms carried by wild animals pose almost no threat to humans. But the artificial conditions of captivity often negatively impact and disrupt the host/microorganism relationship, resulting in a greater likelihood of opportunistic disease and the release of virulent disease organisms into the animal's environment.

It is clear that many wild animals are persistent carriers of disease and many health agencies have issued advisories warning of the potential health hazards associated with their handling. Despite this, most wild animal pet owners seem to be unaware of, misunderstand or ignore the risk of zoonoses.

The only totally reliable way of mitigating the human health and safety risks associated with the keeping of wild animals as pets is to prohibit their keeping.



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