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## The WAO Files 5: WRR's Lynn Cuny

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*In 1977, Lynn Cuny founded Wildlife Rescue & Rehabilitation, a model sanctuary in Kendalia. Shortly after WAO's shake-up, Cuny met with Nicole García, chosen by WAO's board to replace her own mother as the head of WAO.*

*I spoke to Cuny by phone on October 9.*

### **Did you meet with Nicole García?**

That's correct. We met yesterday.

### **How did that happen?**

She contacted me. We agreed we would meet and I invited her here to give her an idea of what a bona fide sanctuary looks like, and how it is possible to give animals who have to remain in captivity a great deal of space. My goal was to answer any questions she had and to hopefully encourage her to turn that facility into a true sanctuary.

### **There are no tours at WRR, right?**

That's absolutely correct. We're not open to the public.

### **That's one of the main differences between a zoo and a sanctuary, right?**

Right. You cannot have a true sanctuary and just be open to the public at the public's whim. That's impossible, because the whole point of a sanctuary, the true meaning of that word, is that you give animals that already been through, at the very least, unpleasant situations and, at the very most, abusive situations, you give them a new and respectful life that mimics the wild. That is the goal of a legitimate sanctuary: To try to get back for these animals some resemblance of what life would be if humans had not... screwed them up, for lack of a more eloquent term.

### **Is it normal for a sanctuary to have 100 dead animals every year?**

Not if you're talking about animals that are in captivity. If you take injured animals, like we do all the time, raccoons that were hit by a car, deer that have been shot, opossum that has been poisoned, in that kind of structure you'll see more fatalities, because they came to you in very bad shape. But no, there should not be 100 animals dying a year in a sanctuary where animals come and you just give them a place to live.

### **I can't understand why the Freedom of Information Act gives me access to all kinds of delicate information, but so far I haven't been able to obtain records of dead animals. Why shouldn't donors have the right to access that info?**

You should be able to. I don't have the answer to that, unless the organization itself doesn't make that known. It could have something to do with the fact that, maybe, there's

no government agency that makes that required.

**Another general question: Do monkeys fall and break their necks?**

That's not a common occurrence by any means. We've never had that happen.

**There's a lot that can be said about bad sanctuaries, but also about the weak animal laws in the country. What's your opinion about those laws?**

It varies; it's state by state. Texas is clearly one of those states that don't do a whole lot to protect the animals that live here.

**I was also surprised at how widespread meat eating is in the animal sanctuary world. Is it important to be a vegetarian? Can you just love animals without changing your diet?**

I don't think you can. I think it's accurate to say a lot of animal 'protection' organizations... The sad thing is that you will often see, for instance, a dog and cat shelter having a fundraiser event, and the fundraiser is a barbecue. You'll see the same with sanctuary groups. I think it's absurd. If you're going to be an animal protection organization, if your mission and your message is that you care about animals, then that message has to be consistent. If you're going to be eating one animal in order to raise money to feed another one, then I don't think you're doing your job and I don't think you're holding that really true high standard of what an animal protection organization is and what they stand for. Now, people will say, 'Oh, well, animals eat animals, so why shouldn't we?' Those in the animal protection should be held in a higher standard. It's one thing to see a mountain lion eat meat, because certain animals have to have flesh in order to survive. The human being is not one of those. We should not be saying 'Oh, well, I want to eat them so I'm going to eat it.' To do a barbecue as a fundraiser for animals is not much different than opening the doors and saying "We need money to run this organization, so we're going to put the animals on exhibit to raise that money." My response to that is that it's not the animal's job to raise money. That's the job of the people who run the organization, without making the animal work or suffer exploitation.

**When I ask them whether they're vegetarian, they very casually tell me, "Oh, no, I eat meat," like it's the most normal thing. They see no connection.**

And that's the problem. They don't see the connection between the two. And they don't see the connection between the animals, and that's a huge part of the problem with human beings: How many people absolutely love and are devoted to their companion animals? And yet never give a second thought to eating a cow or a chicken or going out and killing a deer or whatever. It's almost like "I'm going to love this animal because he shares my house with me," or this one because "it's been with me for many years, but I'm not going to see these other ones in the same light." And the fact of the matter is that the animal, whether she is a cat or a cow or an elephant, they all have a need to be respected and protected and cherished and given the life nature intended them to have. They don't need us to be using them or abusing them, but the opposite. And we don't want to see that and don't want to talk about that.

**And there's the old argument that, unless you do certain things that involve animal**

**killing or tours, you won't be able to raise enough funds, which is nonsense.**

It is nonsense! Oh, yeah, it's absolute nonsense. You can raise money for a non-profit organization without exploiting animals. It is possible and it is done every day.

**How do you even get licensed to be a sanctuary, and who has oversight of what? Are the USDA, TCEQ and the Attorney General's office all involved in overseeing a sanctuary?**

The activity that is carried out at a sanctuary is what decides which agency will issue the permit(s). If a facility is open to the public then the USDA issues the permit. If the facility rescues migratory birds and endangered species, then a permit must be held by the USFWS. If native wildlife are cared for, then it is Texas Parks and Wildlife, WRR is licensed by the latter two.

**What was your impression of Nicole?**

I think she means well. Whether she will have a chance to do it or not, and the backing, and the knowledge and the experience, I don't have the answer to that.

**Anything else?**

I think it is important for people who frequent roadside attractions, if they're going to visit places that keep animals captive, pay attention. Think in terms of, What kind of a life that animal really has? People say, "Oh, well, animals just need some shelter and some food and some water." That's not what we give ourselves, we don't just give ourselves what we need, but what we want. Nobody takes that into consideration. Maybe a monkey can live in a 10 x 10 cement floored cage, and have food and water and shelter, but it's a horrible life.

*On a November 1 email, Cuny replied to my request for info on animal deaths at WRR, so that I could compare them to those of WAO:*

"As I mentioned earlier, we are having some trouble accessing our stats, but best I can tell we have lost about 20 to 25 animals in '09 and about the same in '08. This is about 8% of the wild animals we have in sanctuary.

Enrique, it is important, in order to be fair in this, to note that what should be included in the picture when evaluating the loss of animal lives is the condition they were in when they arrived.

I will just give some examples here: If a sanctuary conducts a rescue of 10 lions from a roadside zoo where the animals were kept in close confinement but were well-fed and the animals are all young-to-middle-aged, then there is no apparent reason for the deaths of those animals in the coming five to even ten years.

If a sanctuary is involved in a rescue of 10 bears who were poorly fed and poorly treated, under constant stress and held in filthy confinement, and those bears are all over the age of 15, then you could reasonably expect to have one, two or even perhaps five deaths from this group in the coming five to 10 years. Occasionally, an animal that is rescued

from substandard conditions will die within several months of being rescued.

Both the responsibility and moral obligation of legitimate sanctuaries is to first reverse the damage done to the newly rescued animals, then to quite literally add years to their lives by affording them large, spacious, interesting and totally natural enclosures where they are never crowded, on exhibit or stressed in any way, as captivity itself is stress enough. In addition to this, a proper diet is paramount to high standards of care for all animals, but it is even more critically important for animals who have lived lives of terrible deprivation. Experience in this field has shown that both a species-appropriate and highly nutritional diet can profoundly alter the future of animals who have suffered extensive abuse.

*For more information on WRR, visit [www.wildlife-rescue.org](http://www.wildlife-rescue.org).*

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