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GUEST COMMENTARY OPINION

Tiger King: Owning tigers is not conservation | Commentary

By H. BOBBY FOKIDIS

GUEST COLUMNIST | APR 08, 2020 | 6:00 AM



Joe Exotic is one of the stars of Netflix's "Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem and Madness." A guest columnist writes that the docuseries didn't do enough to highlight legitimate conservation efforts. (Courtesy of Netflix)

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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.

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 conservational 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.

Nonetheless, the public must draw a clear distinction between private zoo owners using endangered animals for personal status and profit, and the responsible zoo professionals who stand for animal welfare, education and conservation — even after the cameras stop rolling.

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