

Captive breeding has a dark side – a disturbing Czech discovery of trafficked tiger body parts

November 26 2018, by Marianna Szczygielska



Credit: Czech Customs Authority

The [rotting remains](#) of a number of tigers, lions and cougars were recently discovered in a raid on a house in Prague. This disturbing find

was the culmination of a five-year investigation that revealed an illegal trade in exotic wildlife blooming in the heart of Europe.

Czech authorities managed to identify the main figures behind an international crime ring who had been processing and selling wild cat parts as traditional Chinese medicine. Claws, teeth, bones, skin and extracts from their bodies known as "[tiger](#) wine" or "broth" were smuggled to Asia or used to supply the domestic demand in tiger products. The slaughtered tigers came from the country's largest private breeding facility for lions and tigers – where, officially, these protected wildcats are bred for circuses, roadside attractions and petting zoos.

This story provides a stark reminder of the cruelty engendered by captive breeding. Even zoos heralded as the beacons of endangered species conservation play a controversial part in this story.

Captive tigers

With only [3,900](#) left in the wild, the tiger family (*Panthera tigris*) is the only big cat listed as [endangered](#), with two subspecies critically endangered. The captive population, meanwhile, is abundant.

In 2014, the [WWF](#) alerted us to the alarming news that there are "more tigers living in American backyards than in the wild". The organisation called on the US government to introduce a ban on private ownership of big cats. No such federal bill has been passed since, but [21 states](#) ban all dangerous exotic pets, while the rest allow certain species or require permits. Out of 100,000 captive tigers in the US alone, only 350 are held in zoos and other facilities accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums. The [estimated](#) number of tigers in the Czech Republic, meanwhile, is 390, only 39 of which are kept in zoos.



A bath in the house raided by Czech authorities. Credit: Czech Customs Authority

A growing number of cities around the world close their gates for [circuses](#) that use [wild animals](#). According to [Czech law](#), captive breeding of big cats requires special permits, while the environmental inspectorate records each tiger's birth, sale or death. Following the discovery of the tiger slaughterhouse in Prague, the European Association of Zoos and Aquariums issued a [statement](#) urging authorities to take immediate action in ensuring that all captive tigers serve noncommercial purposes such as research, education and conservation breeding.

Regal wildcats

The idea of protecting endangered species through captive breeding in zoos is relatively new, but has a much longer and darker history.

Exotic animals first entered private collections in Europe as diplomatic gifts. Tigers were particularly highly priced in royal and aristocratic menageries as dangerous predators were seen to embody the political and physical prowess of their owners. Wild cats were also exhibited for popular audiences in circuses and other travelling shows. The intensive traffic in wildlife was largely facilitated by colonial expansion. That is why European port cities, as the centres for colonial commerce, were the first to open public zoos.

In the aftermath of decolonisation and the introduction of the [Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species](#) in 1973, the lucrative business of capturing and trading exotic animals came to an end. Faced with the termination of a supply of specimens caught in the wild, zoological parks resorted to captive breeding.

They did so, on the one hand to ensure they retained [rare species](#) in their collections and, on the other hand, to redirect their mission: from entertainment towards conservation. Devising so-called "Species Survival Plans", accredited zoos have collaborated since 1981 to breed endangered species and manage all captive individuals of every species as one population to ensure genetic diversity.



Bones discovered by Czech authorities. Credit: Czech Customs Authority

But even after this period, research, education and conservation did not always drive captive breeding in zoos. Even non-commercial breeding does not always prioritise animal welfare.

White tigers

Many zoos, for example, are still devoted to breeding [white tigers](#). Only two years ago the Czech [Liberec Zoo](#) celebrated the birth of two white cubs, that were transferred to Pont-Scorff Zoo in France in July this year. This rare variation of the Bengal tiger has distinctive white fur colouring with pale chocolate stripes and mesmerising blue eyes. The

extraordinary coating results from a genetic mutation, which as a recessive trait is expressed only if both parents carry the mutation.

This inclined the zoos to practice inbreeding, often pairing off siblings in hope for a white-furred offspring. All 250 white tigers in captivity today [are related](#), having a common ancestor captured in 1951 – the wild-caught cub named Mohan that was the pride of Maharaja of Rewa, an Indian royalty who was determined to breed these rare wild cats. After several failed attempts, in 1957 the first white cubs were born in India from the union of Mohan and his daughter Radha.

In 1960, the [Smithsonian Institution](#) procured one of the female cubs for \$10,000. Today she would be worth eight times more. While the royal ancestry of this exotic feline vividly stimulated the imagination of American zoogoers, her main task at the National Zoo was to produce more offspring of her kind. The demand for these extremely rare animals often justifies pairing off closely related tigers, even though inbred animals are prone to acquiring crippling defects including shortened legs, kidney problems and crossed eyes, as well as psychological issues.



Captive tigers in the Czech Republic. Credit: Czech Customs Authority

Tinder tigers

The tigers slaughtered in the Czech Republic were not bred in zoos but in a private facility, yet their story should put [captive breeding](#) in general into question.

Today, tigers are bred outside of their natural habitats for a variety of reasons: for zoos, exhibitions, circuses performances or as pets. Tiger cubs are often displayed in petting zoos and subjected to the cruel practice of declawing. Adult tigers are drugged to pose in photos. People still see these extremely dangerous carnivores as proxies for luxury and sexiness.

But hopefully attitudes are changing. In 2017, [Tinder](#) launched a campaign to encourage its users to stop posting "tiger selfies". And most recently, due to public pressure, China was [forced to reinstate](#) a [newly lifted ban](#) on using tiger bone and rhino horn in medicine.

Of course we need to pay attention to the conservation of today's wild tigers threatened by habitat loss due to human activity, poaching, loss of prey and the swelling human-wildlife conflicts. But more attention should be paid to the plight of the enormous captive population of [tigers](#) across the world.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Captive breeding has a dark side – a disturbing Czech discovery of trafficked tiger body parts (2018, November 26) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-11-captive-dark-side-disturbing-czech.html>

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