

THE OPERATION OF THE WILD ANIMAL EXHIBITION LAW

- Paul Hickie -

It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to report to your organization that one of the projects with which it assisted materially has been successfully placed in operation. During the 1937 session of the Michigan Legislature, a new section was incorporated as a portion of the state game bill which had to do with the public exhibition of wild animals in captivity. The wording was simple and direct, and stated in effect that all captive wild animals should be kept under adequate conditions of sanitation, housing, and safety. The Conservation Commission armed with this authority was given the power to promulgate and enforce rules and regulations to carry out the intent of the act.

Some of the commonly understood terms were a little difficult to define. For example, just what is a public exhibition of wild animals. Obviously it is not the animal kept as a pet, such as the high school boy with a tame raccoon; it is not the estate of some wealthy individual who keeps a number of animals for his own amusement and allows the public, out of the kindness of his heart, to visit his private zoo. We have both in Michigan as we soon found out when we canvassed the state for all possible exhibits. Again we resorted to general terms with rather broad application. The public exhibition of wild animals became, "Public Exhibition of Wild Animals." Any place where one or more wild animals or wild birds are kept in captivity, either in an enclosure or by tether, upon any street or highway, or upon land public or private, in the vicinity of any commercial establishment for the evident purpose of public exhibition or attracting trade."

The same problem rose in fixing housing specifications. The problem was one of taking the list of animals which we knew were held in captivity, of guessing at what other animals might be desired for exhibits in the future, and then attempting to get together what information was

available. In general our specifications are at present about as specific as, how big is a house? However, we have set up minimum requirements for many species especially the predatory animals, such as bears bobcats, coyotes, and others, and have likewise arrived at some idea of what constitutes a suitable cage and nest box for many of these species. We have thus far proceeded rather slowly in requiring changes in housing facilities, which in many cases might have meant the abandonment of captive animals and a hardship to the owner. We required certain things in housing, however, such as sanitation rain-proof dens, nest boxes or shelters, protection from the sun or inclement weather. We required that exhibitions be not less than 100 feet from trunkline highways and that suitable parking conditions be provided so that the motoring public would not be jeopardized.

Our rules and regulations require that animals be handled humanely and kept free from parasites, sickness, or disease, and that they be treated or properly disposed of when afflicted. Certain of our other regulations such as the maintenance of regular feeding schedules, the amount and variety of rations, the frequency with which drinking water is changed and cages cleaned are almost impossible to bring down to a rigid schedule, at least for the majority of exhibits. It might have been sufficient to insist that treatment and sanitation be adequate and humane, however, these additional regulations which are not of general application are often useful when we encounter some offender whose intentions are not proper, and who has to be "converted" or his exhibit discontinued. Then it is very convenient to have technicalities upon which we can insist.

One phase of the regulations which has proved to be useful and, no doubt, will continue to be so in the future is the requirement that stock held in exhibits be legally obtained, and that evidence of such lawful ownership be produced upon demand. The dry goods-box type of exhibitor is the very one who is apt to have animals obtained illegally,

or what is often as bad from some semi-indefinite source which the owner vouches for in a loud verbal manner. It makes it exceedingly easy to seize such animals and dispose of them without question.

There is still need for education of the public so that we may have their assistance in handling roadside exhibits. Every licensed public exhibition of wild animals is required to have the permit displayed to the view of the public at the place of exhibition. Any exhibits which do not have such a permit should be reported to the Conservation Department or to the local conservation officer.

Thus far there have been 19 public exhibition permits issued under the new exhibition law. In these exhibits there are approximately 150 different animals of 30 different species. Bears are probably the most popular, if not the most abundant, and also are probably most valuable to the exhibitor. One owner of a bear informed me that he did fairly well by selling soda pop to customers which was in turn given to the bear to drink. It later developed that this man substituted sweetened water for soda pop at the same cost to the purchaser and to the much greater comfort of the bear.

Mammals greatly predominate among the animals kept, leading by a score of 20 species of mammals to 7 species of birds, and 2 of reptiles. The mammals include opossums, bears, raccoons, red and grey foxes, coyotes, mountain lions, lynx or bobcats, ocelots, genets, woodchucks, fox squirrels, monkeys, deer, and finally, of somewhat doubtful wildness, one burro. The birds include ducks, geese, pheasants, peacocks, and parrots. The reptiles are made up of two alligators, and one striped turtle.

Many of the people keeping exhibits at the time the new legislation was passed have given up their animals. Two exhibits have been forcibly discontinued because of the incorrigibility of the owners. Our

encounters in this connection have shown that the exhibition law we have to work with is entirely effective. We may in the future find need to alter certain phases or to make a few additions, but in general it appears to serve its purpose very well. Undoubtedly, it is safe to say that the day of the dry goods box, and the mangy animals as well as the tethered bear endangering passersby no longer exists.

What is the future of the public exhibition of wild animals in Michigan, and what should the Department of the general public approve in the way of roadside zoos. I believe that captive animals, if well kept in proper cages and fed adequately, probably enjoy a more comfortable and humane existence than many of their wild counterparts. There can be no doubt of the great interest that wild animals have for the general public or the wholesomeness of the recreation of visiting the zoo. For many people this represents the only way in which they can become familiar with our native fauna. We believe, likewise, that there are many common animals of the smaller varieties which would be very easily handled, and which would be of great interest to many people which are not now generally seen in captivity. Our policy then is to be, not one of extinction for all such exhibits, but rather one of education for exhibitors and through them the general public, but we will continue to insist that any wild animals held in captivity in any capacity whatsoever be kept as humanely as possible.