

Wild Animals Aren't Pets

In many states, anyone with a few hundred dollars and a yen for the unusual can own a python, a black bear or a big cat as a "pet." For \$8,000 a baby white tiger can be yours. Sometimes, wild animals are even offered free: "Siberian tigers looking for a good home," read an ad in the Animal Finder's Guide.

Until this week, though, few people knew how easy it is to own a wild animal as a pet. Or how potentially tragic.

But just as a 2007 raid on property owned by football star Michael Vick laid bare the little known and cruel world of dogfighting, a story that unfolded in a small Ohio city this week opened the public's eyes to the little known, distressing world of "exotic" pets. We're not suggesting that people who own these animals are cruel. Many surely love them. But public safety, common sense and compassion for animals all dictate the same conclusion: Wild animals are not pets.

If that weren't already obvious, it became more so on Tuesday, when collector Terry Thompson opened the cages on his Zanesville farm, springing dozens of lions, tigers, bears and other wild creatures before killing himself. With animals running loose and darkness closing in, authorities arrived with no good choices to protect the public. They shot all but a handful of the animals as the nation watched, transfixed and horrified.

Owners of "exotic" animals claim they rarely maim or kill. But is the death rate really the point?

In 2009, a 2-year-old Florida girl was strangled by a 12-foot-long Burmese python, a family pet that had gotten out of its aquarium. That same year, a Connecticut woman was mauled and disfigured by a neighbor's pet chimp. Last year, a caretaker was mauled to death by a bear owned by a Cleveland collector. This week in Zanesville, it was the animals themselves, including 18 rare Bengal tigers, who became innocent victims.

Trade in these beautiful creatures thrives in the USA, where thousands are bred and sold through classified ads or at auctions centered in Indiana, Missouri and Tennessee. There's too little to stop it.

A 2003 federal law, which forbids the interstate transport of certain big cats, has stopped much of the trade on the Internet, according to the Humane Society of the U.S. But monkeys, baboons and other primates were left out, and measures to plug that hole have twice stalled in Congress.

Only collectors who exhibit animals need a federal license. Those, such as Thompson, who keep the animals as "pets" are left alone, unless states intervene. And many do not. Eight — Alabama, Idaho, Ohio, Nevada, North Carolina, South Carolina, West Virginia and Wisconsin — have no rules, and in 13 others the laws are lax, according to Born Free USA, which has lobbied for years for stronger laws.

After the Cleveland bear-mauling, then-Ohio Gov. Ted Strickland issued an emergency order to ban possession of wild animals. While it exempted current owners, Thompson might have been forced to give up his menagerie because he had been cited for animal cruelty. We'll never know. Strickland's successor, John Kasich, let the order expire.