

# Orlando Sentinel OPINION

GUEST COLUMNIST

## 'Tiger King' series didn't do enough for conservation

Sensationalist TV that capitalizes on the human desire to see deluded narcissists with terrible fashion sense getting train wrecked in real time always sells. The Netflix reality series "Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem and Madness" about the flamboyant Joe Exotic, former owner of the Greater Wynnewood Zoo in Oklahoma, was released during this time of social distancing and is now a number one hit.



By H. BOBBY FOKIDIS

Social media has lit up with memes about Exotic's life and his vendetta with Carole Baskin from Big Cat Rescue, a nonprofit animal sanctuary in Tampa. Many people view Exotic as a hero, a rugged individualist opposed to government attempts to limit freedom, while pursuing country justice for his "murderous" rival, Baskin.

Spoiler alert: the docuseries culminates in a failed murder plot that lands Exotic in prison for attempted contract killing and wildlife-related violations. The "Tiger King" represents a lot of things, but heroism isn't one of them.

Netflix's hit has fueled public interest in the Big Cat Public Safety Act, a bill seeking to restrict the private trade, sale and possession of large cats, as well as outlaw the practice of cub petting and paid photo opportunities practiced at some roadside zoos.

Most people who watched the series would likely agree it feels fundamentally wrong to take helpless tiger cubs from their mothers right after birth and monetize them for selfies. The average viewer would also likely concur that feeding expired meat handouts to animals and zoo staff — and having eight emaciated tigers fight over said meat in an enclosure — indicates an unprofessional operation.

However, the series featured no commentary from any real wildlife conservation experts to justify that intuition, leaving viewers questioning whether the actions of Exotic and others were for the betterment of the species.

This is compounded by statements made by the show's main personalities, which make sense on the surface, but are misleading and just plain wrong.

Tim Stark and Doc Antle, two unsavory owners of their own menageries, both argued that tigers are endangered so we should be breeding more of them.

This sounds good, right? Don't we need more baby tigers? Plainly, yes. A modern

zoo's mission is the captive breeding of species whose populations are so small they must maximize genetic diversity to avoid the perils of inbreeding. But not everyone working with animals is a conservationist, and not all breeding benefits a species survival.

In the exotic animal trade, the inbreeding of white tigers can result in crossed eyes (known as strabismus), clubbed foot and other skeletal issues that aren't picture

perfect. As hinted in the series, animals that don't sell may be euthanized. Promoting unnatural hybrids such as ligers, tigons and even grolar bears also lacks any conservation value, since such animals debilitate the gene pool of wild populations.

In contrast, the captive breeding of endangered species at AZA (Association of Zoos & Aquariums) accredited zoos is a highly coordinated effort that is managed by a Species Survival Plan. This cooperation is necessary to raise highly threatened animals in captivity where little is often known about their biology.

Another question the Netflix show raises is about the role of sanctuaries, like the Big Cat Rescue. Sanctuaries house animals unable to survive in the wild, such as the injured, those confiscated as pets, or those obtained from laboratories, breeders and circuses that have been shut down. They differ fundamentally from zoos in that they do not breed animals, instead seeking to end the cycle of captivity, particularly when it's for commercial purposes.

One thing "Tiger King" gets right is exposing the interstate cub trade, which is fueled by females forced to reproduce continuously in tiger cub mills. As these cubs grow and become more dangerous, many are killed. A lucky few may end up in an animal sanctuary like Baskin's.

In a perfect world, captive animals would be released into wild protected areas of a suitable habitat. This has worked for some notable species — but for every success, there are many failed attempts. This is especially true for large charismatic carnivores, like tigers, that need the opportunity to learn to hunt in protected areas with sufficient prey. With these limitations, it will be some time before tiger reintroduction becomes a routine conservation practice.

Dr. H. Bobby Fokidis is an associate professor of biology at Rollins College.

GUEST COLUMNIST

## Why I voted to rescind plans for Orange Avenue

The purpose of this article is to respond to those who questioned why I brought the motion to rescind and repeal the Orange Avenue Overlay while in the midst of the COVID-19 outbreak.

During my recent campaign for Winter Park city commissioner, I promised residents that I would protect the heart and soul of Winter Park. At my inaugural commission meeting last week, we did exactly that — we unanimously passed essential COVID-19 response resolutions to protect our city.

These resolutions were hammered out days earlier by both the outgoing and incoming commissioners in a spirit of unity for the city we love. Both meetings were held virtually to protect our community. Virtual government meetings have been approved by Gov. Ron DeSantis due to the coronavirus.

Then, we took the next step to protect the heart and soul of Winter Park. We voted to rescind and replace the Winter Park Orange Avenue Overlay (OAO).

Why did I support this move? That's a valid question. I am a strong believer in the advantages of overlays. Overlays provide for an area of a city to have a coordinated plan for development. Winter Park's designated Orange Avenue overlay district encompasses 75 acres along and near Orange Avenue.

I served on the 11-member OAO task force that met for six months to plan the overlay. We listened to dozens of residents, merchants and developers give their input. During my year-long campaign for commissioner, I met with hundreds of residents, always promising them that I would represent their interests.

Over and over, residents told me they want an overlay that maintains charm and scale as well as additional parking, beautiful open spaces and necessary infrastructure improvements, such as drainage and turn lanes to ease traffic congestion.

They were clear that they did not want massive buildings and high density. During this process, I advocated for reasonable building allowances. I also advocated hard to keep the area



By SHEILA DECICCIO

called Progress Point city-owned — a beautiful space that could provide green space, perhaps a potential theater district and a parking structure to serve the nearby merchants and cafes.

So why did I vote to rescind? Because I had no choice. Eight days before the March 17 election, two commissioners who were stepping down pushed through

several changes to the overlay that removed benefits that the residents were seeking. One example was Progress Point. A new amendment now allowed a four-story building with zero setback to be built abutting Orange Avenue.

The changes also greatly added to the potential density and traffic on Orange Avenue. Furthermore, they enacted these changes in a manner that the new commission could not legally amend. Therefore, our new commission had two choices: live with changes that hurt our residents or rescind and replace the overlay. I voted to rescind and replace.

Why didn't we wait a few weeks to act since we're in the midst of a horrible pandemic? Because we had no choice. The current commission was forced into a corner. On March 9, during the beginning of the pandemic, the prior commission voted for the amended overlay which resulted in changes to the comprehensive plan and delivered it to the state for review.

The state approved the changes on March 16. Under Florida law, this gave our new commission only until April 16 to act. We had to act quickly to protect our residents from the massive overdevelopment that the overlay allowed.

Last week, the new commission voted 4-1 to rescind and then replace the overlay. I'm proud of the city for all the work they've put into this project. I'd like to move quickly to adopt a new overlay, and I look forward to working with city planners, residents, merchants and landowners to bring to fruition a beautiful space for all to enjoy.

Sheila DeCiccio was elected to the Winter Park City Commission in March.

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