

Statement from experts regarding otter handling at Tiger Safari

Animal welfare and behavior consultant Jay Pratte, MAIS, and Christie Eddie, an animal care consultant, reviewed the video footage from Tiger Safari and provided the following statement to the HSUS:

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To Whom It May Concern:

We have reviewed the following video (animal encounter, 3-28-2021) of the solitary otter used in public interactions at Tiger Safari Zoo, Tuttle, OK.

The Asian small-clawed otter in the video is clearly exhibiting signs of significant distress, both in its vocalizations and behavior. The animal is visibly struggling against the handler and can be observed pulling away from and trying to evade members of the audience. When the distress vocalizations do not diminish, that handler covers the otter's face with her hand to attempt to muffle the sound. This is neither excitement nor social vocalizing. The handler physically restrains the animal throughout the encounter, ignoring the clear behavioral expressions of distress. The handling and encounter are distinctly aversive for this otter, and the handler and other staff present ignore the visible/audible distress and continue the encounter regardless. It is the responsibility of qualified caregivers to carefully observe animal behavior and provide appropriate outlets and responses to distress, while providing an environment encouraging expression of species-typical behaviors. Per the Association of Zoo's & Aquariums [AZA] Otter Care Manual, "*The individual animals involved are consistently maintained in a manner that meets their social, physical, behavioral, and nutritional needs.*"

Animals that are restrained for interactions can suffer from myopathy, and may experience respiratory distress, muscle impairment or wasting, stiffness/spasms, and in severe cases myopathies can be fatal. [Rosenhagen] The otter interactions in the video negatively impact the animal's welfare. "*Animal and human health, safety, and welfare are never compromised.*" [AZA]

Otters are carnivores capable of inflicting severe bite injuries to humans. Both the handler and audience members are at risk in these interactions, particularly since the otter is exhibiting clear signals of agitation and distress. The risk to the people involved is significant; hand-rearing and tractability do not diminish an animal's natural defense mechanisms. *"It should be kept in mind that otters are capable of inflicting severe bites, particularly sexually mature females, and have been known to turn on their trainers. In general, otters should be trained in a protected contact situation (i.e., keeper and animal should be separated by a mesh barrier)."* [AZA] It is clear that the handlers' priority is to continue with the interactions, despite the animal clearly communicating its distress and discomfort.

The handler also mentions that the otter is the only one that they have. This is an exceptionally social species; lack of appropriate social structure and interference with the ability to engage in species-typical social behaviors will result in both acute and chronic psychological distress. *"Careful consideration should be given to ensure that otter group structures and sizes meet the social, physical, and psychological well-being of those animals and facilitate species-appropriate behaviors."* [AZA]

Mustelids have been documented as susceptible to Covid-19; the handlers and guests are mostly unmasked, no hand sanitizer is visible, and the handler can be heard telling audience members that they do not need their masks. Per the USDA Animal Care Tech Note, Guidance for Zoos and Captive Wildlife Facilities: Protecting Susceptible Animals From SARS-CoV-2 Infection, *"Animals may be best protected by: Asking the public to wear a face mask at the facility; ensuring that members of the public cannot come within 6 feet of nonhuman primates, nondomestic big cats, and all species of mustelids (e.g., ferrets, mink, otters); suspending hands-on encounters with any of the SARS-CoV-2-susceptible animals."* This otter is being placed in a high-risk situation surrounded by guests and face-to-face with an unmasked handler.

It is our expert opinion that otters should not be used in public contact encounters, and in this particular instance that the otter is enduring both acute and chronic physical and psychological distress, significantly impacting the

animal's health and welfare. *“Otters are not recommended as animal handling or off-site education animals.”* [AZA]

References:

AZA Small Carnivore TAG 2009. Otter (Lutrinae) Care Manual. Association of Zoos and Aquariums, Silver Spring, MD.

https://assets.speakcdn.com/assets/2332/otter_care_manual2.pdf

U.S. Department of Agriculture Animal Care Tech Note, APHIS 41-35-078, April 2021

https://www.aphis.usda.gov/animal_welfare/downloads/ac-tech-note-covid-animals.pdf

“Capture Myopathy”

https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.nwrawildlife.org/resource/resmgr/symp_2020/handouts/Rosenhagen_Vet_Th_Capture_My.pdf

Jay Pratte, MAIS

Pratte is an animal behavior and welfare consultant for the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, Bear Care Group, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries, the Humane Society of the United States, Indiana's Attorney General office, and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. He holds a Bachelor of Science degree in zoology and behavioral psychology from the University of Alberta, with a Masters of Interdisciplinary Studies in zoo and aquarium leadership from George Mason University.

For three decades Pratte has worked with organizations across North America on improving animal welfare, including private sanctuaries, rehabilitation agencies, traveling circuses, government institutions and both accredited and non-accredited zoos. Pratte has mentored animal caregivers in China, Kenya, Romania, Scotland and Vietnam to assess management programs for animals under human care. Pratte regularly collaborates with international rescue and welfare agencies Animals Asia and Wildlife SOS, improving behavior-based management programs

and animal welfare for animals rescued from illegal trafficking or other human activities.

Pratte has published numerous papers on exotic animal care, welfare, behavior, and training. He is an adjunct professor at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, teaching courses and labs in Animal Behavior, as well as his signature Special Topics course, “Animal Welfare and Human Influence.” He regularly attends and hosts workshops, symposia, and conferences dedicated to improving animal care and welfare. Pratte is an expert federal witness in several high-profile Endangered Species Act cases, dedicated to strengthening protections for big cats and other exotic species.

Christie Eddie, Zoo Curator of Small Mammals

Eddie manages an extensive small mammal collection consisting of small carnivores, mustelids, primates, rodents and a variety of other species totaling more than 500 individual animals at a prominent Midwestern zoo. She has been an active animal care professional for over 25 years. She consults with Association of Zoos & Aquariums, United States Department of Agriculture and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals in her areas of expertise. She holds a Bachelor of Science in zoology from Iowa State University.

Eddie has served on several national advisory committees that focus on the care and management of small carnivores, prosimians, pygmy hippos, tapirs, and old and new world monkeys. During her many years of service, she has worked directly with three different species of otter, including Asian small-clawed otter, North American river otter and African spotted-neck otter, overseeing daily husbandry, welfare and breeding programs. She currently serves on the national zoo association’s Government Affairs Committee and chairs the association’s prosimian advisory committee. Through this committee work, Eddie collaborates with local, state and federal agencies, such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture, as well as the North American Primate Sanctuary Alliance, to assess the welfare of and ultimate placement of surrendered or confiscated wildlife.