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Young tiger deliberately set free: RCMP

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Police believe somebody tampered with the cage of a 90-kilogram Siberian tiger, allowing it to escape and roam the streets of Cowichan Lake on the weekend.

"The lock was intact, but the mechanism from the gate to the post was broken and left on the ground," said RCMP Const. Brian Brown.

"Anybody that would do that, whether an animal activist or whoever, sentenced this cat to death by letting it out into the community.

"It was not a very well-thought-out plan."

It was unclear last night what action, if any, would be taken against the owners of the nine-month-old female tiger. Jamie Bell and her son Cody run Primate Estate, on Cowichan Lake Road, which they describe as a wildlife sanctuary housing 52 primates and nine exotic cats.

Police do not know when the tiger escaped but she was spotted just after 1 p.m. Sunday. One of the Bells was with her when police arrived.

"Eventually, they lured the tiger into a small shed and then it was loaded into a transport container," and returned home, said Brown.

Neighbours say the tiger is just the latest exotic animal to run wild down their normally tame streets.

Corey Bath, who's 32 and has three small children, says the Bells have a long-standing problem with animals escaping their property.

"They can't even keep their dog in the yard," she said.

Neighbour Sheryl Baas said the Primate Estate property is "filthy."

"One year, you had to cover your face because it smelled so bad out there," she said, describing a 1.2-metre pile of pig manure.

"They're the neighbours from hell."

Debra Probert of the Vancouver Humane Society said she visited Primate Estate about three years ago, before the Bells had the tiger.

"It's just a disaster, it really is," Probert said. "The conditions those animals were being kept under were appalling.

"This situation absolutely has to be addressed.

"It's not just an animal-welfare problem, which obviously is our major concern, but it's also becoming a public-danger issue."

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