

Survival of lion cubs born in HH in jeopardy

By Nate Smelle

Last week, the news broke that three lion cubs had been born at exotic animal owners Mark and Tammy Drysdale's property on Peterson Road in Hastings Highlands. Shortly after reports of the cubs' birth began circulating online, it became evident in a series of posts from big cat owner Mark Drysdale that the newborns were not eating.

The day after announcing the birth of the three cubs and posting a photo of a visitor with one of the cubs on his Facebook page, Drysdale was back online pleading for help in a series of posts. In one of the posts, which have since been taken down, Drysdale acknowledges how after sitting up all night with the mother lion and her cubs, he could still not get her to let them feed, or "latch." In the same post, he also admitted to have never bottle fed a lion cub before, while asking his followers for assistance. In another post, Drysdale stressed the urgency of threat to the cubs survival, when he declared, "100 per cent past my limit. Would anyone in the Maynooth area have a generator I can borrow till I can get a new one. After 3,700 hours my generator is toast. Please I will even rent it till I can get one. Can't boil water to make formula. I only have 24 hours to get them feeding."

Zoocheck's campaigns director Julie Woodyer understands the danger these cubs face as a result of their current situation. Having worked closely with professional animal sanctuaries and rehabilitation centres across the continent, Woodyer knows firsthand how challenging it can be to properly care for infant and young animals. This is especially true when it comes to big cats such as lions and tigers, she explained.

"Unless absolutely necessary, they should stay with their mothers," Woodyer said. "The stress of being removed and handled, the fact that infant formulas for domesticated animals may not be appropriate for wild species, and may not provide a proper balance of nutrition and other factors should have been considered. Of course, the big question in this situation is: why produce more lions just so they can spend life in a cage in someone's private backyard menagerie?" Pointing out how there is already a surplus of lions and tigers in captivity, Woodyer said it is important to note that any legitimate sanctuary would never allow these animals to breed. "They are so many it's hard to even give them away," she explained. "That's why bona fide sanctuaries don't breed big cats and why responsible professional zoos try to control and manage their captive populations."

Far too often, Woodyer said big cat owners use newborn cubs to generate revenue by selling cute photographs or contact sessions to members of the public. These close encounters are not something they can do with adult cats, she said, because of the extreme danger they pose to human safety.

When cubs are removed from their mother too soon after birth, Woodyer said this usually causes psychological trauma to the mother who, like other mammals, has a strong maternal bond with her cubs. Since this separation disrupts the natural relationship between the mother and her cubs, she said it also has a negative impact on the social development in the cubs themselves.

When planned breeding occurs in professional zoos, Woodyer said they would never remove the cubs from their mother except for in exceptional circumstances. She said it is also worth noting that cubs can become stressed by inappropriate or excessive handling. In addition, once the cubs become juveniles at the end of the season, Woodyer said they can no longer be safely handled, and therefore need to be caged or moved elsewhere.

Hybla resident Roy Mitchell was shocked to hear that one of the Drysdale's lions had given birth to three cubs at the roadside zoo on Peterson Road.

As a spokesperson for Citizens for a Safe and Humane Hastings Highlands and a resident of the municipality, he was heartbroken to hear that the cubs were struggling to survive their circumstances in captivity. To avoid potential tragedies such as the death of the newborn lion cubs, Mitchell said Hastings Highlands council could simply pass an Exotic Animal Bylaw. In doing so, he said council could ensure that all exotic animal owners in the municipality uphold the basic industry standards designated in the bylaw.

"What Citizens for a Safe and Humane Hastings Highlands urges the council to do is act," said Mitchell. "They have had legal advice, they have a bylaw before them that will ensure the safety of the community and animals. Their inability to communicate with the people they represent after they have received numerous phone calls and emails of concern is troubling. We look for and expect leadership from our council and we aren't seeing it. Without it they are putting this community and those animals in danger."

In light of the fact that the exotic animal bylaw yet again does not appear on the agenda for the next council meeting on May 19, the community continues to be left with more questions than answers regarding how the municipality intends to handle this ongoing public safety and animal welfare issue.

Hastings Highlands CAO/treasurer David Stewart could not provide a timeline as to when a first draft of the municipality's exotic animal bylaw would be presented to council. However, he said municipal staff will continue to work hard to deliver all of council's directives in a timely manner. Stewart added, "This has not changed, and in conclusion, any information being considered by council on the subject of exotic animals will be available on the public meeting agendas."

While making their bids to become Hastings Highlands' next mayor, both Councillor Tony Fitzgerald and the recently appointed Mayor Tracy Hagar, identified the regulation of exotic animals as one of the municipality's most challenging issues. Although Highlands East, and the townships of Faraday and Limerick have recently joined the quickly growing number of municipalities in the province to pass their own exotic animal bylaw, Hastings Highlands has not addressed the issue with the same sense of urgency.

Bancroft This Week reached out to big cat owners Mark and Tammy Drysdale for comment regarding the health of the three newborn cubs, however did not receive a response as of press time Tuesday.