

Police reports confirm lions escaped, killed, and ate tiger

By Nate Smelle

Zoocheck's campaigns director Julie Woodyer recently provided Bancroft This Week with newly acquired information regarding some of the events which led to Mark and Tammy Drysdale's big cats and other exotic animals being removed from their property in Hastings Highlands in August. Attained through a request made under the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act, the 20-page document Woodyer received in response contained partially redacted police reports following site visits by OPP officers between July 7 and July 12.

As one of the officers checking in on the animals at Peterson Road on July 7, Provincial Constable Alex Cyr reported what he observed at the scene that day. In his report, Cyr indicated that during their visit, he and Provincial Constable April Hannah came across evidence suggesting that the animals were not being fed or watered regularly; and, that they were digging holes between enclosures. The reports also confirmed a disturbing rumour that had been circulating throughout North Hastings since mid-July, acknowledging that one of the Drysdales' tigers had been killed and eaten by some of the lions that were able to dig a hole and get under the fence and into the tigers' enclosure.

Describing the scene on July 7, Cyr acknowledged that officers observed: one tiger in a segregated enclosure; four female lions, including one cub, in two attached small enclosures; two male lions in a large segregated enclosure; and, one male lion by himself in a smaller segregated enclosure. He also noted that there was no evidence of the animals being fed on this day; and, that the smaller enclosure had a single bowl of dirty water, the size one would expect to give a large dog, that was shared among the four female lions. In addition, he said there was a completely separate adjacent enclosure housing two lemurs that did not have access to drinking water, but did have access to what appeared to be 'Fruit Loops' spread on the ground.

Recognizing that there was no sound coming from the generator on site, Cyr also noted that it was unknown whether the electrical wires at the top of the enclosures had power.

At this time, Cyr notified Provincial Animal Welfare Services, and Hastings Highlands bylaw enforcement officer Dawn Bowers. Learning of the tiger's death, and the animals' poor living conditions, PAWS inspector Maryanne Pryer responded, indicating that she would come visit the site the next day (July 8). With the assistance of the OPP, by Aug. 12 all the animals had been removed from the property.

Recalling past incidents with the Drysdales in Niagara and Grand Bend, Woodyer said she wasn't surprised to learn that the animals weren't being provided with access to an adequate supply of food or water; or that they were able to dig out of their enclosure. While the conflict between these naturally territorial animals suddenly sharing such close quarters could be expected, she said the lions wouldn't have eaten the tiger unless they were hungry.

Calling attention to how the police reports highlighted that the hot wire on the electric fence didn't appear to be connected to a generator on several site visits, Woodyer stressed how real the threat was to public safety. The way hot-wired fencing works, she explained, is that the animals encounter it once and then learn from that encounter.

Normally, with this type of fencing, Woodyer said the hot wire would be located at about three feet high inside the cage, so that the animal stops going up to the fence at all, because it gets zapped every time it gets near the hot wire. In this case, she said the hot wire on the Drysdales' enclosures was at the top of the fence.

According to Woodyer, this would basically render it useless, because a big cat would be over the top before it realized where the electric shock was coming from. Even if the fencing had been properly installed and electrified, she said it would have done little to keep the animals from escaping.

Considering the fencing around the enclosures was only around eight feet tall, she said at any time the tigers could have escaped because they are able to jump more than 12 feet high.

?They were just lucky those animals didn't escape a different way,? Woodyer said.

?They just happened to dig under the fence line that was between the two enclosures. But, they could have dug under the fence and been in Algonquin Park. So it was just lucky from a human perspective ? not so lucky from the tiger's perspective ? but from a human perspective, it was just lucky they didn't dig out through the exterior fence line.?

For Woodyer, the most shocking development with the situation in Hastings Highlands has been the province's apparent disinterest in enforcing the PAWS Act. Although the province was aware of the situation in Hastings Highlands, and had a mandate to deal with the alleged issues of animal cruelty and risks to public safety, she said they still failed to enforce the laws in place to protect the animals and the public.

?They failed to act, and that failure of action also contributed to the death of this tiger,? Woodyer said. ?These animals now are back in the hands of dealers and roadside zoos, and will just be traded around. And they are responsible for all of that as well, because they could have come in and seized them.?

If the province would have stepped in and used its authority to seize the animals, Woodyer said Zoocheck had offered from the beginning to have the animals humanely and safely transported to legitimate sanctuaries. Despite the fact that Zoocheck had arranged to have the animals moved and cared for at no expense to the province or municipality, she said unfortunately no one took them up on the offer.

In witnessing how the system failed the animals and the public in Hastings Highlands, Woodyer said the experience revealed to her the two-pronged nature of the problem. First, she said the ordeal underscored the importance of the need to strengthen Ontario's laws meant to protect exotic animals and the public's safety. Second, Woodyer said it has emphasized the need for the province and municipalities to do a better job actually enforcing the laws that are already in place.

If the careless handling of the situation with exotic animals in Hastings Highlands has proven anything, Woodyer said it is that the ownership of all big cats is inherently cruel and a danger to the public's safety; and, therefore should be banned.

Bancroft This Week reached out to Mark and Tammy Drysdale for comment however did not receive a response as of press time Tuesday.