

By: Shaphali Jain

Hear Them Roar - The Jewels At Big Cat Rescue of Tampa

When a friend told us about Big Cat Rescue, a non profit educational sanctuary in Tampa, that houses the most diverse population of exotic cats in the world, we decided to go for a tour of this establishment. We fell in love with the cats housed in this 45 acre sanctuary and were overwhelmed with compassion and a heightened sense awareness of the stand that we, as enlightened individuals, should take to aid what Big Cat Rescue is trying to accomplish.

Big Cat Rescue is devoted to rescuing and providing a permanent home for exotic (wild, not domestic) cats who have been abused, abandoned, bred to be pets, retired from performing acts, or saved from being slaughtered for fur coats, and to educating the public about these animals and the issues facing them in captivity and in the wild.

The sanctuary houses the most diverse population of exotic cats in the world, with 16 of the 35 species of wild cats represented among more than 100 residents. These include tigers, lions, leopards, cougars, bobcats, lynx, ocelots, servals, caracals and others, many of whom are threatened, endangered, or now extinct in the wild.

We interviewed Scott Lope, Director of Operations at Big Cat Rescue. Read on to find out what you can do to make a difference in the lives of these cats, in the wild as well as at the sanctuary.

CM - How did a concept such as Big Cat Rescue come about?

Scott: It started when Carole Baskin, who was in real estate at that time, ended up buying a baby bobcat at a livestock auction in 1992, about 15 years ago. She had been a cat lover and fell in love with the kitten. She thought she was helping it. She then looked into finding a companion for it and found an advertisement which announced baby bobcats for sale. She decided to purchase more because she wanted to stop them from being killed for their fur. Breeders had also discovered that selling them as pets made more money. If they weren't sold as pets, the breeders would raise the kittens until they were older at which point they were sold for their pelt. The conditions in these farms where the animals were being kept were cruel and Carole ended up purchasing all 56 cats and brought them to Tampa.

CM - Did the sanctuary get created at this point?

Scott: Well, not quite! At that time, she had no idea what this industry was all about. She was still under the impression that she could keep them as pets. This sanctuary is truly a work of evolution. After she had housed these cats for a while, she realized that they don't make good pets. They are not content in captivity - no matter what kind of environment you provide them with. Even if you have the best of intentions, it is important to remember this fact.

CM - So, the sanctuary and the mission evolved over a period of time?

Scott: Absolutely! We have a dedicated team of volunteers in our organization that strive to convey two major beliefs. One, these animals should be allowed to remain free and two, we as humans should do all that we can to preserve their natural habitat.

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Enya, the cougar. Picture courtesy Jamie Veronica www.BigCatRescue.org

CM: Wow! That's a noble vision but one that would be hard to convey and instill, wouldn't you say?

Scott: Yes, but we practice what we preach. We will take cats that no one wants and those that cannot be set free because of human intervention. These animals are abandoned when they're not profitable, aren't "fun" or are no longer safe. That is how this organization grew and with the growing conviction that such animals should not be kept in captivity. They are wild and are meant to be free - no matter what or how good your intentions are. You cannot help them except by letting them be free.

CM: What are some of the challenges you face?

Scott: In addition to preserving their freedom, we're facing a growing challenge in preserving their natural habitats where they can roam free. Such areas are rapidly disappearing with urban growth and development. By preserving the area we have, we are helping in the life long care of our cats. However, our ongoing effort is to educate the public about what they can do to help preserve the wild areas. What kind of products to avoid buying in order to help preserve their habitat, such as products that have palm oil because that means that trees are being cut down and rain

forests are being destroyed. Education on traditional Chinese medication - if you purchase these products, you must understand that they are coming from tigers that are fast becoming extinct. Not to support the fur industry or the circus. Exotic animals don't make good pets and are not meant to be killed for their fur or trained to provide entertainment for us.

CM: How do you enlist support for your organization?

Scott: We have been extremely lucky in the kind of media coverage we have received over the years. Also, word

of mouth has generated a lot of support. We are very proud of our organization. We have a very unique concept here and have received a lot of help from good friends in the community.

CM: Tell us about your operations.

Scott: Again, I will stress upon what a great organization we have. The reason is that we have over a 100 local volunteers as well as thousands of volunteers that work through the Internet who are called "Advocats". These may comprise of some elderly as well as out of state people who deal with legislation and other issues for us. On the property itself, the volunteers that we have are amazing people. They may have come in for a tour or have wanted to work around animals and that's what usually sparks the initial interest. Once they see what is really involved, they become an integral part of this establishment.

CM: Would you say that your major work force comprises of volunteers?

Scott: Yes. These people realize that zoos and circuses are not for them. We are a collective mind set of people who want to make a difference. We have about 45 acres of land here with

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approximately 145 animals. You will not believe how many hands we need on board. There is landscaping, food preparation, unloading of trucks and so much more. Our tour guides are all volunteers who give high quality tours and give up their weekends to make a difference – they are one of our biggest strengths. They enlighten, educate and entertain - a compelling aspect of our establishment which helps us convey the message to all the people that visit us.

CM: How old does one have to be to become a volunteer at Big Cat Rescue?

Scott: The minimum age is 18.

CM: I am sure you believe in educating children. What kind of programs does Big Cat Rescue offer for children?

Scott: You're right - we do believe in enlightening children. We offer a summer camp program where they are given the opportunity to be around the animals, (with strict adult supervision and no physical contact with the animals). They are educated about which products not to support or buy so that they can, in turn, educate their parents and others. They also learn not to support the circus for the animals that are put on display. We offer conservation themed birthday parties where the birthday child and friends get an exclusive enrichment tour of the facility. The birthday child may choose to sponsor a cat at Big Cat Rescue. There is a tour every Saturday morning at 9 AM which is the only time children under the age of 10 can come in.

CM: What about the adults? How do they get to see different aspects of the facility?

Scott: The regular tours for adults are available Monday through Friday at 9 am and 3 pm. We offer various different options on Saturdays. Adult tours at 9:30 am, 11:30 am and 1:30 am, a feeding tour every Saturday afternoon at 4:30 pm, reservations are required for this

tour and you go with the keepers as they feed the tigers and other cats. A Behind the Scenes tour on Saturdays at 2 pm, reservations required, you would tour with a senior keeper and would be able to see some of the behavior training that is performed with the cats in the event that they should need medication and checkups.

You would also be able to help create some of the

enrichment items that are created for the cats to play with. We also have a nocturnal tour at 8 PM each last Friday of the month, and we recommend

from?

Scott: We get a lot of our funds from donors, the people who come in for tours, people who sponsor our cats and the purchase of items from our gift shop. There are many different levels of sponsorships and we also hold an annual fundraiser where we are able to enlist the support of corporations and the community.

CM: What are some of the items that you would like to enlist support for?

Scott: Right now, one of our biggest projects, with all the malls that have come up in this area which squeeze us in, is the building of a 10 foot high concrete wall around our periphery for security. This is a huge expense. We worry about people breaking in and hurting the cats and getting hurt in return. A lot of people seem surprised that we don't have government funding. There is no money

available. This is a human generated problem but no one wants to take responsibility for it. We are asking for sponsors for the wall which costs us about \$100 for a foot.

CM: Tell us about your core team which keeps this facility going?

Scott: OK - let's start with me! I am the Director of Operations, there is Cathy Neumann, the Vice President, Jamie Veronica, the President and Jennifer Ruszczyk who is our Volunteer Coordinator. We have worked together for close to 10 years. The entire work force here, including our very valuable volunteers, is an amazing group of people. For most people in the animal career field, the average span at a single work place is less than 2 years as these jobs generally pay little. At Big Cat Rescue, 30 – 40% of our people have been here longer than 5 years.

CM: To sum it up Scott, what message would you want to convey to our readers?

Scott: I would like to let them know that there are many ways that they can help us. They can take a tour for starters, buy items from our gift shop, Adopt A Cat, apply for membership which comes at many different levels, work or volunteer with us or donate money. All of these options help us in countless ways. They can also go to www.bigcatrescue.org for more information. We look forward to seeing you at our facility which is located on 12802 Easy Street, Tampa, Florida 33625. Contact number is 813-493-4564.



Khan & China. Picture courtesy Jamie Veronica www.BigCatRescue.org

that you make reservations for this tour.

CM: Tell us about some of the statistics involved in running a facility such as Big Cat Rescue?

Scott: OK. Our operating cost is close to one million dollars a year. We have to purchase a lot of meat, keep it in freezers for which we have to pay astronomic electric bills. We thaw close to



Breezy. Picture courtesy Jamie Veronica www.BigCatRescue.org

500 lbs of meat everyday which comprises of beef and chicken, and a ground diet with vitamins and supplements. We also have to purchase prey items, the smaller cats get a whole rat, the larger cats get a whole rabbit. These animals are dead when we purchase them from licensed suppliers.

CM: Where does most of your funding come