

Big cats threaten public safety, says Zoocheck



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By Nate Smelle

With many residents of the municipality still uneasy with the idea of allowing a roadside zoo to operate on Peterson Road, council recently heard from two of the spokespeople advocating on behalf of the community to keep big cats and other dangerous exotic animals out of Hastings Highlands. The delegation consisted of Rob Laidlaw of the animal protection organization Zoocheck, and Joshua James one of the neighbours living adjacent to big cat/exotic animal owners Mark and Tammy Drysdale on Peterson Road.

James began the delegation, voicing the concerns for public safety he and many of his neighbours share.

Since opening a bed and breakfast three years ago on his property across the road from where the Drysdales are now planning to open a roadside zoo, James said he has hosted some 400 guests from all over the world. Highlighting the threats to public safety a business featuring big cats such as lions and tigers as their main attraction would pose for the community, he said he can no longer operate his accommodation-based business in good conscience. If the municipality allows a business using lions and tigers to operate in a residential area, which he describes as a "primarily retired community," James told council he will not be the only resident on Peterson Road to move or sell their home. Seeing and experiencing the stress and anxiety this issue is causing the residents on Peterson Road has been heartbreaking, he said.

"Nobody on the road should have to conform to a way of life that puts their family at risk, hinders their ability to hunt their own land, and forces them to live in fear of one of these animals escaping," said James. "The fact of the matter is that nobody would want to live across the street from this. None of you would want to hear lions and tigers roaring all day, and none of you would want to walk outside your home at night wondering what could be lurking in the tree line."

Noting that Grand Bend's council passed a bylaw banning big cat ownership in just eight days when the Drysdales tried to open a zoo in the municipality, James said he finds it hard to believe that Hastings Highlands council is willing to allow such a business without having any means to control how it will be run.

"I feel like we are rolling the Jumanji dice on behalf of the residence in this area, and there is no Robin Williams to save us," declared James. "I don't care how much council has been convinced that tigers can be domesticated. When you are face-to-face with a 600-pound killing machine and you are not the one that raised it, you better believe that they are a threat and you're prey. If you believe otherwise, I would urge council to be the first to step in the cage when these animals are situated. We all know you

wouldn't, so why would you be willing to risk everyone else's safety that lives in this area.?

According to James, the only way for council to prevent the threat and keep the community safe is by passing an exotic animal bylaw that bans the keeping of big cats as pets.

Rob Laidlaw of Zoocheck agrees. For the past 41 years Laidlaw has dealt with issues arising from exotic animal ownership. Understanding the threat big cats pose for the community where they are located, he said a bylaw that prohibits the keeping of dangerous animals, or at least restricts the circumstances in which they can be kept is a ?key tool in protecting the public.?

?Ontario does not currently license or control the keeping of exotic wildlife in captivity, and that means that any person can acquire exotic wild animals, often for next to nothing, and keep them pretty much however they want,? explained Laidlaw. ?To address wild animal issues most municipalities who have dealt with this passed some form of exotic animal bylaw, some of them quite quickly. A bylaw can protect the safety of residents, prevent a range of nuisance problems, save taxpayer dollars, and give municipalities some control over what goes on within their own boundaries. It is very important to note that no one else is going to address these issues. It is currently up to you, and these issues are like easier to deal with upfront rather than retroactively.?

Informing council that municipalities such as Carlow Mayo, Bancroft, Tweed, Quinte West, and Belleville already have an exotic animal bylaw in place, Laidlaw suggested that Hastings Highlands use the existing legislation to establish its own bylaw. Acknowledging that lions and tigers are among the most dangerous animals kept in captivity in Ontario, he said these animals are especially dangerous when they are kept by people without professional training. According to big cat experts such as Ron Tilson, Laidlaw said the risk of these animals causing human injury or death is highest when this risk is underestimated. He explained further that the level of risk increases when lions tigers are kept as pets, used as props for photographs, or when people come in direct contact with them to feed, clean cages, or pet them, with or without a cage separating the people in the tigers.

?You see this right across the province,? Laidlaw said. ?Many exotic animal owners downplay, dismiss, or don't seem to recognize the risk their animals pose. They come to believe they are in control, and that they can predict how their animals will behave, and that can be deadly. An animal can respond the same way 99 times in a row, and then the 100th time that animal may injure or kill somebody. That has happened in Ontario.?

Whether or not council decides to ban big cats and other dangerous exotic animal ownership in the municipality, Laidlaw ended the delegation by again urging council to establish a bylaw so they can have at least some level of control over the situation moving forward.