

Roadside zoos threaten public safety, says Zoocheck



Jan. 4, 2021

By Nate Smelle

Since news of the roadside zoo safari experience being planned by big cat owners Mark and Tammy Drysdale on Peterson Road in Hastings Highlands first broke, Zoocheck's executive director Rob Laidlaw has been one of the most informed individuals voicing their opposition to the proposed business. In response to concerns regarding public safety and animal welfare raised by residents of the municipality, Bancroft This Week reached out to Laidlaw to gain insight into his 35 years of experience working to protect wildlife in captivity and in the wild; and, learn more about how he became involved in the ongoing situation in Hastings Highlands.

Smelle: Thank you for taking the time to speak with us about your work at Zoocheck; and for sharing your insight on the roadside zoo Mark and Tammy Drysdale are planning to open in Hastings Highlands. Tell us about your work with Zoocheck, and how you initially became involved with advocating for wildlife in captivity and the wild.

Laidlaw: In 1984 I visited a small zoo near Wasaga Beach. I was a big zoo supporter at the time, but I was shocked at the makeshift cages, barren living spaces and poor care I encountered. I soon found out there were no provincial laws in Ontario governing how zoos and animal menageries operated ? it was pretty much anything goes. Since no one seemed to helping exotic wildlife in captivity at the time, I ended up forming an organization called Zoocheck.

Since that time I've conducted hundreds of zoo inspections and audits in Canada and around the world; developed, assisted or promoted many dozens of new laws, regulations and policies; networked with leading wildlife captivity experts, animal welfare scientists and conservationists; carried out training workshops for policy-makers and enforcement personnel; and relocated a number of animals, including primates, big cats and elephants. Unfortunately, while every other province in Canada has moved forward, Ontario still remains largely unregulated. No license is required to keep exotic wild animals, no relevant experience or expertise is required by owners and there are no comprehensive standards for animal housing, management, care, handling or safety.

Smelle: I understand that you have dealt with the Drysdals before through your work with Zoocheck at Ringtail Ranch in Wainfleet and their roadside zoo in Grand Bend. What did you learn from these experiences that the community in Hastings Highlands needs to know?

Laidlaw: When we learned of the situation in the Township of Wainfleet, both the municipality and Niagara Region Public Health had already responded to public complaints, identified and investigated a number of concerns and issued a number of orders. We

provided some modest assistance consisting mostly of technical information. Ringtail Ranch closed not too long after we became aware of the situation.

In Grand Bend, we started to receive calls from residents after African lions were observed behind low construction fencing on the property Mr. Drysdale was occupying. Residents had already expressed concern about their own safety as well as other issues to the mayor and members of council and relevant municipal officials. The council responded to those concerns by quickly passing an exotic animal bylaw, as well as taking other actions in subsequent weeks and months. We conducted our own review of the situation and were also concerned by what we found. We provided advice and information, such as professional zoo and sanctuary industry standards, scientific papers and other relevant materials, to both residents and officials. The municipality's activities led to a number of municipal bylaw charges and a court decision requiring Mr. Drysdale to remove animals from the property.

In both situations it was clear that the efforts of local residents had considerable influence over what happened. For that reason, I would say that if someone feels they have legitimate concerns about an issue, they should register those concerns with their elected representatives and municipal officials, and then make sure they keep those officials engaged until a resolution has been achieved. If they don't, then nothing will change.

Smelle: During your recent presentation to Hastings Highlands council you expressed your concerns for public safety and the animals' welfare. From what you know of the Drysdals' previous zoo operations, why do you feel the community and council should be concerned?

Laidlaw: It shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone that big cats - lions and tigers - are considered amongst the most dangerous animals kept in captivity, so it doesn't matter where they are or who is keeping them, they should be a concern. The big cats are large, powerful, fast and equipped with teeth and claws that make them capable of severely injuring or killing an adult human in the blink of an eye.

Right here in Ontario keepers have been killed by their cats, while bystanders, including children, have suffered catastrophic life altering injuries after being attacked directly or through barriers. Two young people even had entire limbs ripped off. The danger is real and that's why nearly all professional zoos and sanctuaries adhere to no contact management programs and why contact between juvenile and adult big cats and members of the public is not allowed. And to prevent escapes (of which there have been many in Ontario) it's critically important that no matter where big cats are kept they should be in cages that are properly designed and constructed, with sufficiently high barriers (16 feet or more is recommended), that incorporate all of the standard safety features found in professional zoological institutions. They should also be large and interesting to the animals, as bored animals are more likely to try to escape. Unfortunately, exotic animal and big cat owners often downplay, dismiss or ignore the dangers their animals pose and suggest that interacting with them is safe. But the animals are only safe until they're not. That's a tragic lesson a tiger owner in southwestern Ontario learned in 2010 when he was killed by his pet.

Public safety concerns were identified as key issues in Wainfleet and Grand Bend. Numerous scratching and biting incidents involving primates, carnivores and other animals, were documented by officials and a number of visitors posted online pictures of themselves reaching through fencing to pet lions or other animals. Public health officials took a number of actions to safeguard residents, including issuing orders prohibiting the general public from visiting the sites.

Smelle: When I visited the Drysdals' property their one lion cub that was running loose jumped up on me and grabbed my sweater. The lion was only 14-weeks old at the time, but I could definitely feel the strength in its jaws. Is it common for big cat owners to allow their animals to run loose like this, and is it safe for the public and the animal?

Laidlaw: In the past three decades, I've never personally encountered anyone who allowed their exotic cats, regardless of age, to run loose in an unsecured area where they could come into contact with members of the public. It's just not a good idea. The US-based Association of Zoos and Aquariums, the world's leading zoo organization, says they do not support or allow direct, unprotected contact between guests and big cats and they consider 'cub petting' as neither safe (for the animals or people) nor ethical. I completely agree with the AZA position. Exotic wild animals should always be under control, especially if children or elderly

persons are nearby, and should not be running loose.

Smelle: You suggested to council that they establish an exotic animal bylaw. How would this type of legislation help protect the public, the municipality, and animals?

Laidlaw: Since Ontario does not currently regulate the keeping of exotic wildlife in captivity, the responsibility for providing oversight, addressing public safety concerns and mitigating nuisance issues, such as noise and odour, resides in the individual municipalities in which the animals are located. This fact was corroborated just a short while ago by the County of Hastings. Without a bylaw, anyone can bring in any kind of exotic wild animal, including extremely dangerous species, and keep them, for all intents and purposes, however they want. As well, exotic animal owners can, and often do, rapidly increase the number and variety of animals they keep.

A bylaw can prevent this kind of escalation and the problems associated with exotic animals by prohibiting or restricting the keeping of certain kinds of animals and by stipulating conditions in which they are kept, such as requiring sufficiently high fences to contain big cats. It's the easiest, most cost-effective way of preventing problems and, if animals already happen to be in a municipality, a bylaw allows municipal officials to put a cap on the number of animals kept, and to maintain some level of control over the situation. Without a bylaw, municipalities have very little control.

Smelle: If Hastings Highlands council passes such a bylaw and the Drysdale's are unable to operate a zoo or keep their lions and tigers in the municipality; and, if they cannot find another community to run their business, what would happen to their animals? They wouldn't need to be euthanized, would they?

Laidlaw: No, there wouldn't be any need to euthanize the animals. In fact, when the court ordered the removal of animals from Grand Bend, Zoocheck offered at no cost to move the big cats to The Wild Animal Sanctuary in Colorado, the world's largest, most prestigious carnivore facility. That offer was refused. The suggestion that euthanasia is the only option for animals is typically not true.

Smelle: Is there anything else the public should know about the potential of a roadside zoo operating in Hastings Highlands? Any other questions people in the community and on council should be asking?

Laidlaw: In the absence of provincial laws, it's critically important that local governments take control over what's going on in their own municipalities, so they can protect the public, the animals, mitigate or prevent nuisance issues and, ultimately, save taxpayer dollars. The question residents of Hastings Highlands should be asking is what have the mayor and members of council done about the keeping of exotic animals, other than to ask the county for advice. Council has repeatedly said there's no exotic animal bylaw and there's no formal proposal for a zoo before them, but that doesn't mean there are not legitimate concerns that require immediate attention.

Council could have easily copied and passed any one of the exotic animal bylaws already in place in the county, even as a stopgap measure, to address exotic animal possession. If they received a formal zoo proposal at some future point, they could deal with it then. But it appears they dilly-dallied instead. The big cats are now roaring in Maynooth, while the mayor and members of council remain silent and leave their constituents in the dark.