



Activist Toolkit

What You Can Do to Help Animals in Captivity

Learn About the USDA

All commercial activity involving animals is governed by USDA. The appropriate agency in USDA is controlled by the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS). The department of APHIS which governs animal welfare inspections is the Animal Care division.

Find Inspectors in Your State

Establish which agency of your state government inspects captive wildlife. This generally falls under departments of wildlife, conservation, natural resources, health or agriculture. The inspectors that govern these facilities will normally be found in the law enforcement division of the agency. Contact the inspectors personally. Locate the laws in your state that regulate captive wildlife issues. These are generally found within state code or administrative code. Each state has a website and state codes can be found through those websites or through Findlaw. Search for the captive wildlife laws and read them thoroughly. Some state laws and regulations can be stronger than the AWA.



Check Licenses

Find the name of the facility or the facility owner; check for licenses on the APHIS website. Establish the type of license that the facility does or does not have. File a FOIA (Freedom of Information Act Request) either online through this website or by mail or fax. File a request for inspection reports for the facility and if further information is needed file a second request for other documentation separately. This will hasten the receipt of inspection reports while other information may take a longer period of time to process. Establish which USDA/APHIS Animal Care inspector is in charge of your area and contact them personally. All inspectors have voicemail and contact information can be found through the USDA website calling the regional office that has authority in your area. If you establish violations of the Animal Welfare Act, file a written complaint through the appropriate regional office. Request notification of the results of your complaint so that when you file a FOIA for USDA actions taken you will receive the results of the inspection or investigation conducted. Investigations are conducted by the Investigative and Enforcement Services (IES) division and are separate from the initial inspections.

To find information on violations previously incurred and cases settled on a facility go to the Office of General Counsel website.

Read the Animal Welfare Act

All commercial activity with captive animals is subject to the Animal Welfare Act (AWA). The Animal Welfare Act and the regulations and standards of care can be located on the APHIS website. Specific regulations for particular species are divided into categories. Some regulations are general and cover all species. Read the AWA and familiarize yourself with the regulations and standards.



Find Health Certificates

Most states require health certificates to accompany any animal imported into the state. These can be located through the State Veterinarian, who is generally under the State Department of Agriculture. Importation rules are created by individual states and can be found at this website. These health certificates are available in most states through the open records acts or sunshine laws.

Check Local Ordinances

Review your local ordinances for prohibitions or regulations concerning captive wildlife. Many counties and municipalities now have ordinances affecting captive wildlife issues (e.g., TX has allowed counties to regulate or prohibit on an individual basis). File complaints as necessary.

Other agencies may be explored for rules and regulations. The United States Fish & Wildlife Service covers activity with endangered species and other animals under the Lacey Act (transportation/ importation/ export/ interstate transportation) and captive-bred wildlife permits. The law enforcement division is at this website. The environmental department of your state or local health departments can be helpful with concerns about pollution runoff or disposal from a facility. When dealing with public safety issues there may be several departments involved with the process. Local law enforcement, animal control departments, health and/or safety departments (zoonosis, animal attacks or bites), wildlife divisions or DNR (structural breach and subsequent escape) are among them.

Many animals are microchipped or tattooed for identification. Humane societies or animal control agencies have universal scanners available for identifying escaped animals. Many captive wild animals have been microchipped with a Vestron chip. The entire body of the animal should be scanned since chips can move throughout the body.



Facility Walkthrough: What to Look For

“Tools of the Trade”

The ankus or bullhook may be seen when trainers or keepers house elephants. Cattle prods or shocking devices have been used in training elephants and large cats. Dowel rods, pipes, whips and chains are all training devices that are used to make an animal submit to the trainer's dominance. Watch the reaction of the animal to the trainer or keeper. Many animals will urinate or defecate at the sight of a trainer who uses these devices or other forms of abuse.

Look For the Basic Needs

Water is essential to all captive animals. Water deprivation has been used by some trainers to create dependency. Food deprivation is used for the same purpose. Water deprivation in many species can cause heatstroke and overheating because many species have no sweat glands and must pant and use water or mud to cool down. Water should always be available. Shade is also essential, in hot summer months particularly. This is a requirement under the AWA and is generally lacking in many exhibits and traveling acts. Shelter is required and should be accessible to the animals. Many times shelter is provided as an indoor area connected by a small doorway to the exterior enclosure. Exhibitors many times close these doorways to the inside so that animals remain in public view.



Facility Walkthrough: Basic Needs

Enrichment is necessary for all captive animals and is required for some species under the AWA regulations. Primates become quickly bored in captive situations and exhibit signs of stress through physical mutilation or injury to others. Watch for use of browse (branches with leaves), toys, arrangement of the environment, puzzle feeders, tubes with food or treats and observe whether they are used and whether they are varied from one walkthrough to the next. The enclosure itself should contribute to enrichment. In most cases all natural landscape is removed from the enclosure leaving a barren area filled only with man-made fake rocks and trees.

Substrates (flooring) have an impact on animals in captivity. Not only can animals suffer from walking on hard surfaces, they also suffer from excessive heat buildup on rock or concrete. Elephants in captivity develop pododermatitis (foot rot) and arthritis from years spent standing on hard surfaces and the lack of space and variety of substrates. Surfaces chosen by exhibitors sometimes reflect an emphasis on easy cleaning rather than concern for the animals.

Emaciation and some physical problems can be determined by sight but internal problems are not easily ascertained. Wild animals mask injuries to avoid the risk of being seen as vulnerable. Medical records for publicly funded facilities can be obtained through FOIA requests and sometimes directly from the facility. Investigations created from medical records should be undertaken by a veterinarian with a specialty in exotic animal medicine and in conjunction with a governing agency.



Facility Walkthrough: Investigate

Follow the Paper Trail

There are records kept on all captive animals used in commercial activity. Learn as much as you can about the facility and their connections to other dealers, breeders and exhibitors. Many times they offer much of that information through their own websites or organizations that they participate in. If they are connected with facilities that have poor track records and a history of violations, that offers you possible information on their own manner of animal care. Find where they received training in handling animals and what course of study they pursued. If the trainer learned from a mentor with a record of animal mistreatment, they probably are using those training methods with their animals. Wild animal training typically is not performed with kindness or a reward system. It is an abusive system.

Recapture Plans

Every facility is required to have a plan in place to recapture animals in the event of an escape. Obtain copies of these plans and study them for public safety and safety of the animals. Facilities are required to have perimeter fences surrounding their property under the AWA regulations. There can be exemptions granted in some cases where a moat or a rock wall serves as a barrier but in general the requirement stands. For most animal species the perimeter fence requirements are 8 ft. high and of structural strength necessary for containment of the specific species. That may mean 11 gauge fences in some cases to 9 gauge fences in others. Caging requirements inside the perimeter will vary by species. Every facility should be licensed by the state and trained in the use of tranquilizer dart guns in event of an escaped animal. If they cannot be licensed or have no employee or veterinarian who can be licensed then a red flag should go up and you should question why. It may mean a past criminal record or may be as simple as the local jurisdiction maintaining the authority. Use public safety as an issue in working on these issues. Local authorities will look at public safety first and animal welfare second. Welfare concerns will be addressed but open the conversation with public concerns.



Facility Walkthrough: Tips

Take Notes

Gather as much information as you can about the species that you are concerned with in the facility. Find their proper dietary requirements and normal behavioral patterns in their natural environment. Watch for any aberrant behavioral patterns or abnormalities. Typical problems range from lackluster coats in fur-bearing animals, pacing back and forth repetitively (stereotypic behavior), weight loss (emaciated look), diarrhea, favoring a leg or arm, discolored skin, lack of appetite, dry cracked feet in elephants, and problems may sometimes be as obvious as self-mutilation (fingers chewed to the bone) or head-banging. An animal who remains motionless with a blank stare is exhibiting abnormal behavior.

Observe

The physical environment provided for the animal in question. Space is a necessity for all animals to have any level of comfort in their captive situation. They require space to escape the onset of aggression from others of their own species and areas to escape public view. Every species has special needs in their environment requiring space. Bears as an example are solitary animals that do not often do well housed in groups. Males travel up to 50 miles per day and mark territory by scratching marks on trees. Rarely will they tolerate another male bear within their territory. Elephants are extremely dependent on social structure and need the company of other elephants. They should never be housed alone.

Use Video & Photography Whenever Possible

Documenting evidence is always important and when viewing these pictures later you may see things that you missed by visual observation. Always keep records of your investigation for refreshing memory and ensuring correct and factual information.



Remember:

Do not rely totally on yourself as the only source in any investigation. Others can substantiate findings and assist with background information during the process. Use "experts" in the field if they are available to assess information and provide statements or testimony for a possible complaint or case.

One person can make a difference; many together can make a change.

This checklist is meant to be a helpful guide and not a comprehensive source for all scenarios. Be creative and investigate all possible avenues that can be used to assist animals suffering in problematic captive situations.

