

Should I Support This Sanctuary?

All of us have been grabbed at one time or another by a heart-wrenching story that tempts us to open our wallets to help a deserving animal or sanctuary. But how can you tell if the sanctuary in question is really deserving? We all know to go to websites like Charity Navigator to assess financial health and transparency, but how can you tell the animal's health and well-being is a priority for the facility as well?

What to ask:

- Are they a non-profit organization (501c3)?
- Do they provide place of refuge only for abused, neglected, unwanted, impounded, abandoned, orphaned or displaced wildlife in need of lifetime care?
- Do they use animals for any commercial purposes?
- Do they buy, sell, trade, auction, lease, loan animals?
- Do they allow or encourage breeding of their animals (except as part of an American Zoo and Aquarium Association (AZA) Species Survival Plan (SSP))?
- Do they allow public contact with wild animals?
- If they allow public visits, is an educational message delivered?
- Do they take their animals off property except for medical necessities or emergencies?
- Are they accredited by GFAS (Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries), ASA (American Sanctuary Association) or AZA?

Look at the organization's social media and website. Read all you can and look at the photos. Do the enclosures look well-lit, airy, sturdy, clean and dry? Are there pictures of people posing with animals? Do they offer opportunities to pet wild animals or pose for pictures with them? Do you see photos of baby animals that may have been born at the facility? Do the animals look healthy? Does the facility promote "conservation breeding" but isn't part of an AZA SSP? Do they promote white tigers as a "rare species" needing conservation? All of these warrant a closer look.

Check with the USDA. Every facility that displays wild animals to the public is required to have a USDA exhibitor's license. Look up their license to make sure it is active and check out their inspection reports on the USDA's Animal Care Search Tool Website (<https://acis.aphis.edc.usda.gov/ords/f?p=116:203:0::NO>). When reading the reports, keep in mind that indirect noncompliance items (NCIs) are those that do NOT affect an animal's health. Direct NCIs reflect conditions that DO affect an animal's health. Critical NCIs include direct NCIs, and other serious compliance issues (e.g. refusing inspections, operating without a license, falsified paperwork). One or two indirect NCIs that are corrected by the next inspection should not necessarily raise any red flags. Multiple, repeated indirect NCIs, and any direct or critical NCIs should raise a red flag and warrant a second look, especially if there are multiple or repeated direct or critical NCIs.

Why do these questions matter? Some of the answers are obvious – we give to non-profits because we want our money to go to the care of the animals, and not to make a CEO rich; clean, dry enclosures are healthier for the animals; etc. But what about the rest?

Source of the Animals and Commitment to Lifetime Care – IFAW believes that true sanctuaries provide lifetime care to animals that have no place else to go. Animals that are purchased for exhibit purposes or are surplus to zoo breeding programs do not usually fit this description. Buying animals or providing a home for surplus breeding animals creates a cycle that encourages more sales and more breeding of animals for which there are no homes. It also reduces the amount of space available for the abused, neglected, unwanted and displaced animals that truly need sanctuary.

Commercial Use of Animals – Large carnivores can make an organization big bucks, but almost always at a big cost to the animal. Organizations that buy, sell, auction, lease or otherwise trade in animals as a commodity often have profit as their motive, not good animal welfare. Buying animals, even to “rescue” them from bad situations, supports the commercial trade in wild animals – a trade that is at the very root of the need for wild animal sanctuaries.

Breeding – True sanctuaries are hard to find and always have limited space due to financial, staffing or space restrictions. Allowing or encouraging animals to breed and fill up those limited spaces means that the sanctuary must turn away other animals in need. Sanctuaries that promote breeding of captive big cats for claimed “conservation purposes” should be closely vetted. The value of these programs is questionable, as the majority of captive big cats outside of AZA zoos are hybrids of different subspecies and as such have no conservation value.

White Tigers – White tigers are not a breed or subspecies of tiger. They are Bengal or Amur tigers with a color mutation caused by a recessive gene. Because animals with this color mutation are rare, white tigers are often inbred to continue creating more. This inbreeding has resulted in a host of genetic defects including cleft palate, spinal deformities and mental impairment. The continued inbreeding of these animals serves no conservation purpose, and the AZA has banned breeding of white tigers in accredited facilities.

Public Contact – Large carnivores are wild animals and they are dangerous. Allowing public or staff contact with adult big cats and other large carnivores does three things: 1) It puts at risk the individual standing next to that animal, 2) it promotes a message that these animals are not dangerous, feeding demand for trade in these animals, and 3) it puts at risk the health of the animal as they are often drugged or trained using abusive methods to allow this type of contact. What about the babies? Not only are these babies taken from their mothers to be handled for photo ops, resulting in stress, exhaustion and dehydration, but the USDA limits handling of big cats to a narrow window of only 4 weeks of their lives. Facilities that allow public interaction with baby animals must constantly breed their animals to create more babies for public handling.

Educational Message – A good sanctuary will educate the public on the trade in wild animals and why sanctuaries are needed. Educational signs, talks and tours should include information on why animals end up in sanctuaries and what can be done to prevent more animals from ending up there.

Accreditation – Accreditation or verification from respected organizations like GFAS, ASA, or AZA indicates that the facility meets certain standards in animal care and sustainable management. It also means that the sanctuary is periodically assessed by a third party who has done the work for you to make sure the sanctuary is doing things right. The Zoological Association of America (ZAA) is an accrediting body, however they promote commercial trade and breeding of privately held captive wildlife and therefore ZAA accreditation is not consistent with IFAW’s concept of a legitimate sanctuary. It’s important to note that there are great sanctuaries that are not accredited, so the lack of accreditation should not, on its own, be taken as an indicator that something is amiss.

Every sanctuary should be evaluated based on these principles but with the understanding that there is not one proven formula to create a successful, true sanctuary. Every facility is unique with its own set of resources and challenges and these must be taken into account. Additionally, many facilities are in varying stages of development, and it is important to recognize willingness and efforts to advance in both practices and ideology.