

# Endangered Animals on the Loose

At 5:30 p.m. on Tuesday, October 19, 2011, Sheriff Matt Lutz of Muskingum County, Ohio, received the first of several 911 calls indicating that something was wrong at the private 73-acre Thompson wildlife preserve. These calls were not unusual. Terry and Marian Thompson, the property owners, were known exotic animal collectors. Described by friends and neighbors as somewhat reclusive, Mr. Thompson had faced a series of problems with law enforcement officers over taxes, gun permits, and animal safety issues. For the next several hours, 911 calls continued to come in with reports of wild animal sightings – including Bengal tigers, lions, bears, wolves and monkeys – along Zanesville’s roads, at local farms, and on other public and private properties. One woman reported to the 911 operator, “There’s a bear and a lion out. Right up behind us. They’re chasing Terry’s horses!”<sup>1</sup>

When deputy sheriffs arrived on the Thompson property just a few miles west of downtown Zanesville, they discovered a chaotic and bloody scene. Mr. Thompson, aged 62, lay dead in his driveway from a self-inflicted gunshot wound and the cages, previously holding the Thompson’s 56 exotic and endangered animals, were open. Deputy Sheriffs concluded that Thomson decided to “free” the animals before ending his life. Recognizing the danger to public safety, Sheriff Lutz ordered all roads near the property be shut down and requested that all Zanesville schools be closed the following day while steps were taken to control the situation. His next decision, however, outraged many animal rights activists and Americans across the country.

Describing the freed animals as “mature, very big, [and] aggressive” with “high potential for being dangerous to humans,” Lutz gave his deputies a shoot to kill order. “We are not talking about your normal everyday house cat or dog,” Lutz said. “These are 300-pound Bengal tigers that had to be put down. We could not have [these] animals running loose.”<sup>2</sup> By Wednesday afternoon deputy sheriffs had shot and killed 49 of the 56 animals, including the 18 endangered Bengal tigers, 17 lions, and 8 bears. Six of the 56 animals were spared through the use of tranquilizer darts; only one animal - a monkey - remained unaccounted for.

Many who opposed Lutz’s order said that more tranquilizer darts should have been used and the animals died needlessly. Will Travers, CEO and co-founder of the *Born Free Foundation* agrees but goes one step further, strongly objecting to private possession of exotic animals. “What happened in Ohio is appalling,” Travers said. “All those animals [were] imprisoned for no good reason .... All those wandering animals, confused by their sudden and unfathomable “freedom,” were shot dead as though they were alien invaders. None of that had to happen. Private possession of exotic animals is inexcusable and puts human lives at risk.”<sup>3</sup> Travers now actively campaigns to make private possession of exotic animals illegal.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Should state and local authorities do more to regulate private animal collections in order to ensure the safety of local citizens, as well as ensuring the safety and care of the animals collected?
2. Is it ethical for private citizens to maintain “exotic” or “endangered” animals on their private property?

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1 [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/20/us/police-kill-dozens-of-animals-freed-from-ohio-preserve.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/20/us/police-kill-dozens-of-animals-freed-from-ohio-preserve.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)

2 [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/10/19/zanesville-ohio-exotic-animals-killed- n\\_1019884.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/10/19/zanesville-ohio-exotic-animals-killed- n_1019884.html)

3 <http://www.cnn.com/2011/10/19/opinion/travers-escape-wild-animals-ohio>

