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Tiger Politics: Is AZA and Few Outspoken Individuals Representing the Views of the Majority of AZA Members?

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Las Vegas, NV (1/2/2008)--AZA (American Zoo and Aquarium Association, lately also known as Association of Zoos and Aquariums), has been under heavy criticism lately following the December 2007 fatal tiger attack at the San Francisco zoo which is accredited by them.

Although still under investigation, it is speculated the 12.5 feet moat wall was too low, allowing the tiger to escape its cage by climbing out, killing one person and injuring two.

There are speculations the three attacked men might have been taunting the tiger; however, that is a separate issue. A tiger shouldn't have been able to escape no matter how much visitors taunt it, and the zoo and AZA have to concentrate on that and take full responsibility unless it is shown the tiger had 'help' getting out of her cage.

AZA is not a government agency; it is a [powerful private group](#) accrediting zoos and aquariums that have (supposedly) met certain standards for veterinary care, exhibits, physical facilities, operations, safety, security, finances, staffing, education, conservation and research. For most small private zoos, the accrediting fee is too expensive.

For many years, non AZA private owners of wild and exotic animals in the USA have been coming under increased attacks from animal rights (AR) community, who became very successful at introducing bans against exotic animal ownership, many of which passed. All the bans, until now, exempted AZA accredited facilities, so AZA saw no reason to help us fight this unfair legislation, just the opposite, AZA material and speakers were often supporting exotic bans against non AZA sector, aka private competition.

On top of that, almost every time there was an exotic animal accident, even if the facility was accredited by AZA, their spokesperson went on criticizing the non AZA owners to deflect the blame, instead of accepting the responsibility and stay focused on their internal problem.

As reported in Examiner on December 30, 2006, AZA spokesman went on rather unprovoked attack against private owners, when the female keeper

got severely injured by the same tiger that one year later escaped, killing one and injuring two visitors at the San Francisco zoo:

"The reports may show that the procedures were followed, but with wild animals these things sometimes happen," said Steve Feldman, spokesman for the American Association of Zoos and Aquariums, the nation's accrediting body. Feldman said the vast majority of injuries from tigers happen to people who keep the animals as pets, not professionals who work with them in zoos."

On May 4, 2006 AZA accredited San Diego Zoo made a [press release](#) concerning 33 orphaned monkeys being imported from South Africa under the auspices of the AZA's Old World Monkey Taxon Advisory Group (TAG). Without skipping a beat, the zoo found a way to attack US exotic pet owners, aka, non AZA facilities:

"We do not put a price tag on our animals as we do not wish to contribute in any way to promoting exotic animals as pets here in the United States," said Karen Killmar, associate curator of mammals at the San Diego Zoo. "As stunned as we were by the call, we thought that maybe there was an opportunity to provide these animals with good homes with their own species in the U.S. at AZA-accredited zoos".

Not a month goes by lately without news about AR demanding that zoos close their elephant exhibits and send their elephants to a Tennessee elephant sanctuary, which had one of its handlers tragically killed in July 2006 by a former AZA Zoo elephant.

But despite warning from the private sector, AZA officials and some individual members continue to be totally blind to the fact that they are being used by AR to divide all captive exotic animal keepers by helping the animal rights groups in passing the bans toward the non AZA sector. They refuse to acknowledge they are the next AR target, whose final agenda is no animals in captivity, no pets, no meat, no eggs...

These predictions came true after the San Francisco fatal tiger incident, when AR went on full frontal attack asking for elimination of all zoos, including the ones accredited by AZA. But when you look at the history, it was AZA leadership and few individual members who helped AR get the credibility by working with them and supporting their propaganda and public brainwashing.

Most gullible seems to be the director of the Detroit Zoological Institute Ron Kagan, who won "2004 PETA 'proggy' award-Peta progress Award" and supposedly became 'friends' with Gary Yourofsky who seems to have ties to the terrorist [Animal Liberation Front](#), ALF.

In Yourofsky's own words : " *Actually [people are shocked](#) that I befriended Ron Kagan a Detroit zoo director over the years. Ron happens to be a pretty cool guy; he hates circuses and rodeos, fur, hunting, and vivisection.*"

Kagan was almost fired this year from his \$200,000 job when it was revealed [he lied](#) about having a Ph.D.

June 12, 2003, Dr. Eric Miller, DVM, Director of Animal Health and Conservation for the Saint Louis Zoological Park and a member of the American Zoo and Aquarium Association's Board of Directors, testified in Congress on behalf of AZA and American Association of Zoological Veterinarians in support of H.R. 1006, also known as 'Captive Wildlife Safety Act', which would amend the Lacey Act to define "prohibited wildlife species" as any live lion, tiger, leopard, cheetah, jaguar, or cougar. This animal rights sponsored federal bill passed and it makes it a felony for a non commercial private (pet) owner of big cats to move their animals across the state line for any reason, even veterinary care. Similar bill is now attempting to add non human primates as prohibited species, with AR hoping to add reptiles, birds and the rest of the mammals soon.

Miller, in his propagandized testimony, stated that:

"The bill is a logical starting point for addressing the public safety threats posed by the private ownership of certain wild and dangerous animals as pets, as well as the important animal welfare issues associated with the personal ownership of these animals."

Somehow, the only examples he could use to prove the supposed need for this bill were incidents at two facilities that were already licensed and regulated by federal USDA agency and also on the state level, and would therefore be exempted from the bill he was supporting and trying to pass. It is like mixing apples and oranges, trying to ban orange growers because few apples were bad. How about just going after the bad apples and leave the rest alone?

He also claims that: *"Private ownership of large felids also creates significant public consequences."*

Interesting, since only 19 people were fatally mauled by big cats between 1990 and 2007, that is [one \(1.1\) death per year](#). This number includes AZA Zoos as well.

September 2004 [AZA publication](#) brags: *"In January of this year, the Captive Wildlife Safety Act was passed into law. The AZA, as well as individual members, worked with other animal protection groups and testified before the United States Senate."*

Talking about tigers, let's not forget Mr. Ron Tilson, director of conservation at the Minnesota Zoo and coordinator of the American Zoo and Aquarium Association's captive breeding program for tigers, who too has been known to spout AR propaganda based on pure magic and estimates, such as "*Trafficking in endangered species is third only to trafficking in narcotics and gun smuggling*".

Well, according to United Nations, it is human trafficking, not animal trafficking, that is third in line.

Reading news reports interviewing Tilson, it is obvious he doesn't hide his disgust with private non AZA owners of tigers: "*...Tigers represent everything fine and decent and powerful. Everything those people would like to be. It's all an ego trip—big guns, big trucks, and big tigers*" and "*For private owners to say, 'We're saving tigers,' is a lie,*". He adds: "*They are not saving tigers; they're breeding them for profit*".

US Zoos manage 3 tiger subspecies with max target population of 150 individuals for each of them. However, what the AZA zoos fail to tell the American public is that only the Siberian tiger has reached that target goal of 150 individuals. The population of other two sub-species pure tiger collections only number in the few dozen, hardly a survival plan, how long will it take before they start inbreeding? You don't have to be a geneticist to figure out that if you only had 150 humans to save human race, pretty soon we would all look the same, not to mention health issues where any single disease would wipe us all out. With AZA Zoos having all the financial and cage space problems, why can't the AZA leadership look at us, private owners, as the answer/solution to their own as well as conservation problems instead of ridiculing us any chance they get???

In "exotic animal owners' bashing" interviews too numerous to list, Tilson is known to practice fear mongering by saying that tigers kill on average 40-60 people each year, but conveniently 'forgetting' to add that majority, in some years all, are people killed by wild tigers in India. This misinformation helps feed into AR hype and hysteria by creating the appearance that captive pet tigers are wiping out entire US human population.

AZA publication titled "Why Wild Animals Don't Make Good Pets" makes it abundantly clear that in the [delusional 'World According to AZA'](#), anybody not accredited by them is a lowly stupid pet owner :
"*Hundreds of wild "pets" attack their owners every year. Well-publicized examples include the Las Vegas animal trainer who was seriously injured by his tiger.*"

After basically calling professional exotic animal trainer Roy Horn of Siegfried & Roy a 'pet' owner, the AZA brochure sends you to an extreme AR site to look for more animal attacks.

It is time AZA officials stopped the 'us against them' hypocritical rhetoric which is echoed in May 2001 AZA Publication 'Communiqué' by Steve McCusker, Director of the San Antonio Zoo, that "he wouldn't be in the business now if he didn't own wild animals as a child. He notes it would be hypocritical of him to reprimand others for doing the same. "

When will the AZA leadership and few outspoken individuals see the wrongs and damage they are doing with their all mighty attitude toward all animal owners and, in the long run AZA zoos as well?

AZA helped AR groups get respect and power by aligning themselves with them by spouting the same 'anti non AZA zoo' propaganda, by testifying and supporting AR ban bills. AZA officials need to undo the damage they created. Coming from a communist country, I know how it is sometimes hard to go against the leadership. I would like to think the majority of AZA zoos employees love the animals the same way we at non AZA sector do, and I hope they don't support the misguided views of their leadership.

In his January 2, 2007 blog, Wayne Pacelle, the current president the AR group HSUS, asked AZA to join them in eradicating the private exotic sector. If you read between the lines, Pacelle seems to be basically offering AZA the immunity from more AR attacks if they join in their jihad to eradicate the non AZA community:

"Accredited zoos are here to stay, but they can do better. And the professional zoo industry should unite with the humane community to eradicate roadside zoos, circuses that use exotic wildlife, and private ownership of wildlife, especially of dangerous exotics. The case of Tatiana shows us that even the top institutions fall short, and it lays bare the broader crisis in our treatment of captive wildlife in America."

Maybe it is time to remove AZA exemptions from exotic animal bans, all animal owners should be abiding by the same rules. Private AZA shouldn't be treated any different than other private clubs or associations; AAA gives you some perks but doesn't exempt you from following traffic laws, BBB gives businesses a seal of trustworthiness, but it doesn't exempt these companies from commerce laws. AZA accreditation shouldn't be anything more than what BBB seal is.

Most importantly, not being a member of AAA or BBB (Better Business Bureau) still allows entities to continue their commercial or non commercial

driving and business activity. The latest exotic animal bans usually only allow facilities to keep, breed and replace their animals if they join a very expensive AZA club. Forcing people and businesses to join expensive private clubs to stay legal is wrong.

Any zoo, breeder, sanctuary or pet owner should be allowed to keep their animals if they do it in a responsible manner. If all animal owners, from pet to major AZA zoos, have to fight on the same side of the fence, we will all get much stronger and have a better chance of winning the AR war against captive exotic animal ownership. AZA shouldn't allow themselves to be at the mercy of AR who will go after them again once they outlive their usefulness to these extreme AR groups.

Or is AZA becoming more interested in political correctness and money than in the animals themselves?