

Northland Forum

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SECTION B

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HOLD THAT TIGER

Four cubs died last year. Should the carnival tiger attraction return to Duluth?



2007 FILE PHOTO / NEWS TRIBUNE

Marcus Cook tends to the parents of four tiger cubs at his attraction at the Mighty Thomas Carnival last year.

OUR VIEW

If a wild animal exhibitor brings a couple of tigers to town, one of which is very pregnant, and sets up shop at a carnival where the female gives birth to four cubs that he displays publicly only to see them die the next day, should he be welcomed back?

How about if he made the trip last year after being socked with a lengthy complaint from the United States Department of Agriculture alleging Animal Welfare Act violations, as well as a \$100,000 fine for fraud from the attorney general of Texas?

Well, sanctions or not, Marcus Cook and his Zoo Dynamics tiger show have been barnstorming the South and Midwest this year with the Mighty Thomas Carnival, which is preparing to set up shop in the Duluth Entertainment Convention Center parking lot this week. But hold your horses — or tigers — because this time, the carnies may be stripped of their stripes.

"I'm not sure if the tigers are coming with us or not," Mighty Thomas co-owner Tom Atkins told the News Tribune's editorial page staff early last week, acknowledging that the big cat sideshow had been traveling with the carnival "for a couple of weeks."

Atkins advised calling back later in the week. In the meantime, the office of Attorney General Greg Abbott of

Texas, the state where Cook is based, had plenty to report.

"What name is he operating under today?" asked spokesman Charlie Castillo when the newspaper called to inquire about the status of the "Final Judgment and Agreed Permanent Injunction" signed by Cook and the attorney general's office in February 2007. Asserting that Cook had fraudulently operated various nonprofit entities — ZooCats Inc., Zoo America, and the Kaufman County Humane Society, among others — the ruling enjoined him from ever again establishing a nonprofit in the state, as well as claiming any affiliation with Save the Tiger funds sponsored by Exxon and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation.

The judgment enjoined Cook from representing that he has a 'perfect safety record.' It would appear that he does not.

With regard to dangerous animals, the judgment enjoined Cook from "misrepresenting or causing confusion ... as to Defendants' safety record ... including representing that Defendants have a 'perfect safety record.'"

It would appear that he does not. In 2005, a woman was bitten in the hand by a tiger cub Cook exhibited at a Florida auto dealership, the St. Petersburg Times reported. A year later, according to numerous news reports, one of Cook's workers required 2,000

stitches after being mauled by a tiger that had escaped his Texas facility.

In Duluth last year, Cook dismissed the incident, telling the News Tribune the worker was trying to commit "suicide by tiger." (The worker disputes his claim.) And Cook said the attorney general judgment — which would seemingly enjoin him from making suicide-by-tiger excuses regarding his safety record — wasn't as severe as it



2007 FILE PHOTO / NEWS TRIBUNE

The four cubs — shortly after their birth in Duluth, and shortly before their death.

sounded and the fine had been reduced.

Not quite. On Thursday, Texas attorney general spokesman Thomas Kelley gave an update. "Mr. Cook is mistaken," he e-mailed. "Short answer: yes, the judgment still applies; no, he hasn't complied with the judgment; and yes, the \$100,000 is reinstated."

It looks like Cook won't soon be getting any ticket revenue in Duluth to pay down that debt. On Friday, the News Tribune editorial staff called

Atkins of Mighty Thomas again to ask if the tigers were coming to town.

"They're not," he said, and hung up.

Cook did not respond to requests for comment. His lawyer, Bryan Sample, who also signed the Texas judgment, said of it: "There are ongoing matters that would be improper for me to make any comment." As for the cause of the tiger cubs' deaths last year — Cook reportedly sent their remains for a necropsy shortly after the incident — Sample said, "I really don't know. I don't believe any criminal charges or charges from the [United States Department of Agriculture] were brought against him or anyone else from the exhibit."

He's correct, but the USDA has other matters to discuss with Cook in a September hearing on its voluminous complaint against him.

For Duluth and Minnesota, the larger question is what state and local governments can do to control wild animal exhibits gone wrong. A state law passed in 2004 requires residents who own dangerous animals to register them with their counties, but is mum about visiting exhibitors. As for Duluth, city spokesman Jeff Papas was in the process of researching relevant ordinances on Friday when told Cook probably wasn't coming to town.

"That might solve the whole issue completely," he said.

Maybe this time, but not completely.

PRO / CON

Is there adequate government oversight of exotic animal exhibits?

Yes: But attention would be better placed on 'scam-tuaries,' which are rarely monitored

ZUZANA KUKOL



BIG CAT OWNER'S VIEW

The question about government oversight of exhibits needs to be broken into two parts: traveling exhibits versus general, as there are quite a few differences.

Concerning traveling exhibits, yes, there is adequate government and public oversight. Remember that traveling exhibits are out in the public eye almost every day. Thousands of people are taking pictures and videos that could be evidence if real abuse was happening. With the advent of cell phone cameras and the Internet, cases of abuse would not be kept quiet for very long!

Enforcement of existing animal welfare laws (meaning more officers) is needed in cases of serious animal abuse. Passing more laws that won't be enforced will

not help any animals. There is a huge difference between animal abuse and animal discipline. Animal abuse would be beating your dog or tiger for no reason. Animal discipline is tapping your puppy or tiger cub on its mouth if mouthy.

While a puppy would feel your hand disciplining it, the tiger cub might not even notice; the human hand is much smaller and weaker than the paw of a tiger's mom.

Many complaints filed against traveling exhibits are done by extreme animal rights groups, whose definition of "abuse" is simply keeping animals in cages. To the extreme animal rights camp, extinction of tigers in the wild is better than saving them in captivity.

Some complain-ers are hypocritical exotic animal "scam-tuary" owners, who want to ban others, while exempting themselves. To these hypocrites, legitimate exotic animal business is serious competition and a threat to donations for their own pet collection.

I worry more

about the huge, donation-dependent, often underregulated or unregulated (exempt from bans) sanctuaries that could use more government oversight. Some will not allow the public to visit. There is a fine line between hoarding and good animal husbandry.

ZUZANA KUKOL owns and trains exotic pets, including big cats. She lives in the Nevada desert and has been an exotic animal owner for more than 20 years. She is a cofounder of Responsible Exotic Animal Ownership, www.REXANO.org.

No: Exhibitors may call themselves 'educators,' but too many exploit animals

TAMMY QUIST



SANCTUARY VIEW

Not every tiger will walk on a leash or sit quietly in an exhibit cage. Traveling exhibitors breed surplus tigers so that they can get the "pick of the litter" for their events and photo ops. When cubs and adolescents don't make the cut, they often are sold at auction and to dealers who sell to the pet trade.

Surplus tigers are an epidemic in the U.S. and in Minnesota. There are only 4,000 tigers remaining in the wild and almost 10,000 kept as pets in the U.S. The United States is the top supplier of tiger parts to the black market. In the past three years, The

Wildcat Sanctuary has helped remove 33 tigers from Minnesota's backyards.

At least 78 Minnesota cities now forbid such animals as tigers, elephants and bears being possessed in their cities, including Duluth. So isn't it hypocritical it to say a USDA-licensed exhibitor cannot live in our city because it is a public safety risk, but hauling animals in small transport crates from other cities is acceptable and safe? This "not in my backyard unless it is only for a week" mentality is unethical and does nothing to improve public safety.

There are too many people who are making their living carting exotic big cats around for exhibit. They call themselves educators. They claim to be exhibiting and breeding these animals to save them from extinction and raise public awareness through entertainment.

But the cats travel day after day in cramped, barren cages. They may be exposed to severe heat with minimal or no protection. They barely have enough room to turn around. Imagine being a tiger and never feeling grass under your feet or swimming in water. The only opportunity to run and jump is at the command of a trainer. Interaction with other tigers is for-



STEVE LINDSTROM / FOR THE NEWS TRIBUNE

bidden unless it is for breeding. These animals are born tigers, yet never get the chance to be one.

The Wildcat Sanctuary is Minnesota's only accredited large animal sanctuary and assists local authorities to enforce Minnesota's Exotic Animal law and city and county ordinances. At our sanctuary, we house several "retired" exhibit cats that had nowhere to go once they were too old to breed or perform.

There is no valid reason to breed exotic cats for life in a cage. There are more humane ways to educate and entertain our children and families.

TAMMY QUIST is the director and founder of The Wildcat Sanctuary in Sandstone. She is a member of the American Sanctuary Association's Board of Directors.