Implementing Stricter Exotic Pets Laws Will Avert Future Animal Tragedies

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Dozens of lions, tigers, bears and monkeys roamed around the countryside on Tuesday, October 18, 2011. [1] The images of these exotic animals wandering among the general population almost depicted a scene from the “Wild West,” however, Zanesville, Ohio is a far cry from the “Wild West.” When the owner of a private zoo, Terry Thompson, released these animals by breaking the animals’ cages and fences, uproar ensued in the Ohio community. [2] In order to avert public chaos, law enforcement had no other choice but to kill many of these exotic animals. [3]
Although this horrific incident has attracted nationwide media attention, the perplexing issue of exotic pets is nothing new. In fact, states have struggled for years in regards to the appropriate mechanism for regulating the private ownership of exotic pets. Many states have established total or partial bans on private ownership of exotic pets while other states, including Ohio, do not have a direct ban on owning such animals.[4] Therefore, the question that emerges is whether a direct ban on private ownership could have saved these animals?

Ohio has always been considered the “Wild West” of exotic animals because of its lack of regulation on private ownership of such animals.[5] This tragedy stunned the national community, including Kentucky Wildlife officials. Steven Dobey, a wildlife biologist with the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources stated: “[t]hat was unbelievable, awful and an extremely dangerous situation.”[6] The incident triggered lawmakers across the country to evaluate their existing laws in regards to exotic pet ownership. Pacelle, CEO of the Humane Society of the United States, proclaimed that the “[states] will seek statutory authority. Changes must be made in the law.”[7] The governor of Ohio has also publicly stated that such legal changes will be addressed by the legislature in its next session.[8] In order to implement these changes, states should look to the Kentucky regulation as a model for new laws. According to 301 Ky. Admin.Regs. 2:082, no person may possess inherently dangerous exotic animals.[9] The regulation further explains that “inherently dangerous exotic animals include, but are not limited to tigers, lions, non-human primates, dangerous reptiles, bears, etc.”[10] Of course, the regulation carves out an exception for ownership of exotic animals for educational and research purposes.[11] Based on this regulation, it is clear that private ownership of exotic pets will not be tolerated in Kentucky.

In exotic pet cases, the government has a compelling interest to prohibit the private ownership of such pets. The unregulated ownership of these animals poses a large risk to public safety. Not only are these animals dangerous because of their size and ability to physically harm humans, they are also dangerous because of the potential diseases they carry. Besides protecting the public at large, these laws will most importantly protect the exotic animals. Such animals require more care and resources than one’s dog, cat, or hamster and it is difficult for states to control the treatment of these animals. As a result, every state in the United States should make it a mission to implement stricter laws in regards to private ownership of exotic pets. Banning private ownership will allow these animals to live in their natural habitat and not be subject to future tragedies.


[2] Id.

[3] Id.


[5] Id.
Kentucky laws are the worst in the United States. Kentucky has no regard for the people that enjoy exotic animals when they allow thousands of acres of habitat by coal miners and developers to be destroyed. Kentucky only has one state zoo, it tells where their priorities are taking away our rights, and one day I would like to see Bill 301 KY. Admin. Regs. 2:082 thrown out.


Id.


See 301 Ky. Admin. Regs. 2:082

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