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Photo by Jamie Good

WHAT'S IN YOUR BACKYARD? This 400-pound black jaguar known as 'Bhino' escaped last week from Guhas Lions and Tigers Farm in Utterson. Submitted photo

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Fur flies over exotic animal bylaw

February 20, 2008 - by Jacqueline Lawrence

The potential escape of another ferocious big cat does not appear to be enough to persuade some members of Muskoka Lakes council to pass a bylaw regulating who can own such large, dangerous animals as lions and tigers.

Astonishingly, some members of council are calling last week's jaguar escape in Utterson an "isolated incident," and something that does not warrant the passing of an exotic animal bylaw.

The 400-pound cat escaped from Guhas Lions and Tigers Farm Feb. 12 after breaking loose from its chain link fence. OPP officers eventually shot the animal, but not before it mauled a dog.

The incident has prompted renewed calls for the adoption of a bylaw in Muskoka Lakes to regulate "backyard zoos" such as Guhas. The Utterson animal farm is home to several other big cats including lions, cougars and a black panther. The farm's owner, Nanda Guha, has been criticized in the past for not providing adequate care for the animals, including using substandard enclosures to cage the cats.

Kristin Williams, spokesperson for the Ontario Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (OSPCA), said society staff issued Guha a warning last fall to improve his animals' living conditions. Williams said containment of the animals was an issue.

Under current provincial laws, however, the OSPCA has no authority to enforce how exotic species are housed.

In fact, almost no laws currently exist in Ontario to govern how animals not native to Canada such as lions, tigers or jaguars should be cared for. The only way to regulate the ownership of exotic animals is through a bylaw, passed by the local municipality.

In Muskoka Lakes, however, some councillors still have no appetite for such a regulation, even after last week's events.

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"You don't pass a bylaw just because of one incident," said councillor Brian Hare.

Hare, who opposed an exotic animal bylaw when it came before council last year, went on to call the jaguar escape an "isolated incident." He likened passing a bylaw to "using a sledgehammer to swat a fly."

Councillor Stewart Martin agreed, saying he would not be "stampeded" into passing any prohibitions just to appease some special interest "zealots."

"I don't hear any concern from the general public," said Martin. "I get more complaints about dogs running loose."

Guha, he continued, is a responsible man. "I've been there, and I saw nothing wrong with his relationship with those animals."

Guha himself maintains that he operates a safe facility. Last week's jaguar escape was the first time in 22 years that an animal has broken loose from his farm, he said. Guha alleged that the cat, known as Rhino, only got out because someone tampered with his cage.

The media and others are blowing the situation out of proportion, he said.

"These are negative people," said Guha. "What experience do they have looking after animals?"

Hare and Martin apparently share Guha's sentiments.

"If there was a widespread problem, then yeah, we'd deal with it. But there's not," said Hare.

Still, Hare's and Martin's comments have baffled some animal welfare advocates, who say Muskoka Lakes council must act now to prevent further threats to public safety from Guha's farm.

"This is a facility of concern and it needs to be addressed," said Jody Gienow, co-director of the Muskoka Wildlife Centre near Gravenhurst, which rescues injured and abandoned animals.

Gienow expressed concern about another potential escape from the Utterson facility. She noted that Guha does not even have a firearm to properly handle such a situation should it occur again.

"The fact that he had to call the OPP shows you he didn't have a plan in place to deal with emergencies," she said. Gienow called councillors' reluctance to deal with the situation "troubling," particularly given the disturbing information they have received about Guha's in the last several months.

In addition to public complaints, the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) last fall refused to renew Guha's licence to keep native wildlife, such as wolves, at the farm.

Paul Van Schyndel, MNR enforcement officer, said Guha refused to allow ministry staff onto his property to inspect his farm. The MNR, which has no authority over exotic animals, later obtained a court order calling for the permanent forfeiture of his native animals.

Gienow called on both the township and the province to act now to address the situation. Many other Ontario municipalities have similar backyard zoos with little or no safety regulations, she noted.

"It's a big problem," she said. "Muskoka Lakes is just one municipality where anybody can have these animals and house them any way they like because it's nobody's jurisdiction."

Parry Sound-Muskoka MPP Norm Miller said he is in support of new legislation to deal with the issue. The provincial Liberals have reportedly pledged to beef up Ontario's animal cruelty laws in this respect, though it is unclear when any new legislation will appear before parliament.

"There's a need across the entire province for this," said Miller. "Right now there are no rules, and we need some."

In the meantime, Muskoka Lakes Mayor Susan Pryke has pledged to work with Hare, Martin and any other opposing members of council to pass an exotic animal bylaw for the township. Already, some councillors are coming around, she indicated.

"It's a real serious situation," said Pryke, "and quite frankly, it's time to put the rules in place."

Muskoka Lakes councillors are expected to discuss the exotic animal bylaw early next month.

This article has been viewed **4498** times.

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Wouldn't it be a much nicer World if?

Submitted by Marlaine Albert from Toronto, Ontario
on Tuesday, October 28, 2008 at 11:26 am

It would be so much nicer if instead of criticizing and threatening Guha and his Lions, Tigers & Panther. Why can we all not rally to help him get better housing for the animals. It would be a positive action, with positive results and everyone would benefit.

This man clearly loves these animals and loves to share his love for them with we the people. To condemn him for this instead of helping him with this is in fact the purest display of a very small and uncivilized mind.

You have a priceless treasure in your own back yard in the form of a man named Guha and instead of trying to find ways to rally around him to help build the desired enclosures you lean to criticizing him.

Lets all try to help this man instead of chastizing him.

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