

Ten Problems with the Zoological Association of America

Formed in 2005, the deceptively-named Zoological Association of America (ZAA) is a Florida-based zoo trade organization with approximately 500 members and 65 member facilities, including poorly run roadside zoos and private menageries. ZAA promotes the private ownership of exotic pets and the commercialization of wildlife. In contrast, the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) is a highly-regarded and established zoo trade organization with 6,000 zoo and aquarium professionals, organizations, and suppliers worldwide and nearly 240 accredited facilities. Accreditation by the AZA ensures that knowledgeable and experienced professionals provide care for animals in a safe environment at modern facilities. In response to criticisms about its woefully inadequate standards, ZAA has duplicated portions of standards developed by the AZA, but implementation appears to be severely lacking.

- 1.** ZAA accredits facilities that failed AZA accreditation for serious problems such as financial instability, failing infrastructure, misuse of zoo resources for personal profit by zoo executives, plummeting attendance, federal Animal Welfare Act violations, insufficient staffing, and inadequate animal care.
- 2.** ZAA accredits facilities with troubling records. Between 2010 and 2023, combined USDA enforcement actions against 32 facilities accredited by ZAA include more than \$191,000 in fines, 21 official warnings, and 58 direct and critical citations issued when inspectors find serious conditions that adversely affect the health and well-being of an animal. At least 12 facilities that were once accredited by ZAA have closed.
- 3.** ZAA has an abysmal safety record. People have been injured by animals including an elephant, bison, orangutan, pygmy hippopotamus, lemur, tiger, lion cubs, bear, jaguar, and camels at ZAA facilities.
- 4.** ZAA appoints board members who violated AZA's ethics policy. While previously working at AZA zoos, ZAA board member Mike Kerr was expelled from AZA membership for ethics violations, including failure to ensure that animals were placed with those qualified to properly care for them. Former ZAA board chair Barbara Baker's AZA membership was suspended for six months after she knowingly misinformed others during a presentation.
- 5.** ZAA rejects progressive policies. ZAA zoos use outdated, abusive devices such as bullhooks on elephants, and ZAA opposed the Big Cat Public Safety Act, which bans both public contact with big cats and keeping them as pets. AZA bans bullhook use and supported the BCPSA, which became law in 2022.
- 6.** ZAA fears oversight. ZAA promoted a bill in Wisconsin that would exempt ZAA from regulatory requirements by the state wildlife agency, arguing they should be treated equally to AZA, which had an existing statutory exemption. In response, two Wisconsin AZA zoos supported removing the AZA exemption rather than weaken the law. The AZA zoos testified that there is no parity between ZAA and AZA and the AZA zoos' husbandry, veterinary, animal welfare, handling, transaction tracking, and other standards exceed state requirements.
- 7.** ZAA does not oppose keeping wild animals as pets, including animals such as sloths, kangaroos, kinkajous, coatimundis, raccoons, porcupines, fox, otters, skunks, opossums, capybaras, bats, and dangerous reptiles. AZA opposes keeping wild animals as pets because most people cannot meet their complex behavioral, social, nutritional, and psychological needs.
- 8.** ZAA members and facilities have sent animals to auctions and dealers who sell animals at auction or to hunting ranches. AZA facilities do not sell wild animals at auction because the animals can end up being used in unscrupulous ways, such as in canned hunts, circuses, roadside zoos, and sold as pets.
- 9.** ZAA has apparently developed no animal care manuals detailing professional animal care standards. The AZA's biologists, veterinarians, nutritionists, reproduction physiologists, behaviorists and researchers have developed nearly three dozen species-specific animal care manuals that often exceed 100 pages.
- 10.** ZAA lacks transparency. Unlike AZA, ZAA fails to publish publicly on its website, its committees, the purpose of each committee, and the committee members and their affiliations. In addition to publishing committee lists, AZA also publishes a list of accreditation applicants and invites "anyone wishing to offer comments, positive or negative" to email the organization.