

BIG CAT RESCUE'S

# BIG CAT TIMES

SUMMER 2020



PURRFECTION - OCELOT



## A MESSAGE FROM BCR PRESIDENT & EDITOR

*Jamie Veronica*

2020, go home, your drunk...

Who would have thought so much could change so fast. These last few months have been trying to say the least.

We closed our doors to the public due to the risks associated with the Covid-19 pandemic. The decision did not come lightly and was followed by even more upset. In order to be financially responsible for our commitment to the animals and not knowing how the ramifications of nationwide shutdown would affect donations we were left with no choice but to let half of our staff go.

Adding insult to injury everyone in the country was on lockdown when the inflammatory and salacious docu-garbage that is Tiger King was released. A clear win for the big cats was intentionally missed to feed the greed of the creators who we feel are no better than the cub breeders and dealers, profiting off the innocent. In the weeks following the show we were inundated with hateful people threatening us day and

night, gathering at our front gates to take selfies, deface our property, and harass our staff and volunteers.

Meanwhile we still have cats to take care of and orphaned and injured native bobcats to rescue. Despite so much to deal with we have risen above the uncertainty and hate. Our volunteer and intern force is strong and our small but mighty family of staff members have faced each new challenge with bravery and positivity. I could not be more proud.

So what does the future hold for Big Cat Rescue? We are committed to caring for the cats residing at the sanctuary for the remainder of their lives. We continue to rescue, rehabilitate and release wild Florida bobcats.

It is uncertain when we will be opening back up for tours. Because of this loss of tour revenue we had to trim expenses.

### THIS COULD BE YOUR LAST ISSUE OF THE BIG CAT TIMES

We are sending this print issue of the Big Cat Times to our full mailing list because we did not want it simply not to appear to people who enjoy receiving it in the mail. In order to offset the cost, going forward we will only be able to send the print issue to those who have donated \$25 or more in the prior 12 months.

The digital version will be sent to everyone else for whom we have an email address. Thanks very much for your support and your understanding during this difficult financial time.



Big Cat Rescue, one of the world's most effective accredited sanctuaries for exotic cats, is a leading advocate in ending the abuse of captive big cats and saving wild cats from extinction. We are home to over 50 lions, tigers, bobcats, cougar, servals and other species of exotic cats, most of which have been abandoned, abused, orphaned, saved from the fur trade, or retired from performing acts.

The sanctuary, located on 100 acres in the Citrus Park area north Tampa, was founded in 1992 and is a 501(c)(3) charity.

Big Cat Rescue is accredited by the Global Federation of Sanctuaries, certified Independent Charities of America as a "Best in America Charity," rated 4 Stars Charity Navigator, and part of a global coalition including HSUS, AWI, IFAW, WWF, GFAS, Born Free U.S. and other animal protection groups working together to end big cat abuse.

Read more about Big Cat Rescue and the cats who live here at [BigCatRescue.org](http://BigCatRescue.org)

Donation Info:  
[BigCatRescue.org/Donate](http://BigCatRescue.org/Donate)

# YOUR SUPPORT DURING COVID-19 AND TIGER KING THE "PERFECT STORM"

BY HOWARD BASKIN BCR TREASURER

Before launching into the details of the very difficult last few months I want to try to express to you the gratitude Carole and I feel for the many, many expressions of support, both emotional and financial, that we have received during the few months leading up to this writing in early June. There truly are no words to convey how much this has meant to us, how many times it literally brought tears of gratitude to our eyes, and the degree to which it reduced the stress and helped us weather the most difficult time for the sanctuary since 9-11. God bless you all!

## COVID-19

Our COVID-19 story starts when I met Carole in late 2002, which sounds strange, but I will explain. After



a few dates Carole brought me out to the sanctuary. I had spent the prior decade working with small growing companies. I was a co-founder of one. In the other cases I went into a company that was up and running but needed help. I would spend typically a year or two working there full time helping the entrepreneurial founders clean up the operational and financial issues and position the company to grow.



*These images show an example of the terrible conditions many of our cats were rescued from. Responsible financial planning was critical to ensuring the cats are cared for the rest of their lives.*

After I reviewed the very weak financial position the sanctuary was in then, Carole and I sat down to do what I call "kitchen table strategic planning" where Carole laid out what the goals were and the hurdles to achieving them. She described the thousands of cats living in horrible conditions and her determination to end the mistreatment. She also described what she experienced in the aftermath of 9-11, when donations and visitors dropped precipitously and she was literally selling her household goods and other personal belongings to raise money to feed the cats.

For me there were two main takeaways from this. First, the commitment we make when we take in a cat is identical to the old "defined benefit" pension plans that used to be common in large corporations like GM. Those were a commitment to pay a stated amount for the life of the retiree. Our commitment when we take in a cat and commit to care for it to the end of its life is just like that. The only difference is that here the retirees are big cats.

When we take in a ten year old tiger that is

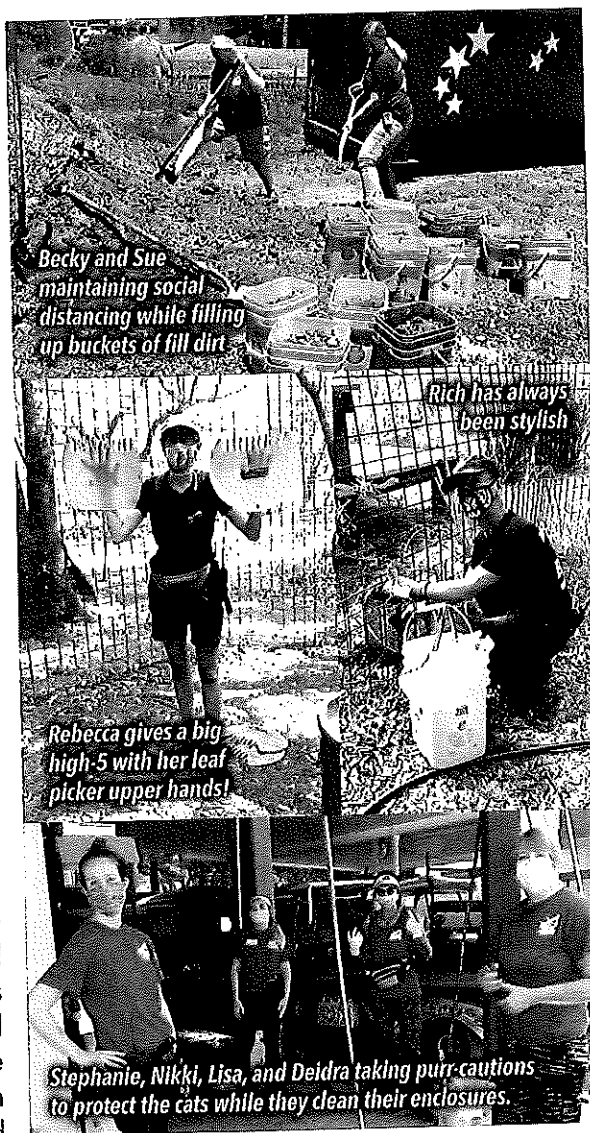
likely to live to 20, and it costs us roughly \$10,000/year on average for food and medical care, we just made a future commitment of \$100,000 – i.e. a pension liability. Companies who had those defined benefit pension plans were required to set aside money to at least partially “fund” those plans to insure they could meet the obligation.

We made a decision that if we could turn the sanctuary's finances around to have a positive bottom line, we would diligently set aside reserves to fund that pension liability. The way we thought about it then was that we needed to be in a position to survive “another 9-11,” i.e. to ensure that we could meet our commitment to the cats if a tragedy like that happened again. We followed that plan and have built significant reserves. But, we need to be careful about making them last long enough. No one knows how long COVID-19 will affect us or how bad things are going to get.

During January and February, like everyone else, we watched to see what was going to happen with the virus. By early March the picture became clearer. For the safety of our visitors, our staff, and as we later learned for the cats (as tigers elsewhere were reported to have contracted the virus), we closed down our guided tours in mid March, during what would normally be our peak season due to spring break. Because we did not know when we could reopen, we refunded the tour fees to all of the people who had paid for future tours. We just felt it was the right thing to do. We also realized that while we always had thought of it as surviving another 9-11, COVID-19 had the potential of being 9-11 on steroids when it comes to the financial impact. We had to plan for the worst.

Let me pause here and note that we are going to be very conservative about resuming having tours until we are sure it is safe for both people and the cats. In contrast, roadside zoos like GW (Joe Exotic's former zoo now run by Jeff Lowe) and “Doc” Antle's Myrtle

Beach Safari have reopened to the public despite the risks. The adult tigers who contracted COVID survived. Tiny cubs ripped from their mothers at birth have deficient immune systems because they are deprived of the mother's colostrum that provides disease fighting antibodies. If they contract the disease, their chances are far, far worse.



For some sanctuaries the mission is more limited than ours. I is focused almost totally on rescuing and caring for cats. is absolutely their right to make that decision. But from the kitchen table conversation in 2003 to today, our mission has been broader. We have devoted enormous resources to solving the problem, i.e. ending having big cats suffering in captivity. Those activities include going after the bad actors like Joe Exotic, convincing venues not to allow abusive exhibits on the grounds, impressing upon major national companies not to use big cats in their advertising, and supporting changes in state and federal regulations and laws. In addition, in recent years we have run very effective but expensive digital campaigns to educate people not to engage in cat petting and we have dived head first into augmented and virtual reality to be a leader in showing that these kinds of experiences can be much richer, much more educational, and much more entertaining than gawking at

big cat in a cage. Virtual reality is the future we envision – a future where people actually do learn about animal and conservation, but without big cats inappropriately confined to cages.

The revenue from our educational guided tours represents about a third of our operating revenue. Without it, we cannot sustain all of these activities and insure our reserves will last. As a result, in March we made the incredibly painful decision to lay off about half of our staff and Carole and I stopped taking salary. We stopped funding the discretionary programs and will focus for now on just two things – continuing to give the best possible care to our cats and past

the Big Cat Public Safety Act that we feel will end 90% of the abuse.

Meantime, we have been blessed with having remaining staff who have stepped up to the challenge of increased workload with enthusiasm, having amazing volunteers who have continued to carefully and safely come in to care for the cats, and volunteers who have been doing at home some of the tasks normally done at the sanctuary and working round the clock on our social media. We cannot thank all of them enough. Everyone is practicing social distancing and wearing masks where appropriate both at the sanctuary and in the rest of their lives so they do not bring the virus to their colleagues here or to the cats. We have changed many of our procedures and rules to address the risks associated with the virus

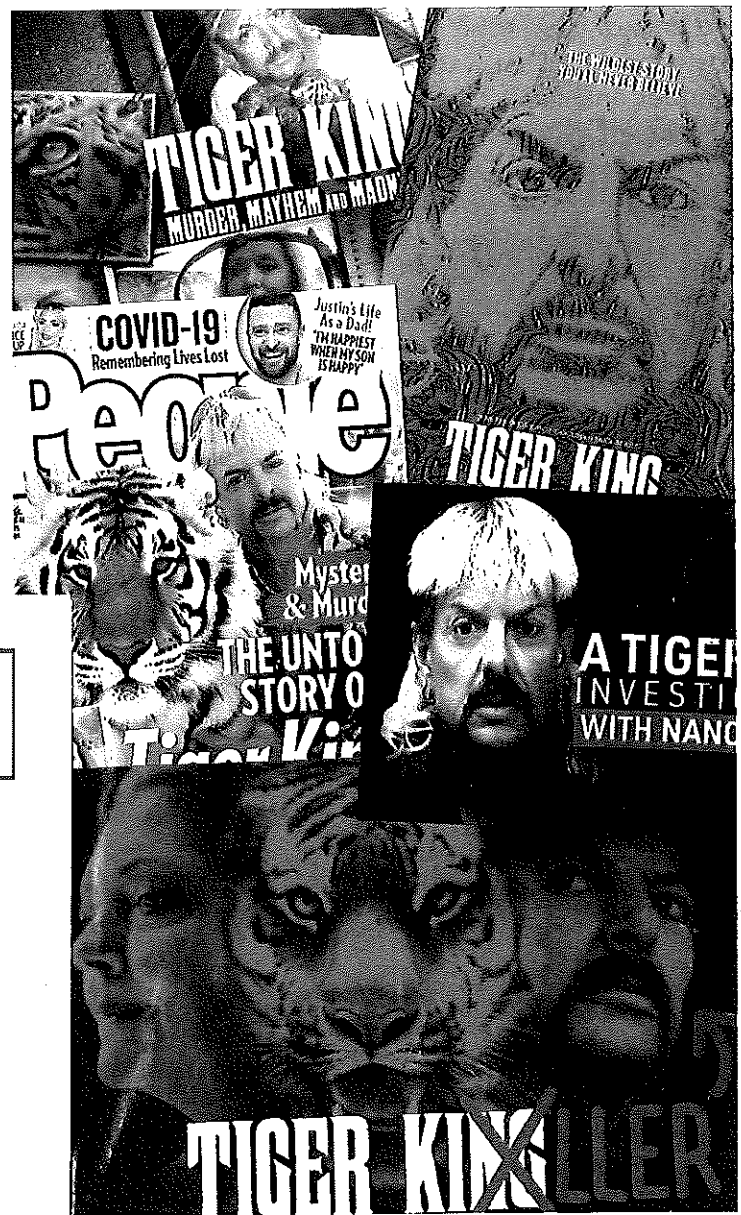
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## TIGER KING

In recent years we have worked with four groups of documentary makers, all of whom have films that should come out this year. Three of those groups are people who genuinely care about the cats and want to help us end the abuse. Each of those three is examining the captive big cat issue from a different angle.

We were led to believe, or more accurately, in our view misled to believe, that the makers of Tiger King, Eric Goode and Rebecca Chaiklin, also had this intention. Instead, the series gave viewers who do not know us the impression that our cages are tiny, that we are overrun with crowds of people, and that we operate for



onal financial gain, all of which is idiotic as anyone has been here knows. In other words, the series intentionally made us look like the awful roadside zoos depicted in the series. It gives the impression that there is no difference between a true, accredited sanctuary and a roadside zoo.

In addition, the series did Carole an enormous disservice, to put it mildly. As the current Hillsborough County Sheriff has reaffirmed, there was never a shred of evidence to suggest Carole was in any way involved in the traumatic disappearance of her former husband Don 23 years ago. When he went missing, his secretary, who had been caught a few months earlier trying to steal over \$500,000 in properties from him and Carole, and his ex-wife and children, colluded to try to take over not only the portion of the estate they were entitled to, but also the portion Carole was entitled to.

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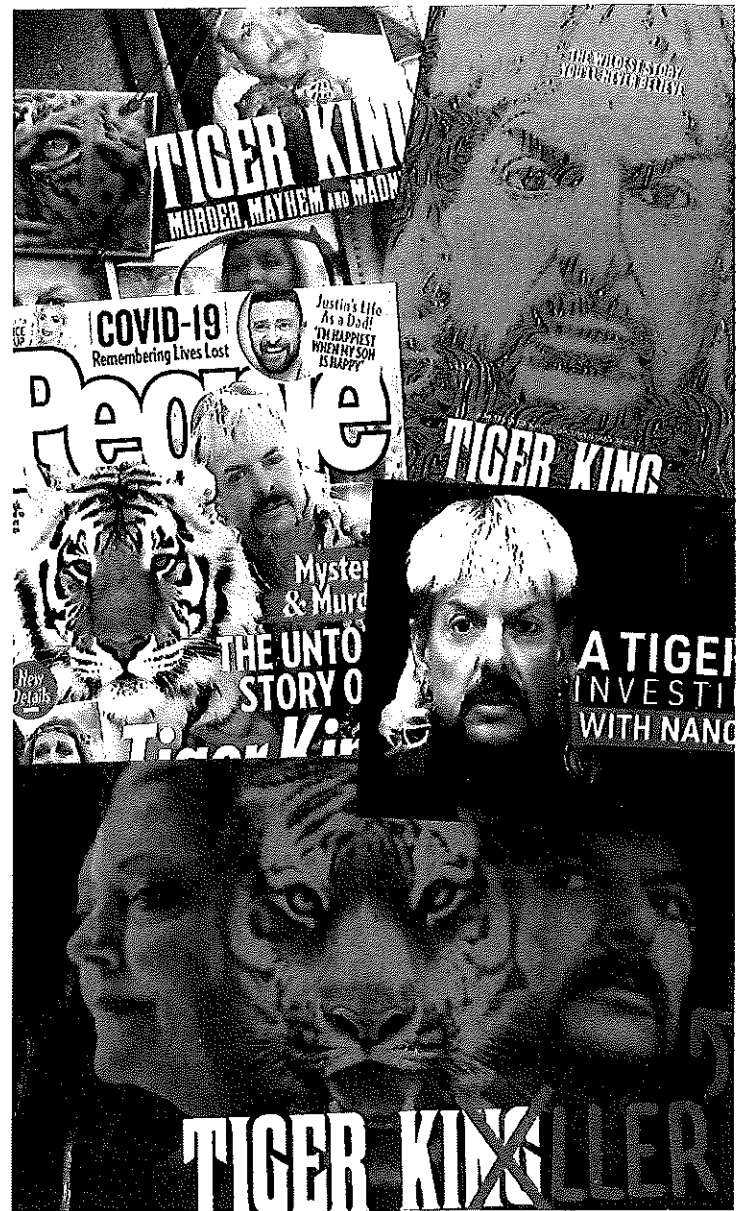
The big issue now will be how well our donations hold up. That may depend in large part on whether the virus sends us into a recession or worse. But so far, the readers of this Big Cat Times as a group have been incredibly wonderful in understanding this time of need. We fretted over how our recent annual Give Day fundraiser would go given the environment. I cannot tell you how much it meant to us, and how much it eased the stress, when supporters stepped up and made it the best Give Day in the history of the event, raising over \$100,000 for the first time.

I hope this long explanation of both our years of preparing for a crisis and the way we are responding to COVID-19 is not "TMI" as they say. And I want to end by just trying one more time to tell you that there really are no words to adequately convey how much we appreciate your incredible support at this very difficult time.

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As part of that effort they spread absurd rumors. For instance, that Don was run through a tiny kitchen meat grinder and fed to the cats. In the series, in addition to repeating those rumors, they made other baseless disparaging statements. The series purposefully painted Carole as a murderer to make the show as salacious as possible to draw viewers.

You can view our rebuttal to the lies at

**BigCatRescue.org/truth**

If you have not visited the page, we urge you to do so.

Unfortunately the series was very successful at constructing the false impressions it clearly intended to create. As a result, we have been inundated with hateful and often very crude email, phone calls, and social media posts. Perhaps I am naive, but I honestly had no idea there were so many thousands of people in this country who could be so hateful. The saving grace has been our largely volunteer social media team and other volunteers and staff who pitched in to help them round the clock to combat this. While there is no point in engaging with people who send outright hateful or crude comments, in many cases our team has been able to patiently educate the people who contacted us with real questions instead of vicious hate.

Carole has a wonderful quote from Franklin D. Roosevelt at the bottom of her emails. Roosevelt said "I ask you to judge me by the enemies I have made." I think Carole expressed our reaction to all this wonderfully one day when she was doing one of her Facebook LIVE walks through the sanctuary. Some of the haters were trying to post nasty messages and our social media folks were deleting them. Carole ended the LIVE by saying that on her emails she has that Roosevelt quote and then said, "To all of you who tried to make nasty posts during the LIVE, and to all the others who sent hateful messages, I just want to say that I am proud to have you as enemies." For my part, I have taken comfort in a report I saw that said 30% of the people surveyed will not buy Corona beer because of the corona virus. I figure that must

be the 30% that are sending the hateful and crud messages.

There have been two "silver linings" in all this. The first has been the enormous number of expressions of emotional support and outrage about the series from so many of you who know the sanctuary and/or know us personally. I cannot tell you how helpful and stress-reducing that has been. The second silver lining is that despite the best efforts of the series NOT to point out the animal abuse associated with cub petting and roadside zoos, many people still got that message. Many articles in major print and online media have criticized the series for failing to focus on the animal mistreatment. Quite a few have also criticized the series' clear mistreatment of us. This has resulted in increasing attention to the need to pass the Big Cat Public Safety Act.

We cannot credit the lies in the film to this. There would be MUCH more awareness of the abuse and much more awareness of the need for the federal bill if the producers had drawn more attention to the abuse and interviewed experts to explain why breeding cubs for petting does nothing for conservation and why the cub handling is inherently cruel. But we can take some comfort in the fact that despite their failure to expose the abuse and explain the need for the bill, there has been an increase in awareness.

Again I want to thank all of you for your emotional and financial support during this difficult time. And I want to assure you that while this has been difficult, it will not in any way deter us from fulfilling our mission of stopping the mistreatment of captive big cats. In fact, it has had the opposite effect. We are more committed than ever to the fight. With your help we have been steadily winning battles and with your continued support we will absolutely win the war.

## THANK YOU SO MUCH

