

Wild Animals Don't Want to be Owned

By Susan Orlean

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A small, drowsy town in Ohio, a pile of dead Bengal tigers. How did it come to this? The blame should be doled out carefully. Very little of it should fall on the sheriff of Zanesville, who did what was probably the only thing he could do: give a kill order when darkness fell and Terry Thompson's wild carnivores were still prowling around town. Anyone who argues that he should have used tranquilizers or live traps knows very little about small-town sheriffs, wild animals, and tranquilizers. (How many small towns in the Midwest anticipate having tigers on Main Street and stock the equipment to capture them alive?) I love wild animals, but if I knew there might be a bear in my backyard, I would understand that it might need to be killed.

Obviously, the problem lies with Thompson himself—both his mad decision to release his animals and with his need to own them in the first place. Anyone who claims that he needs to own wild animals because he loves them is delusional. Wild animals don't want to be owned. They're wild. They are not pets; they are not our friends; they are not objects. No scenario makes private ownership of wild animals reasonable or fair. It never ends well for the animals. When I wrote about the Tiger Lady of New Jersey, I realized that every possible outcome for her tigers was sad—even sending the animals to a sanctuary that could provide them with better care. There should never have been twenty-seven tigers in suburban New Jersey to begin with.

There will always be vain, obsessive people who want to own rare and extraordinary things whatever the cost; there will always be people for whom owning beautiful, dangerous animals brings a sense of power and magic. It must be like having a comet in your backyard, a piece of the universe that is dazzling and untouchable right outside your door. But animals live and die and breed and feel pain and can inflict pain. There is no excuse for any individual to own them, period. States should pass laws making it illegal to own or trade wild animals; the phony “educational” permits that many private owners have used to skirt those laws should be eliminated. There is no constitutional right to own a Bengal tiger. It's not a matter of individual freedom; as we have seen in Zanesville, it is first and foremost a public-health issue. Would you want to live next door to someone who owned animals that could kill you if they just happened slip out of their cages?

The dirty secret of all of this is that zoos, which are always cited as the good version of wild-animal ownership, have to accept some of the blame, too. There are too many zoos breeding too many animals (baby animals are a huge draw, so most zoos simply can't resist producing them). The surplus animals end up in mostly unregulated auctions where anyone at all can buy them. It's appalling. In my perfect world, we would establish perhaps four national zoos of unimpeachable quality and close the rest

of them. The money we'd spent or donated to all the closed zoos—and whatever public money had supported them—would instead go to animal sanctuaries and research programs and habitat preservation in the animals' natural environment, and to fund documentary films that would show us the way animals live when they are free. These films would fill us with awe and respect and even a little bit of fear, which is what we should feel about these creatures. Love that is used to justify ownership isn't love at all.

Susan Orlean began contributing articles to The New Yorker in 1987, and became a staff writer in 1992.