

PRESS RELEASE

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TIME TO COMPLETELY BAN SHOWS INVOLVING WILD ANIMALS IN SINGAPORE AND IMPROVE THE WELFARE OF ANIMALS IN CAPTIVITY

SINGAPORE 27 APRIL— The recent incidents at two of the establishments (Singapore Zoo and Night Safari) of the Wildlife Reserves Singapore (WRS) involving carnivores escaping and even attacking members of the public raises serious concerns, both in terms of public safety and animal welfare. The incidents involve the daytime escape of a jaguar at the Singapore Zoo and a serval attacking a member of the public during an animal show at the Night Safari.

In 2002, the Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority of Singapore (AVA) imposed a local ban on performing wild animals in traveling circuses. According to AVA's press release, "AVA is initiating this restriction on travelling circuses in the interest of public safety and animal welfare. AVA has been monitoring the incidences of mishaps and abuse associated with performing wild animal in traveling circuses in recent years. The number of such accidents has been increasing. In some cases, the accidents have resulted in serious injuries and death to both trainers and the public."

AVA's ban however did not include the performances involving wild animals at captive facilities in Singapore. In light of the recent attack by a serval during an animal show at a WRS's establishment, clearly AVA's rationale for the ban on performing wild animals in traveling circuses should be applied to WRS's establishments as well and the wild animal performances should be banned.

Animal attacks at WRS's establishments are not a new phenomenon. Past attacks include a chimpanzee biting into a girl's finger so deeply that it was almost severed and an elephant goring a keeper, puncturing his lungs and fracturing his ribs in 2001.

The recent escape at a WRS's establishment is also not an isolated event. A panther, hippopotamus, orang utan, tiger and chimpanzee have all previously escaped from their enclosures into the public area.

Dr Chris Furley from the Singapore Zoo states "its wrong to say the zoo is 100 per cent safe", indicating that there might be more escapes or attacks. WRS's establishments house large species of carnivore which are known to kill humans and receive more than one million visitors a year at their captive facilities. If they cannot guarantee the safety of their visitors, then maybe they should not be open to the public or perhaps they should not be allowed to house these large carnivores. These repeated escapes and attacks on the public by dangerous animals make it obvious that WRS has not learned from its past mistakes and has failed to identify the short-comings in its safety protocols.

WRS should also note that Section 289 of the Penal Code (Chapter 224, Statutes of the Republic of Singapore), states:

"Whoever knowingly or negligently omits to take such order with any animal in his possession as is sufficient to guard against any probable danger to human life, or any probable danger of grievous hurt from such animal, shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to 6 months, or with fine which may extend to \$1,000, or with both."

The regular escapes also raise doubts with regard to the welfare of these captive animals. Scientists from the Oxford University have concluded that the keeping of naturally wide ranging carnivores, such as polar bears and big cats (tigers, lions, jaguars, leopards, etc), should be either fundamentally improved or phased out. Scientists state that captive carnivores have difficulty adapting to life in zoos because they miss the variety of the wide ranges they roam in the wild.

Louis Ng, biologist and President of the Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (Acres), said “Perhaps the animals at the Singapore Zoo are trying to escape because they are seeking more stimulation, space and varied environment, which they are currently not being provided. Despite the current provision of enrichment, it is clear that the animals’ needs are not being met. It is also simply fortunate that these escapes and attacks have not resulted in more serious injuries and death. We might not be so lucky the next time.”

Acres, a local animal welfare charity, has written to AVA urging the government to extend the ban on performing wild animals in traveling circuses to include performances involving wild animals at WRS’s establishments.

Acres also appeals to WRS to take the initiative and end the use of wild animals in their shows and drastically improve the welfare of the animals currently in captivity at the Singapore Zoo and Night Safari.

Acres has also started an online petition (<http://www.petitiononline.com/zooshow/petition.html>) and we urge the public to sign the petition and support our call. The petition will be handed over to WRS.

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- Acres is a local animal welfare charity aimed at fostering respect and compassion for all animals. Acres’ approach to raising animal welfare issues is to focus on education and back up our advocacy with scientific clarity accrued through research. Using our findings, we will inform the public and work towards synergistic partnerships with the authorities and related parties to improve animal welfare.