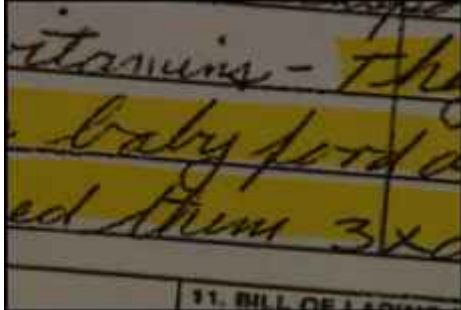


## More than meets the eye?

Thursday, March 16, 2006



**Bay News 9 combed through hundreds of pages of documents to uncover this story.**

The mission of [Big Cat Rescue](#) in Citrus Park is to make you care about animals.

The first page of its web site mentions how it provides a home to "abused and abandoned cats." However, former volunteers say many of the cats living there weren't in need of being rescued, and that they were bought from breeders to be bred.

At least 30 of the 150 cats that live at the facility were not rescued, and were actually born at the facility. Former volunteers say stories about

what the facility does are, at best, exaggerated.

"If it's not a rescue, it shouldn't be tagged as a rescue," said former Big Cat Rescue board member and volunteer Jim Moore, who worked for almost five years there and even lived on the property for a while.

Moore and others intimately familiar with Big Cat Rescue say it's time they spoke publicly to set the record straight about the non-profit facility and its founder and CEO, Carole Baskin.

"She wanted to one day have the largest private collection of exotic cats in the world," said Debra Sandlin, who volunteered at the facility from 1997-2000.

The former volunteers point to examples like [Fluffy the serval cat](#) as one of many possibly misleading stories on the web site. The web site says many of Big Cat Rescue's servals were purchased at auctions where uncaring owners dumped them. Halfway down the page, it says Fluffy "came as a result of the pet trade." Fluffy's seller, Sandra Flaherty, said she raised the serval on baby food and would have only sold her to a good home.

"She was sold as a pet and possible breeder," said Flaherty.

Another serval cat is described on the web site as coming to Big Cat Rescue after a pet shop owner was afraid she would bite children who taunted her.

"Not a word of it's true," said the cat's former owner, who said she parted with the serval because she was paid a thousand dollars.

### Contact the Reporter

→ [Click here](#) to e-mail Chris Hawes, the TV reporter for this story.



One of the most convincing pieces of evidence for many of Baskin's critics is a video of the tiger cub Shere Khan. Big Cat Rescue's web site says he was "unwanted and uncared for," and "could not walk."

However, a home video with Baskin on it tells a different story.

"This is Shere Khan," Baskin said in the video. "He was bottle raised in a loving and nurturing home."

[Picture](#) from video of Shere Khan.

"I see a normal tiger cub," said Sandlin.

Baskin discussed the allegations with **Bay News 9** and agreed with the perception that the majority of cats at her facility came from abusive situations. She stood by her web site's story of Shere Khan's abuse, despite the video showing him standing on his hind legs.

"He could lift himself, but just barely," said Baskin.

The tiger is just one of the stories the former volunteers mention. They're also troubled by claims that many animals on the site were born into the pet trade.

"The majority of the animals that are listed on the web site where it says born into the pet trade were actually born there (Big Cat Rescue)," said Sandlin.

"That's because back prior to 1997 that's what we were, pet owners," said Baskin. "We were the pet trade."

One of the few points that Baskin and her critics agree on is that Baskin and her husband sold and bred cats.

"We went through a whole range of beliefs," said Baskin. "He was set on breeding virtually every cat here."

Baskin says she's up front about that history. The extent of that breeding, however, is described nowhere on the web site, although one statement says no exotic cats have been bred there since 1997.

Volunteers who worked there, however, say that's simply not true.

"There were some binturongs born," said Judy Watson, a Big Cat Rescue volunteer from 1997-2000.

Binturongs are more commonly known as bear cats. Former volunteer Jim Moore, who worked at the facility from 1995-2000, says he believes the bearcats' births were no accident.

A mid-1998 newsletter announced the imminent birth of caracals, medium-sized exotic cats with large, pointed ears.

When shown the newsletter, Baskin responded, "You got me on that. I just, I don't know.



**Baskin maintains that most of the animals at her facility came from abusive situations.**

It's not in the list of cats that we currently have."

Baskin says the list shows she's telling the truth about the animals at Big Cat Rescue and that they're now in better homes than they once were, but she didn't want Bay News 9 to copy or videotape the list for fear her critics will "use the portions that they can zero in on as showing something negative about us."

Of course, that's what's already happening with other records that have leaked out.

Baskin says some of the people attacking her are motivated by a piece of legislation she's backing that would severely limit the ownership.