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Police officers examine the tiger enclosure at the San Francisco Zoo on Wednesday, Dec. 26, 2007, in San Francisco following a Christmas Day tiger attack that left one person dead and two others injured. Tatiana, a Siberian tiger, escaped from the grotto and attacked three people before police shot and killed her. (AP Photo/Noah Berger) (Noah Berger)

Tiger attack exposes oversight weakness at the nation's zoos

By [John Woolfolk](#)

[Mercury News](#)

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The tiger that escaped its San Francisco Zoo pen on Christmas did more than just kill a San Jose teenager. It exposed alarming gaps in oversight - both at the well-regarded zoo itself, and beyond.

How did no one notice until after the tragedy that killed Carlos Sousa Jr. that the 350-pound predator's pen walls were well short of industry standards?

The answer appears to lie in the weak mix of regulations and professional standards that govern the nation's zoos, a system that rests on overwhelmed federal inspectors enforcing vague animal welfare laws and industry standards that are only voluntary.

San Francisco Zoo officials are defending their operation, saying industry inspectors who reviewed the zoo's practices and facilities three years ago never cited concerns about the tiger pen. But they also have acknowledged that their own records overstated the height of its walls by 5 feet.

Ron Tilson, who oversees tiger management for the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, was baffled why neither his group's inspectors nor the zoo would notice such a deficiency. With a wall only 12 1/2 feet high, he said "the tiger can almost stand up and reach it" and would have little difficulty escaping "with a little bit of a hop."

But as Tilson notes, the AZA's enclosure guidelines "have never been compulsory."

"In no way do I have the power to implement them or demand that they be met," Tilson said.

Questions about the oversight of the nation's

zoos start at the top, with the federal government.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service has the primary responsibility to regulate zoos and other animal exhibitors as part of the Animal Welfare Act. The agency can charge exhibitors with violations of the act that can lead to license revocation or fines up to \$3,750 a day.

Animal welfare first

But the act itself is written more with humane treatment than public safety in mind. For one thing, it doesn't specify caging dimensions for animals, whether they are tigers or rabbits, said USDA spokesman Jim Rogers. Instead, it provides general guidelines for the animal's comfort, safety and security. The idea, he said, is to allow design flexibility.

"We don't maintain a specific measurement," Rogers said. "It's more that it must be sufficient to do the job. Our inspectors are trained to know what's sufficient for what. That sort of regulation allows everything from the old bar-and-cage zoo to the animal habitat environment you see today."

The federal agency has only about 100 inspectors, and critics say those inspectors are overwhelmed with the responsibility for regulating more than 200 accredited zoos, thousands of roadside attractions, circuses and other private animal exhibitors.

But Rogers said each institution is inspected at least every two years, and in cases of repeat violators, as many as four times a year. Zoos are required to keep a copy of their most recent inspection report, and for those like San Francisco that house dangerous animals, a copy of an emergency response plan for dealing with escapes and disasters.

San Francisco Zoo officials said they would provide the Mercury News copies of both reports, but had not done so by Friday afternoon. They also said federal inspectors would be investigating the deadly escape, and that the zoo, which has four other tigers, already plans to add fencing, surveillance cameras and electrified wiring to fortify the enclosure.

Rogers said the only serious enforcement issues he could recall in recent years involved circuses rather than industry-accredited institutions like the San Francisco Zoo.

In California, state law also governs the keeping of wild animals. However, the state exempts from its oversight zoos accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, a non-profit organization based in Maryland.

The AZA offers zoos and aquariums accreditation through a days-long review every five years by a committee of three or four volunteer curators, keepers and veterinarians from member organizations.

Inspectors review everything from governing structure, financial health, staffing levels, record keeping and safety protocols to the condition of buildings and enclosures, animal acquisition and disposal practices and educational programming.

Critics say the system still falls short.

"The issue here is that it's essentially industry self-regulation," said Wayne Pacelle, president of the Humane Society of the United States, adding that federal oversight amounts to "a finger-in-the-dike situation."

Standards exist

Nevertheless, the AZA does set some standards. Tilson, head of the group's tiger program, has written guidelines covering everything from the animals' diet, health care and reproduction to holding and exhibit enclosure design.

His enclosure guidelines, written in 1994, recommend against barred cages in favor of "naturalistic fenced and moated exhibits." The recommendations specify that moats should be a minimum of 23 feet wide with a wall at least 16.4 feet high on the visitors' side, with walls that are sheer and unclimbable.

The AZA said the Christmas incident in San Francisco marked the first escape leading to the death of a visitor among the organization's accredited zoos. After the tragedy, the AZA called the San Francisco Zoo an accredited "member in good standing," and stood by that statement even after zoo officials revealed the moat wall in the tiger grotto was as low as 12 1/2 feet.

Zoo officials said the tiger enclosure was built in 1940, and Tilson said it was likely "grandfathered in" as an acceptable enclosure.

Defending procedure

Tilson insisted the deficient wall height isn't an indication of shoddy accreditation practices. Instead, he said, it demonstrates the complexity involved in managing and overseeing zoos with dozens of different animals, each with their own specific enclosure guidelines.

"For a visiting committee to be on top of all these specifications would be a formidable job," Tilson said.

It's not just animal-rights groups who lament the state of zoo regulation. Exotic pet keepers and unaccredited exhibitors say government regulators put too much faith in the AZA to police its own.

"Obviously they didn't do a very good job making sure the facilities were up to the standards they require," said Zuzana Kukol, a Las Vegas big-cat trainer, and co-founder of the non-profit REXANO - Responsible Exotic Animal Ownership.

While the AZA's standards are voluntary, its accreditation is potent clout that it can withhold when a zoo fails to measure up. In 1995, the AZA postponed accrediting the Los Angeles Zoo after its inspectors documented conditions that jeopardized animal health including overcrowding, enclosures with poor drainage and vermin infestations.

The zoo responded by spending \$1.7 million on improvements, and its accreditation was restored.

"That's a huge hammer that the AZA has," Tilson said. "If you lose accreditation, you're screwed."

But the Humane Society's Pacelle said that "sometimes these problems don't really get on the radar screen until there's an incident."

"You can be sure that the directors of other zoos have their tape measures out now," Pacelle said.

Contact John Woolfolk at jwoolfolk@mercurynews.com or (408) 975-9346.