Fatality File: Outdoor Animal Hazards

INCIDENT

There was a fatal mauling of a zoo intern by a lion that escaped from a locked pen.

Alexandra Black, 22, was attacked while cleaning an animal enclosure with other staff members. It was at least the 10th instance of an escape or attack by an animal at a privately-run North Carolina wildlife facility since 1997, according to the Humane Society of the United States.

Officials said the lion somehow escaped from a nearby pen and killed the recent college graduate just two weeks after she started working at the Conservators Center near Burlington, about 60 miles northwest of Raleigh. Sheriff's deputies shot and killed the animal before retrieving Black's body.

Before deputies fired on the lion, officials made several attempts to tranquilize it or hold it at bay with fire hoses, the Caswell County Sheriff's Office said.

It was not immediately clear how the lion escaped or whether it got out of the enclosure that was being cleaned. Staff said the lion never made it beyond the park's perimeter fence. The park was closed indefinitely as part of an investigation.

NEED TO KNOW

There are a host of problems for workers who work outside and in proximity to all sorts of animals. Some of these animals from spiders, snakes, lions are dangerous and obviously are capable of killing workers.

Protections, precautions and procedures must be in place to safeguard employees working amidst animals.

BUSINESS / REGULATIONS

In a statement the Centre said the lion named Matthai was a 14-year-old male born at the Centre shortly after his mother was placed there following a 2004 confiscation assisted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

No problems were found at the non-profit nature Center during inspections by the USDA in January 2017 or April 2018. A government inspector counted 16 lions, three tigers and two leopards among 85 total animals during the 2018 site visit.

A 2016 federal tax filing shows the Centre earned about $711.000 from gifts, grants and contributions while spending about $600.000 operating the Centre that year. An online public records search indicates the Centre faced state tax liens totaling thousands of dollars in 2017.

While the Centre is USDA-licensed, animal welfare advocates note that it’s not accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, which requires facilities to meet strict animal safety and security standards.

The Humane Society has urged North Carolina to go beyond the USDA licensing standards, arguing that it’s among four states with particularly lax laws on private ownership of dangerous wild animals.

The organization pushed for a 2015 bill to make it illegal to own lions, tigers and other wild carnivores unless a facility was accredited by AZA or met other strict standards. The bill passed the state House but not the Senate.

“The longer North Carolina does nothing as other states continue to pass stricter and stricter laws, North Carolina is going to see people coming into the state with their collections of dangerous wild animals, and the problem is simply going to grow,” Lisa Wathena, the Humane Society’s director of captive wildlife protection, said in an interview.

The Centre was founded in 1999 as an “educational non-profit

dedicated to providing a specialized home for select carnivore species," according to its website. The site says it houses 21 species and gets more than 16,000 visitors annually after starting public tours in 2007.

A Centre spokeswoman, was not available to discuss safety and security. The Centre acknowledges its lack of AZA accreditation on the site.

Black, who was from New Palestine Indiana, graduated from Indiana University in May with a degree in animal behavior. She had also recently worked at a research and education centre in Battleground, Indiana, known as Wolf Park, which is home to wolves, bison and foxes.

A bright, promising life was tragically ended. There were numerous heartfelt comments about Alexandra Black.

As she tried to narrow down her interests to a specific field, she became intrigued with animal husbandry, said Wolf Park Managing Director Dana Drenzek.

"What made her a really good fit was her passion and intelligence," Drenzek said. Black would do research on her own and come back with questions.

Black's "passion was the zoological industry. This person wanted to spend a lifetime around these animals, and I believe that the family was very supportive of that," said Mindy Stinner, executive director of the facility.

Cara Wellman, director of IU's Center for the Integrative Study of Animal Behaviour, recalled that Black was an undergraduate teaching assistant for introductory biology.

"She was very energetic and committed to animal behavior and pursuing a career in animal husbandry."

STATISTICS

Animal attacks are a cause of human injuries and fatalities worldwide. According to the 2012 U.S. Pet Ownership & Demographics

Sourcebook, 56% of United States citizens owned a pet. In the United States in 1994, approximately 4.7 million people were bitten by dogs. The frequency of animal attacks varies with geographical location. In the United States, a person is more likely to be killed by a domesticated dog than they are to die from being hit by lightning according to the National Safety Council.

Animal attacks have been identified as a major public health problem. "Unprovoked attacks occur when the animal approaches and attacks a person(s) who is the principle attractant, for example. In 1997, it was estimated that up to 2 million animal bites occur each year in the United States. Injuries caused by animal attacks result in thousands of fatalities worldwide every year. All causes of death are reported to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention each year. Medical injury codes are used to identify specific cases. The World Health Organization uses identical coding, though it is unclear whether all countries keep track of fatalities caused by animals. Though animals, excluding some tigers, do not regularly hunt humans, there is concern that these incidents are " …bad for many species 'public image'."

PREVENTION

This was clearly an "accident" that was "preventable". Alexandra Black did not need to die. It was clear that USDA licensing standard in North Carolina were far too lax on private ownership of dangerous wild animals.

It is also noteworthy that the Centre was not accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums. This association requires facilities to meet stricter animal safety and security standards.

Had the Centre been subject to more strict regulation per AZA standards, there is a likely probability that Ms. Black would be still working today at the Centre.