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Community voices opposition to use of exotic animals for entertainment

BY NATE SMELLE

Staff

In the past week, Hastings Highlands council has received several letters from residents and animal advocacy organizations in opposition to exotic animal owners. Mark and Tammy Drysdale's plan to open a roadside zoo/safari experience in a residential neighbourhood on Peterson Road.

Zoocheck's executive director, Rob Laidlaw wrote council a letter on behalf of the organization, expressing why they are opposed to the Drysdale's using their animals for entertainment. Since it was founded in 1984, Zoocheck has promoted and protected the interests of wild

animals in captivity and free-roaming in nature by conducting hundreds of research projects, investigations, legislative initiatives, legal actions, training programs for enforcement and policy-making officials, and animal rescues.

In the letter, Laidlaw explained to council that Zoocheck first learned of the Drysdale's intention to bring their 10 big cats and a variety of exotic animals to Hastings Highlands when they were contacted by several concerned residents of the municipality. Because Hastings Highlands does not currently have an exotic animal bylaw in place, he pointed out that the municipality does not have any control over the keeping of exotic wild animals, including dangerous species, in the jurisdiction. Highlighting the effectiveness of such bylaws, Laidlaw said

Zoocheck encourages all municipalities to develop and pass their own exotic animal bylaws, describing them as "a simple, convenient way of maintaining control over what goes on within your boundaries and are useful in preventing problems from escalating to unmanageable levels."

Noting how Ontario is the only province in Canada that does not regulate or control the keeping of exotic wild animals in captivity, he said there is no provincial license required for the keeping of exotic animals. According to Laidlaw, this means there are also no comprehensive, mandatory standards for exotic animal housing, care, management, transport or for the protection of human safety.

"At present, any person can acquire exotic

wild animals, regardless of education, professional expertise or experience, house them at a standard of their choosing and allow the public to view or interact with them," explained Laidlaw.

Taking aim at the municipality's response to the issue so far, he continued "I was somewhat concerned that your municipal staff incorrectly informed us that exotic animals are not a concern because the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry has jurisdiction over exotic animals, and that I should address concerns to them. In fact, you should be aware that the OMNR does not have jurisdiction over exotic wild animals, but only regulates native

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North Hastings Family Pharmacy

Zoocheck urges HH to create exotic animal bylaw

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wildlife species listed in the Ontario Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act."

In light of the lack of provincial regulation, Laidlaw said the majority of the responsibility for addressing issues, mitigating risks and assessing the liabilities associated with the keeping of exotic wild animals in captivity falls in the hands of the individual municipalities in which they are located. For that reason, he said it is important that municipalities deliberating over exotic animal issues do so "in an informed way with appropriate levels of due diligence."

Since most municipalities have little to no knowledge or expertise regarding professional standards of: wildlife housing and husbandry; what safety features and protocols are essential to safe animal containment; what health and safety risks animals may pose; how zoos and animal exhibits are assessed; how accredited zoos and sanctuaries operate; as well as many other issues, Laidlaw said municipalities often don't know how to properly evaluate existing or proposed facilities, or, what questions they need to ask. Acknowledging that this lack of relevant information and knowledge can be problematic, he stated that it is also one reason why so many Ontario municipalities have ended up spending so much time and money retroactively addressing animal control, zoning, licensing, public safety and nuisance issues associated with the keeping of exotic wild animals by private individuals as pets or in personal menageries, unregulated zoos, zoo-type exhibits and other situations.

"Many of those issues could have been substantially mitigated or prevented in advance," Laidlaw said.

Highlighting Zoocheck's more than four decades of experience in providing assistance to municipalities in such a predicament, Laidlaw said their organization can provide expert information, materials and advice about current laws and regulations, key safety considerations, professional standards for keeping wildlife in captivity and many other topics that help inform deliberations over exotic animal issues. He said they can also help to respond to "erroneous claims and correct the misinformation that is often associated with discussions about exotic animals."

Council discussed the matter of the Drysdale's plans during a closed session meeting on Nov. 18. Following the meeting, Mayor Vic Bodnar released a statement, indicating that the municipality's planning department had received

preliminary details around a safari experience concept that included exotic animals in Hastings Highlands. Although no formal applications have been received, he said council and municipal staff are "reviewing the matter and slaying abreast of the situation."

Further explaining council's position, Bodnar said "private individuals simply owning exotic animals does not contravene any existing municipal bylaw. No commercial use involving exotic animals has been created on any property and there is no application to do so before the municipality. The municipality will follow the advice of its lawyer."

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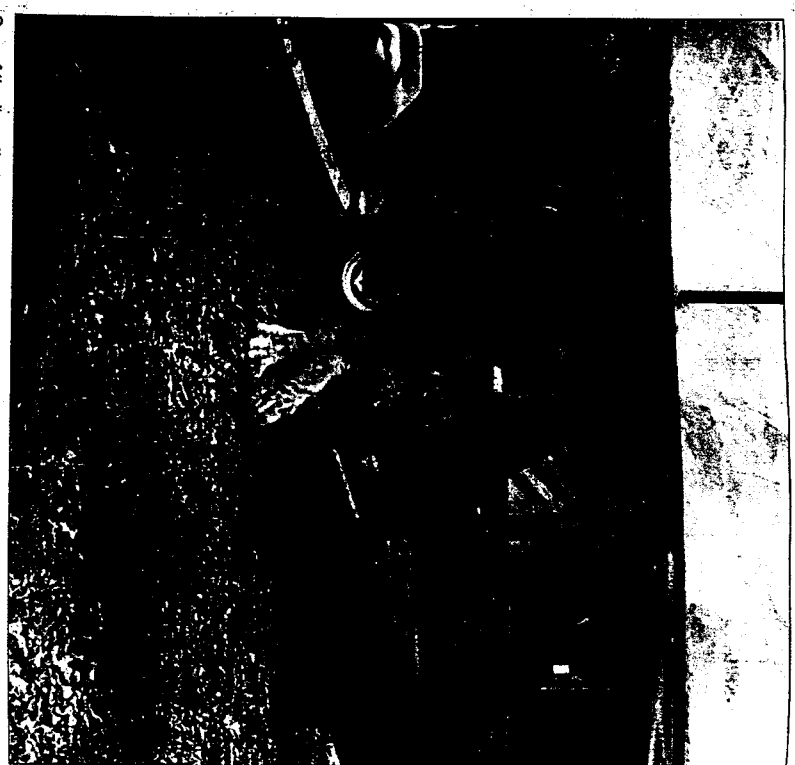
Tourists from all across the globe have stayed with us here, and if the municipality prefers the exploitation of exotic animals over the safety of its community and the people that work hard to keep it relevant, then I have no problem moving our operations to an area where the people's voices matter.”

—Joshua James

Joshua James is one of the residents along Peterson Road who is uneasy with the idea of having eight lions and two tigers living next door to his home and business. Describing what he calls council's "inaction" as "disheartening," he said he has decided to put his property up for sale and leave the community.

"My cottages have hosted over 400 guests in the past three years," said James. "Tourists from all across the globe have stayed with us here, and if the municipality prefers the exploitation of exotic animals over the safety of its community and the people that work hard to keep it relevant, then I have no problem moving our operations to an area where the people's voices matter."

James said he has received an overwhelming amount of support from people throughout the community and beyond. He is urging residents



One of the lions that exotic animal owners Mark and Tammy Drysdale are allegedly planning to use for entertainment purposes at the "safari experience" business they are allegedly planning to operate in Hastings Highlands. Submitted by Joshua James

to remember council's response regarding this issue during the next election. James said he is working closely with lawyers to explore all legal ramifications pertaining to council's response. Regardless of the outcome, he said he hopes that the community is able to maintain the peaceful and tranquil environment that has made Hastings Highlands a popular tourist destination, and a "sanctuary of Canadian heritage."

The Bancroft Times reached out to the Drydales for comment, however they were not available for comment as of press-time on Monday. Pick up a copy of next week's edition of The Bancroft Times for a look into the Drydales side of the story.

Tender Care
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Queen Who?
I am a rock singer born in Ohio on January 5, 1969. I worked for a music magazine interviewing to break into journalism.
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