

## **Big Cat Question and Answer Commonly Asked Big Cat Questions**

### **I've heard that there have been changes in the regulations regarding the handling of big cats. Is that true?**

The handling regulations were amended in July 2004, and a new section 2.131(a) was added. It states: " All licensees that maintain wild or exotic animals must demonstrate adequate experience and knowledge of the species they maintain." Consequently, the other subsections in Section 2.131 were renumbered. Most of the handling questions we receive involving big cats concern the current Section 2.131(c)(1). The Secretary of Agriculture has determined that there is an inherent danger present for both the viewing public and the exhibited animal(s) where there is any chance that the public could come into direct contact with juvenile or adult big cats. The handling regulations prohibit the exhibition of such animals without sufficient distance and/or barriers between the animals and the viewing public to assure the safety of the public and the animals. Trained handlers, leashes, and stages, for example, are not substitutes for sufficient distance and/or barriers.

### **What species are considered to be "big cats" by APHIS?**

Lions, tigers, jaguars, leopards, cougars, cheetahs, and any hybrids thereof. This list is consistent with the definition of big cats in the Lacey Act.

### **What about cubs? Can I exhibit them in situations allowing contact with the public?**

It depends. The handling regulations require that all animals be handled as carefully as possible. They also specifically prohibit young or immature animals from exposure to rough or excessive public handling, and prohibit animals from being subjected to any combination of temperature, humidity, and time that is detrimental to the animal's health and well-being. The latter requires exhibitors to take into consideration an animal's age, species, and overall health status, among other things. Although we do not encourage public contact with cubs, it is possible for an exhibitor to exhibit cubs over approximately 8 weeks of age (i.e., when their immune systems have developed sufficiently to protect them from most communicable diseases), to the public, and still comply with all of the regulatory requirements

### **What is meant by the term public?**

The terms "the public" and "the general viewing public" in the handling regulations generally mean customers or visitors, and not an exhibitor's paid employees or unpaid bona fide workers who comprise the exhibitor's regular work force (i.e., personnel with regular hours who work under formal arrangements). Exhibitors themselves are not "the public" or "the general viewing public."

### **Are volunteers members of the public?**

The public and the general viewing public can also include volunteers. We have learned of several exhibitors who charge fees or accept donations from volunteers or trainees in exchange for interaction with juvenile and/or adult big cats. We consider such volunteers or trainees to constitute the public, and have prosecuted these exhibitors for violating the handling regulations, among other things.

### **Is public feeding of big cats allowed?**

Generally, exhibitions that allow the public to feed adult or juvenile big cats do not meet the handling regulations. We are aware of only one exhibition that does. In this exhibition, the animals are held in enclosures and there is a second barrier that both keeps members of the public at a safe distance from the actual enclosure and prevents contact between the animals and the public. This second barrier eliminates the public's ability to approach or reach into the animals enclosure, and eliminates the animal's ability to reach out and scratch or grab people. Members of the public, while behind the barriers, can place food into a chute that runs into the enclosure. The food used is appropriate for the species and is not provided in excessive amounts.