

# LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE TIGER KING

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**“IF THE WAY THESE TIGERS ARE USED AND KEPT IS UNACCEPTABLE, THEN WHAT OTHER TYPES OF USE AND CARE SHOULD ALSO BE QUESTIONED?”**

**F**or those of you who have not yet had the chance to meet Joe Exotic, Doc Antle, Carole Baskin, and the other challenging characters in the popular Netflix documentary *Tiger King*, I encourage you to do so. Yes, the show is profane and disturbing, but it shines a powerful light upon issues relevant to all of us who are interested in animals and their role in our society. In media coverage of the documentary, commentators have called for a number of changes, including the obvious (for example, legal changes that prevent or restrict keeping exotic animals, such as British Columbia's Controlled Alien Species Regulation that restrict individuals from keeping tigers and some 1,200 other species). The skeptic may see this simply as a case where notoriety provides a soapbox from which pre-established positions can be advocated, but I suggest that *Tiger King* also provides an opportunity for viewers to reflect upon the broader issues related to animals. In particular, from this wreckage surrounding the private ownership of large cats there are at least three lessons about the human-animal relationship.

## LESSON 1—VULNERABLE PEOPLE ARE DRAWN TO ANIMALS

The employees working with the tigers are often social outsiders, sometimes dealing with drug abuse and poverty, suggesting that the more vulnerable in our society are perhaps especially drawn to the tigers. Despite their failings in adequately meeting the needs of the animals, the workers give much of their life (and—spoiler alert—sometimes limb) trying to care for the animals. Throughout the documentary, the workers attest to their desire to care for what they view as creatures in need, even when this makes them complicit in exploiting the animals. A related question, stemming from the wild popularity of this show as the world suffers the collective anxiety brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, is whether the draw of contact with animals is even greater when we experience social stress. In Vancouver at least, shelters for companion animals have experienced increased demand from adopters during the crisis. Thus lesson 1 is that even (and perhaps especially) when socially or emotionally vulnerable, humans have a great desire for some connection with animals. Acknowledging this, we are left with the question: how can we do a better job (for both animals and people) of responding to this need?

## LESSON 2—HUMANS DRAW POWER FROM ANIMALS

At least in part because of the great draw of these animals, those who control access to the tigers seem to be able to exert great power over those who wish to work with them. In all three of the animal facilities featured, the staff is portrayed as either underpaid or unpaid, and in some cases the owners are portrayed as controlling and verbally and perhaps otherwise abusive. In this way we see a very dark side of the ways in which humans use animals—initially as a lure to attract others, and then as a tool to extend the reach of their control. Thus lesson 2 is that people sometimes use access to animals to exert control over others, opening the door to abusive or perhaps otherwise

inappropriate relationships. Acknowledging this, we are left with the question: how can we put safeguards in place to reduce these risks?

## LESSON 3—HUMAN AND ANIMAL WELFARE ARE INTERTWINED

In recent years, the idea of “one health” (that is, that human health is connected to animal and environmental health) has been extended to “one welfare” (that is, that the quality of life of animals is related with the welfare of the people who care for them). In the documentary, the workers' living conditions are portrayed as being dirty, barren, and neglected, much like the conditions seemingly provided for the animals. As I write this, the news feeds are full of stories about the high rates of COVID-19 infections among slaughterhouse workers in the US, suggesting that the often-marginalized workers whose job it is to kill and process animals for our consumption are themselves working in conditions dangerous to their health. Indeed, once you are primed to look for it, the evidence for lesson 3, that the well-being of animals and their caregivers is intertwined, seems present all around us. The good news is that acknowledging this relationship provides another powerful rationale in advocating for improved standards of animal care.

Tigers, like the humans portrayed in *Tiger King*, are so incredible we can scarcely believe they exist. The exotic nature of the characters helps to draw us into the story, but like all good storytelling, the specifics serve to reveal more universal truths. Yes, there are powerful messages specific to tigers kept for display and as companions, and more broadly concerning the care, breeding, and trade of exotic animals. But perhaps our collective viewing of *Tiger King* can also trigger broader reflection on our relationship with animals. If the way these tigers are used and kept is unacceptable, then what other types of use and care should also be questioned? Other instances of keeping exotics, keeping animals for display, keeping animals in poor living conditions, breeding animals simply so we can use the offspring for our pleasure? And what about the marginalized and vulnerable people who care for animals—what support can be provided to improve their lives and the lives of animals in their care? If you've watched this show, you've suffered the evil. Now use it for good. Talk to others about these questions, and let's see what collective lessons can be drawn from this experience. **WCV**

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