

# THE FIGHT OVER "EXOTICS" GOES ON

Roger Caras



Mr. Caras with Yawning Lion

The author with a 500 pound lion "Movie star." Note that the cats' canines have been removed. Even after this mutilation a cat of this size is capable of inflicting fatal injury. This lion "behaved all of his life" and died at the age of seven.

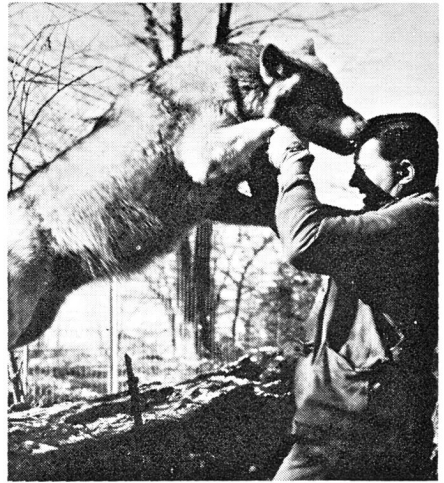
80% of the world's wildlife **could** vanish in the next quarter of a century. Think of that! Twenty-five years to oblivion for three quarters of our wildlife. There are 889 species and subspecies of birds and mammals alone (plus many fish, reptiles and amphibians) on the endangered species list. Of these, 22 are cats. Mark that point well — 22 forms of wild felines are in immediate danger of extinction.

There **may be** as many as 25 Eastern Panther left in New Brunswick. There **may be** as many as 100 Florida cougar left — although the recent double tragedy in the Everglades of drought and fire has probably reduced that number. The Asiatic Lion once roamed across Asia, the Middle East and Southern Europe. There were tens of thousands of them. There are 162 left. The Barbary Leopard is down to between 50 and 100 specimens. There are fewer than 400 Snow Leopards in the world, there are probably no more than 15 Javan Tigers. Both the Persian and Balinese Tigers were listed as extinct as of 1969 and the Siberian Tiger is down below 200. The Caspian Tiger is below 1000. There are many fewer Bengal Tigers than was

One would like to think that enough has been said, enough has gone into print about the role of the exotic pet owner in the endangerment of species to bring to an end the traffic in these animals. Unfortunately, this is not so. Conservationists and humanitarians have been barely able to scratch the surface of the problem. And it is a problem that is becoming more profound each year.

Somewhere between 5,000 and 10,000 wild felines reside in American **homes** today. There are lions, tigers, leopards, jaguars, ocelots, margays, cheetahs and perhaps a half a dozen other species among these unfortunate creatures. The problems thus created are very far reaching.

Dr. S. Dillon Ripley, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, has gone on record with the dire prophecy that between 75% and



The author with two wild acquaintances

Jackie, a six month old mountain lion, owned by Boston Children's Zoo. She was the model for the puma in the book **PANTHER** (Little Brown 1970) and a very well behaved cat, raised in captivity, but mutilated her keeper in an accident that occurred without intent or warning.

A 135 pound Canadian timber wolf "Homer," who was the model for the wolf in the book **THE CUSTER WOLF** (Little Brown 1965). Wolves are popular with the exotic pet trade because they are available and inexpensive. They're unsatisfactory however for they can't be house-broken.

believed as recently as five years ago. All tigers, everywhere? Probably fewer than 2,500 — possibly many fewer. The Spanish Lynx — under 150. The Cheetah? Extinct in India, virtually if not totally extinct in all of Asia and going steadily downhill in Africa. The jaguar is reportedly being rapidly thinned out in many traditional areas.

In a word, the cats of the world face annihilation. And many different factors are playing a part in this tragic picture.

Habitat destruction and pressure from agriculture and animal husbandry are principal factors. Some trophy hunting, certainly, has played a role and the insidiously evil traffic in exotic furs has certainly applied great pressure. It took three tigers (out of fewer than 2,500 in the world) to cover Gina Lollabridgida's backside in one of her maxi coats. As many as eighteen to twenty leopards may have to die to make a **single** coat. That is because five or six **good** skins are required. For six **good** skins as many as twelve cats may have to be trapped or shot. Of those twelve a certain percentage will be female and some of them will leave cubs to starve. That is an insupportable form of attrition.

However, the trade in exotic pets is a factor, too. It simply is not possible for the cat "lover" who insists on owning wild cats to separate himself from this tragic picture of extinction. He is as **guilty** as the

trophy hunter and the lady who insists on a cheetah coat or a leopard pants suit. The fact that the cat "lover" has his or her cat alive in an apartment somewhere does not mean a very real contribution is not being made to the extinction of all wild cats. As far as nature goes, as far as ecology and balance within an exotic ecosystem is concerned the cat in a cage or an apartment, no matter how much it is loved, is dead. And a dead cat is poor proof of love.

Just as the leopard coat on the back of an aging actress requires a disproportionate number of cat deaths so does the wild cat in the home. It has been estimated on very good evidence that for every ocelot or margay in a home in America today, as many as nine or ten had to die in shipment. Further, most captive cats live very short lives and are constantly being replaced by frustrated owners. One New York woman boasts endlessly that her margay is now eight years old. She fails to tell most of her listeners that this margay is her third. Neither of her first two lived to be a year old. Taking the mortality-in-shipment factor into account, for this woman to have a margay as a pet in her New York City apartment required the death of **at least** thirty other wild cats! We must say **at least** because no one can estimate the number of cats killed in capture. In fact, for this lady to own her margay **forty or more margays may have died**. There is just no way of separating exotic cat ownership from the plight of the world's wildlife. And we call this **love**?

We often hear the patently absurd argument that exotic cat owners are contributing to the **survival** of species by removing them from dangerous environments and breeding them in captivity. Certainly captive breeding programs have been essential to the survival of some wild animals and will be for many more in the future. But, these are breeding programs supported by international cooperation between large zoos and institutions, **not**, I emphatically repeat **not** by private individuals. The Przewalski's Horse, the European Bison, Pere David's Deer — these are animals that survive because of zoos. In the future the Arabian Oryx (with the stud book in Phoenix, Arizona) and the Siberian Tiger (with the stud book in Prague) will be added to that list — and many more in the years ahead. But, **not** through the efforts of the exotic pet owner. How many exotic cat owners do you know who have returned cats to the wilds of Africa, Asia and South America?

Recently a very poor television show was shown purporting to give a contemporary picture of zoos around the world. Although done by the prestigious National Geographic Society the show was a fabric of half-truths. One sequence showed the large and famous Zoo-at-Harrod's — the pet shop in London's Harrod's Department Store. The narration stated that conservationists come to Harrod's to buy rare animals (and they **do** sell rare animals there) so that they can breed them and help them to survive. That is not even a half-truth. That is an untruth. Wealthy people buy rare animals in Harrod's so that they can attract attention to themselves — attention they could not otherwise get. Not one in a thousand of them even try to breed their

pet. Most people who buy such animals are so disgusted when they find what they have gotten themselves into that they quickly dispose of them. The situation is no different in the United States than in England. The legend persists that the people who order these animals are helping them to survive. **Exactly** the opposite is true.

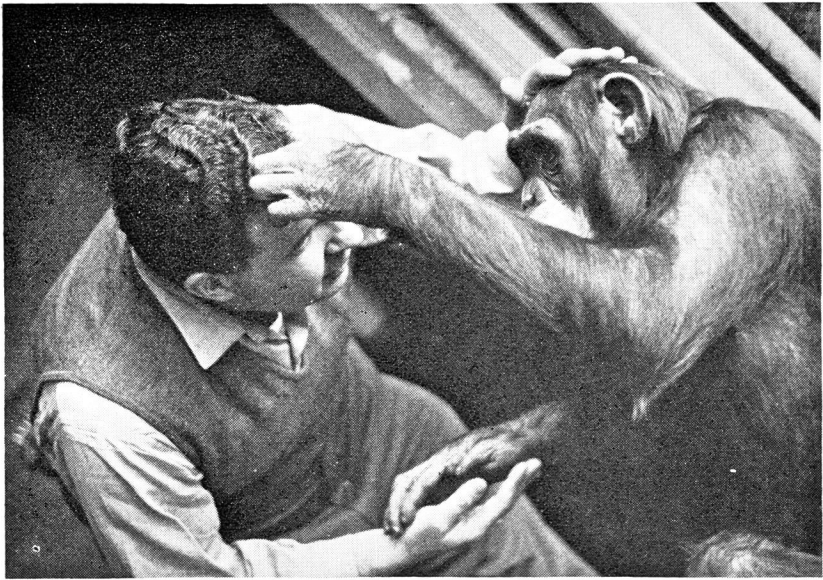
A case in point is the Cheetah. **No private owner** of a cheetah is known to have successfully bred his pet. In fact, captive cheetahs have only been bred a half dozen times in history. If, then, they cannot be bred by private owners, and if they are in fact vanishing from the wild, what is the justification for cheetah ownership. There is none. None at all except incredible selfishness and self-delusion bordering on self-hypnosis. At this moment I personally know of six private homes with cheetahs in them. There probably aren't more than six cheetahs left in all of Asia! Scandalous!

A fatuous argument often heard is that the animal was already in a pet shop and therefore no harm was done by buying it. That, unfortunately, is specious in the extreme. Dealers do not keep large stocks of jungle cats. They are expensive to feed, troublesome to house and the mortality rate in captivity is far too high for financial comfort. There is, though, a regular chain down which orders can be sent when a cat is sold.

Let us say that the pet dealer in an average American city orders an ocelot or a cheetah from a wholesaler or importer. He holds it for a few days to attract customers to his shop, and indeed word does get around quickly. After selling a lot of paraphernalia that has been displayed for impulse buying on the part of people drawn in by his cat or a few monkeys, he sells the cat. His profit from the transaction inspires him to order another. The outfit in Florida or the Carolinas who shipped the cat also makes a profit and places an order with the exporter in the country of origin. No one holds such fragile stock. Before long a trapper is at work. He may be a hunter who gets young cats by shooting a mother and taking her cubs. One way or another, the cat taken out of the pet shop will bring about the death of at least ten more cats. That is the work of a "so called" cat "lover."

If you do see a wild cat in a pet shop call in the police or A.S.P.C.A. Go to the authorities and register a complaint against the owner of the shop. It is almost certainly illegal to sell such animals in your town. If it is not then make a test case and bring action to get such a law enacted. Go to a local newspaper and enlist their support.

The big cats, even the smaller wild cats do not make satisfactory pets. They can be tamed — and I have worked with any number of them myself, all the way up to 650 pound tigers. But their reflexes cannot be tamed — ever! Exotic cats do not "revert" to the wild for they are never anything but wild. It is just that they are sometimes pleasant although wild. A well-fed, well-cared for cat of any size can be perfectly pleasant for a time unless frightened or frustrated in some basic pursuit. However, that cat has reflexes. At any moment it can explode into action and if the animal is large the action can be large.



Roger Caras with Chimpanzee

This animal is a common commodity on the Exotic Pet Market. Yet there is no more dangerous animal once it reaches sexual maturity. They have enormous strength and unpredictable and explosive tempers. The author here shown with a fully mature male feels this is the most dangerous position he has ever placed himself in with an animal.

We once had a mountain lion living with us for a week — a cat I was using on television to plead the cause of vanishing American wildlife. It was fine although destructive to furniture. A few weeks after going back to the zoo it was being carried by its keeper — the person it still adores above all others on this planet. For some reason it thought it was being dropped and struck out. It tore the man's ear off. It is still a lovely cat. Less than a week ago I sat beside its cage stroking it through the bars while it licked my hand, rubbed against it and purred. Yet, in a moment of reflexive action, it mutilated a man who weighed almost 225 pounds. Three years ago a leopard killed a man who had raised it from birth. It was playing. Cats do not always remember the length of their teeth, the edge on their claws or the strength of their slap. When a 500 pound cat forgets, the results can be devastating.

Until you have seen a leopard or a lion sharpen its claws on the arm of a couch you have not seen devastation. Until you have seen an ocelot climb the drapes you have not seen a mess. Until you have smelled a home where a male cat of a hundred and fifty pounds resides you have not smelled trouble. And until your cat unexpectedly jumps a neighbor — which a friend's large cat recently did — you have no idea what legal hell can be. In the case of my friend, her pet of six

years jumped a neighbor and one of the fourteen injuries inflicted required 28 stitches alone. My friend is no longer friendly with her neighbor. Their lawyers are quite well acquainted, however.

Not all wild cats do all of these things. Some will even use a cat box, some will be kind to furniture, some will never explode into violent action, but almost all will do one or all of these things eventually. They happen often enough statistically so that the most exotic cats are not held by their original owner. They get taken back to the shop, they get given to a neighbor, they get (heaven help them) placed in a roadside animal slum or "come-on" for a gas station or diner — one way or another most end up very badly indeed. Most real zoos won't take them because they don't have room or they are afraid of disease. Very few wild cats who finally do make it into a home live out their life in contentment. For most, by far for most, their lot is one of near-agonies of spirit if not body.

All of the humane societies, all of the conservation groups and virtually every zoo in America has come out against the traffic (racket!) in exotic pets. Yet people persist. Why? The most reasonable explanation I have heard was put forth by a friend of mine — a psychiatrist. It is his opinion that it is becoming increasingly difficult for people to be "themselves" in this world of ours. Individual identity is very hard to come by when your immediate neighbors number in the millions, when the parkways are bumper-to-bumper and when the lines for everything get longer by the day. One way to find identity apparently, is to appear different even if only in your own eyes. And one way to appear different, certainly, is to have a tiger or a lion around the house. It is a way of calling out to people, "Look at me. I'm not just anybody — Look!!! I'm very different. Please! See me! Don't pass me by!"

I believe this to be so. I believe most owners of wild animals are essentially exhibitionists. That, I hold, is not reason enough to further decimate the world's wildlife profile and inflict suffering on beautiful, and increasingly rare animals. There are other ways for people to put on a show — by their clothing, by their hair, **but not by their pets.**

There is no excuse for us to "pussy-foot" (forgive me that pun) around this subject any longer. Despite the pleadings of humanitarians and conservationists, despite the warnings of law-enforcement agencies, the pet shop industry continues to cater to a lunatic fringe among the purported cat lovers of America. Animals whose genetic potential is desperately needed in wild places or in bonafide zoological collections are being taken, with a horrific mortality rate, and brought into homes so that the people there can feel a sense of identity. The world can no longer afford this luxurious waste of life and life force. The people who willingly and knowingly help to deplete the wildlife of the world can no longer be allowed the luxurious title of **animal lover.** The person who buys a wild jungle cat today is not one inch better than the lady who will buy cheetah boots or a jaguar coat, and not one wit better than the most destructive poacher. They are on a

plane with the trophy hunter — only each kills his own cat in his own way. If we are to save anything of what is left we can take no other view.



Caras and a Siberian Tiger

This 600 pound tiger was the model for the "hero" of the book *SARANG* (Little Brown.) This very well trained cat has appeared in many films and on many television shows but is far too large to trust in the hands of any one not experienced in handling large, wild animals. This mature animal is naturally calm but potentially explosive.

Nature has provided this planet of ours with few blessings as wholly rewarding as the cat family. In many ways cats play important roles in the lives of men. The great wild cats are the mind-stretchers. What child has not made the transition from demand-reading to recreation-reading with books about animals? A tiger anywhere is a magnet for the imaginations of adults and children everywhere. It would be a tragedy of immeasurable proportions if these cats vanish from this planet. Did I say "if these cats vanish"? Strike that phrase and read it "when these cats vanish!"

There can be no getting away from the fact that people who call themselves "cat lovers" are among those actively involved in bringing this tragedy into being. At one time the inroads of the pet industry — the **exotic** pet industry — were not very high in proportion to the cat population and the evils which afflicted it. Now it is different. As the wild populations sink rapidly **each** and every cat becomes a

precious reservoir of genetic potential. When there are a hundred cats of a species left (there are fewer than that of some forms) five cats held by exhibitionists represent five percent of that species' chances for survival. It didn't matter all that much — except on humanitarian grounds — when the population of that form numbered in the thousands. But, that day will never return. No one making this active contribution to the ultimate tragedy can with any justification think of himself as anything but a cat-hater. That is the sad but inescapable truth.

Once upon a time this subject was fairly academic. We had time to discuss it, to moralize, to intellectualize. But, no longer. The alarm has sounded. Before many of the people who will read this article have their first gray hair most of the wild cats of this planet may be extinct. We cannot allow this to happen. Here, at least, are a few contributions all of us can make:

- (1) Refuse to wear any bits and pieces of dead wild cats. Obviously.
- (2) Further, openly boycott and harass any store selling chopped up wild cats.
- (3) Refuse to support the exotic pet racket. Obviously.
- (4) Further, openly boycott, openly harass any emporium offering exotic cats for sale.
- (5) Push for laws against exotic pets in your community. Do not be fooled into believing this will lead to laws against all pets. Unless you are sailing on a ship of fools your community can distinguish between a Seal Point and a Siberian.
- (6) Spread the word. Refuse to admire a friend's margay. Tell them how you feel. Discourage any would-be buyer. Make it a distinct social hazard to own such a bedeviled creature just as it is becoming hazardous to wear wild cat bits and pieces. Help create the new consciousness.

Allow me to leave you with a simple question. If the tigers, leopards, cheetahs and jaguars of the world cannot turn to the readers of The Cat Fanciers' Association's Year Book, in heaven's name to whom can they turn? Think about it.

#### **Biographical Data**

An Author, Broadcaster, Lecturer, Naturalist, Ecologist.

Author of the following books: "Antarctica: Land of Frozen Time," "Dangerous to Man," "Wings of Gold," "The Throwbacks," "The Custer Wolf," "North American Mammals," "Last Chance on Earth," "Monarch of Deadman Bay," "Sarang," "Source of the Thunder," "Panther!," "Death as a Way of Life." Books now published in ten countries. Also author of scores of magazine articles. Author of the column "Our Only World" (nationally syndicated newspaper column) - Ecology. Author of the column "Pets and Wildlife" in Family Circle Magazine. Has his own national radio show (CBS Network - 247 stations). Also called "Pets and Wildlife." Appears regularly as the "House" naturalist on NBC-TV's "Today Show." Many, many appearances on Johnnie Carson, Dick Cavett, Mike Douglas, etc. Member of the Board of Directors, "Humane Society of the United States." Member of the Board of Directors, "The Fund for Animals." Chairman, Zoo and Wildlife Committee, Morris Animal Foundation. Fellow, Royal Society of Arts, London.