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GOING GOING GONE!

A LITTLE-KNOWN AUCTION CIRCUIT THAT STRETCHES FROM OHIO TO TEXAS IS SELLING THOUSANDS OF EXOTIC ANIMALS, FROM MONKEYS AND LEOPARDS TO GENETIC NOVELTIES LIKE "LIGERS" AND "ZORSES." IT'S A $100-MILLION-A-YEAR BUSINESS—AND GROWING. ~ By Jim Mason

VIDEOGRAPHY BY STREET VISIONS

At noon in Macon, Missouri, Lolli Brothers' stuffy, windowless sales arena is packed with people. Under a sea of cowboy hats and camouflage caps, all eyes are watching the bidding on Watusi cattle, an African breed with improbably huge horns. The auctioneer's pitch blasts from the speaker system like machine-gun fire, and after several bursts, it stops. A pregnant cow in the caged-in ring below is sold for $5,800. Gates open, handlers shout, and she trots from the ring, snorting and switching the air with her horn span.

Soon another auctioneer takes the microphone and stirs up bidding on a run of miniature cattle, then zebu, a dewlapped, humped type of domestic cattle common in Africa and Asia. I get up and meander about—out to the stalls and pens where people are huddled in groups, muttering. The usual air of a country fair is missing today; the mood here is down.

Only a couple of hours earlier, a man had been fatally gored in the Lolli Brothers auction ring. As hundreds watched that morning, a water buffalo cow had attacked her owner, thrown him across the ring, and pinned him against a fence. The cow then charged and injured another man when he tried to rescue the owner. Observers said the cow had reacted in defense of her three-month-old calf, who was also up for sale.

Now, outside the arena, braced by September's clearest air and sun, it somehow seems surreal that by evening this auction will be offering fainting goats—a breed with an inherited muscular defect called *myotonia congenita,* which causes the animal to stiffen and fall after a hand clap or some sudden stress. The sale is sanctioned by the International Fainting Goat Association, whose logo shows a goat flat on its back with its legs straight in the air.

By week's end, Lolli Brothers auctioneers had sold ostriches, rheas, moose, elk, various kinds of deer, kangaroos, llamas, camels, zebras, miniature horses and donkeys, primates, cats, birds, and reptiles—10,000 animals in all. And those were the live ones. Some 1,000 head and full-body taxidermy mounts also changed hands during the six-day Fall Exotic Animal and Bird Sale, which was touted as "the largest sale of its kind in the world."

Lolli Brothers is the epicenter of a broad belt of exotic-animal auctions that stretches from Ohio to Texas. These sales have been "proliferating like mad" in recent years, according to Richard Crawford, an acting assistant deputy administrator for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service. Together with dozens of magazines such as *Rare Breeds Journal* and *Animal Finders' Guide,* the auction circuit helps feed a market in rare and unusual animals that now exceeds $100 million a year,

BY WEEK'S END, LOLLI BROTHERS AUCTIONEERS HAD SOLD 10,000 ANIMALS IN

CAMERAS ARE NOT ALLOWED INSIDE THE LOLLI BROTHERS AUCTION HOUSE IN MACON, MISSOURI. BUT AN AUDUBON HIDDEN CAMERA RECORDED THE ABOVE SCENES:

according to industry leaders' estimates.

Some of them say it's nothing new, that people have owned unusual animals and birds for generations. "We're not the new kid on the block," says Pat Hoctor, publisher of *Animal Finders' Guide.* "We've been around a while." Others, including Maureen Neidhardt, editor of *Rare Breeds Journal,* say the current boom started roughly 20 years ago, when zoos began selling their excess animals on the private market, mostly in North America. Through brokers and dealers, the animals have gone to private collectors, breeders, trainers, drive-through zoos, and hunting preserves.

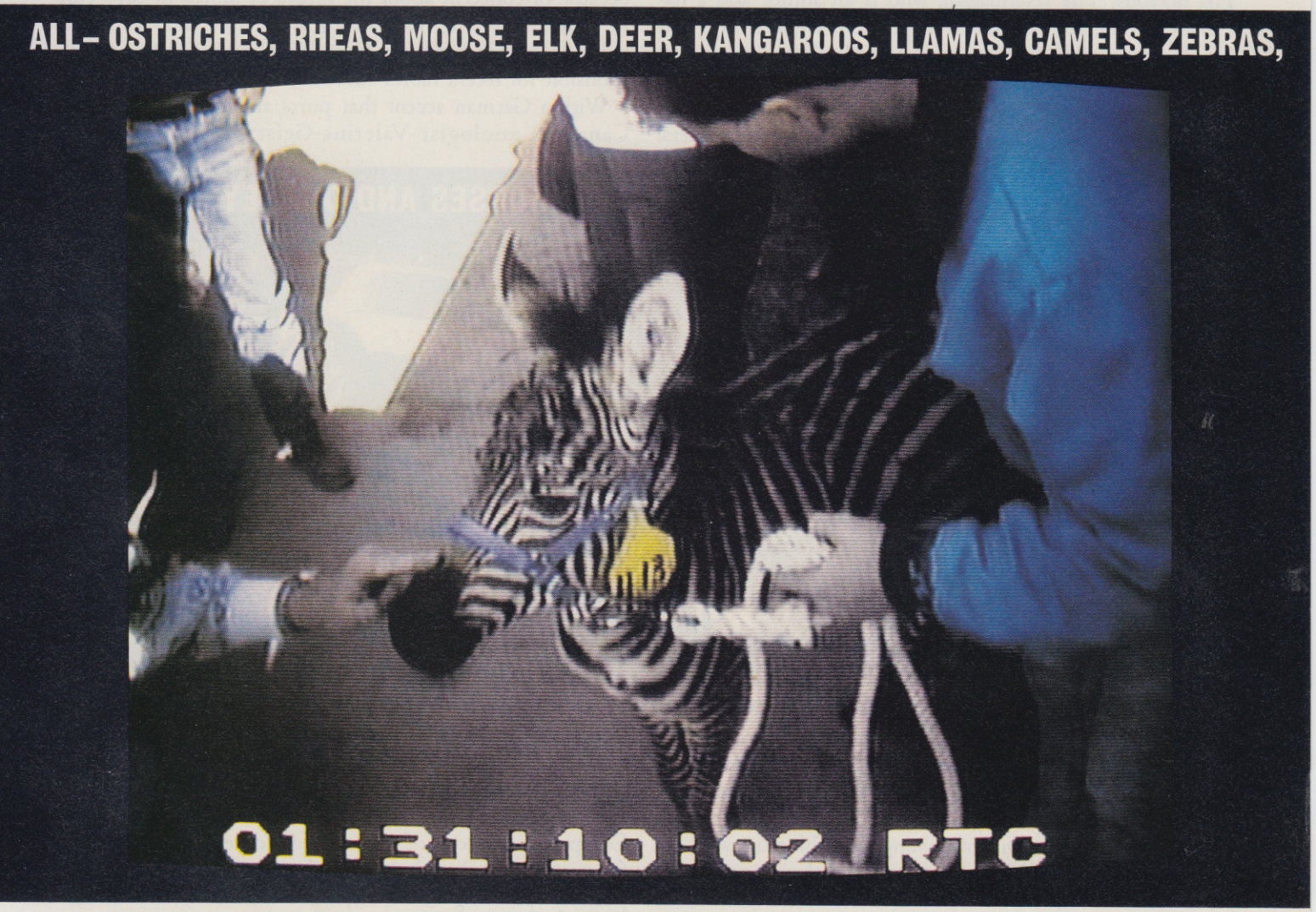
Now, however, zoos claim to be choking off the supply. They are responding to reports—including a January 1990 story on CBS's *60 Minutes* and a 1992 *Audubon* article (see Incite, January-February 1992)—that animals from publicly supported zoos were ending up in "canned hunts" on private preserves and being shot like fish in a barrel. But thousands of animals and birds usually found in zoos, including endangered species, are already in private hands and are caught up in the flood of commerce. Enough, apparently, to breed an industry that feeds on the public's fascination with exotic animals—rare animals, beautiful birds, ugly reptiles; the cute and the cuddly, the dangerous, the wild, and the weird.

The recent boom in business has stirred up a chorus of complaints. With exotics readily available, critics say, many fall into the hands of careless, naive owners and suffer or die of neglect. Some escape and hurt people. Escaped exotics can also harm native wildlife by preying on it, competing for habitat, spreading disease, and polluting the gene pool.

For some critics, the often freewheeling trade raises deeper questions about our dealings with animals: Should wild species be selectively bred to make docile, cute pets? Should we propagate miniature animals and other mutations for our amusement? Should endangered species be farmed so that everyone can own a last piece of the wild?

Wind of these criticisms probably led to some of the gloom in the crowd at Macon last September. But most of it came from the deadly goring that had occurred that morning. The incident brought still more grief for exotic-industry insiders—more bad press, more unpleasant visibility.

You could see the tension in some of the signs posted about the Lolli Brothers compound: "No cameras or recording devices," said one. Another was a laundry list of required government permits, disease tests, and health papers, as well as details on cage sizes and materials. Several fliers called for a meeting to form a national organization to protect and defend the rights of breeders, dealers, and owners of exotic animals—or "alternative livestock," as they prefer to call them.



LEFT, OSTRICHES, WHICH CAN SELL FOR $10,000 OR MORE, WAITING THEIR TURN IN THE AUCTION RING; RIGHT, A THREE-WEEK-OLD ZEBRA THAT SOLD FOR $3,000.

MONITOR SHOTS BY STEVEN FREEMAN

At an earlier fall auction in Ohio, I watched the bidding on a run of bottle-raised black bear cubs, several lynx, and a six-month-old female coyote—"leash-broke and raised with children," according to the auctioneer. Behind me, a couple had a small spotted cat on a leash; I asked them about it. The animal was a two-month-old male leopard kitten; "you just raise him like a dog," they told me. Another couple nearby had three tiny monkeys—all in diapers. A crowd of about 100 milled about, waiting for the sale of macaques, capuchins, squirrel monkeys, tamarins, grivets, and other primates to begin.

These are the sales that make pet experts like Michael W. Fox nervous. The veterinarian, who is an author and a nationally syndicated columnist on pets and wildlife, says that nondomestic animals offer more trouble than companionship. "They are not biologically adapted to live with humans," he says. "Some of these animals can be dangerous." If they escape, as many do, or are released by frustrated owners, Fox says, some species can spread diseases to domestic livestock and native wildlife that can be "quite devastating."

Ohio's public health veterinarian, Kathleen Smith, has examples on file. "I hear the horror stories," she says. "People are getting a big kick out of owning something unusual. It's fine when it's young, but it grows up, and they are probably not ready for what they have to deal with." She pulls a file and tells of a Carroll County, Ohio, man who kept a wolf at his weekend farm. Half-starved, the wolf escaped in May 1989 and stalked and attacked a boy who had gotten off a school bus. Smith also notes a pet cougar's 1990 attack on a two-year-old Ohio boy and then on his grandmother when she tried to rescue him. "You can hear these from just about any state public health official in the country," she says.

In Missouri, David Erickson, assistant chief of the wildlife division of the state Department of Conservation, cites the disease risks. He tells about a free-ranging group of Japanese macaques that were finally rounded up last fall near Branson—a town famed for its country-music shows and hordes of tourists. An Asian species that can thrive in temperate regions, the monkeys had been roaming back and forth for years between the Ozark forests and Wilderness Safari, a local tourist attraction. The animals tested were found to be infected with simian herpes—a virus that Erickson says is "fairly harmless to them but fatal to humans."

Luckily, the feral macaque population was recaptured before it could menace tourists or native wildlife. "These monkeys can forage and virtually eliminate native birds," Erickson says. "They can get right up into the treetops and raid nests."

Erickson points to the diseases that can be transmitted by the introduction of any nonnative wildlife. Missouri allows neither the possession of skunks nor the import of raccoons because of concerns about the spread of rabies, he says. And he notes there is a "very strong suspicion" that the movement of captive raccoons from southeastern states was responsible for recent rabies outbreaks in the Northeast.

With a German accent that purrs and lilts like a brogue, Canadian zoologist Valerius Geist distills the list of problems caused by runaway exotic species: interbreeding, competition, transmission of disease. The University of Calgary professor has been an outspoken critic of North American elk ranching for the Asian horn market, noting that a European subspecies of elk—called red deer—were escaping from some ranches, hybridizing native American elk and possibly spreading bovine tuberculosis. Geist gives other examples of how exotics can harm native wildlife. The mouflon—a wild species originally from Iran that is believed to be the ancestor of domestic sheep—presents native sheep with all three major threats cited by Geist. Oregon has held up reintroduction of native bighorn sheep for fear that escaped mouflons would ruin their chances of survival.

Geist also mentions Asian sika deer and African aoudads, or Barbary sheep—both favorites with exotics fanciers. The aoudad, he says, "has been liberated in the southern states, it now may be shot on sight in Arizona, and it will almost certainly outcompete the bighorn sheep very rapidly once they meet." Although sika deer cannot interbreed with American species, "they are very tough competitors," Geist

WATUSI CATTLE, WATER BUFFALO, MINIATURE HORSES AND DONKEYS, PRIMATES,

AT THE LOLLI BROTHERS MARKET (LEFT TO RIGHT): THE ENTRANCE TO THE AUCTION BARN; A CAMEL BEING LED BY ITS HANDLER THROUGH THE PARKING LOT; A WALLABY,

says, "and they outdo white-tailed deer very quickly and efficiently." He goes on, talking of Asian sheep, European moose, European foxes, and the kinds of threats they could pose to North American wildlife.

Such talk makes people like Debbie Kolwyck angry. Kolwyck, who raises primates, elk, deer, and various other exotics at her home near Kansas City, is president of the Missouri Animal Association. She says she understands the concern about dangerous animals. "We're not comfortable with somebody with a tiger in town. It's like waiting for an accident to happen." But she believes exotics owners have a constitutional private-property right to keep their animals if they maintain them properly. "We have more control over caging our exotics than people do with Jersey bulls," she says.

Pat Hoctor says as much, but with a great deal more indignation. His editorials in *Animal Finders' Guide* lash out at "do-gooders," government officials, humane societies, zoos, environmentalists, and the rest of the motley pack of critics that is hounding his industry. In California, Wyoming, and Arizona, for example, such criticism has led to bans or severe restrictions on the possession of species whose presence could harm native wildlife or people. Louisiana, New Hampshire, Wisconsin, and South Carolina have significantly tightened their controls in recent years. Not far behind are Missouri, Ohio, Indiana, and Colorado, where new laws or regulations currently are being proposed.

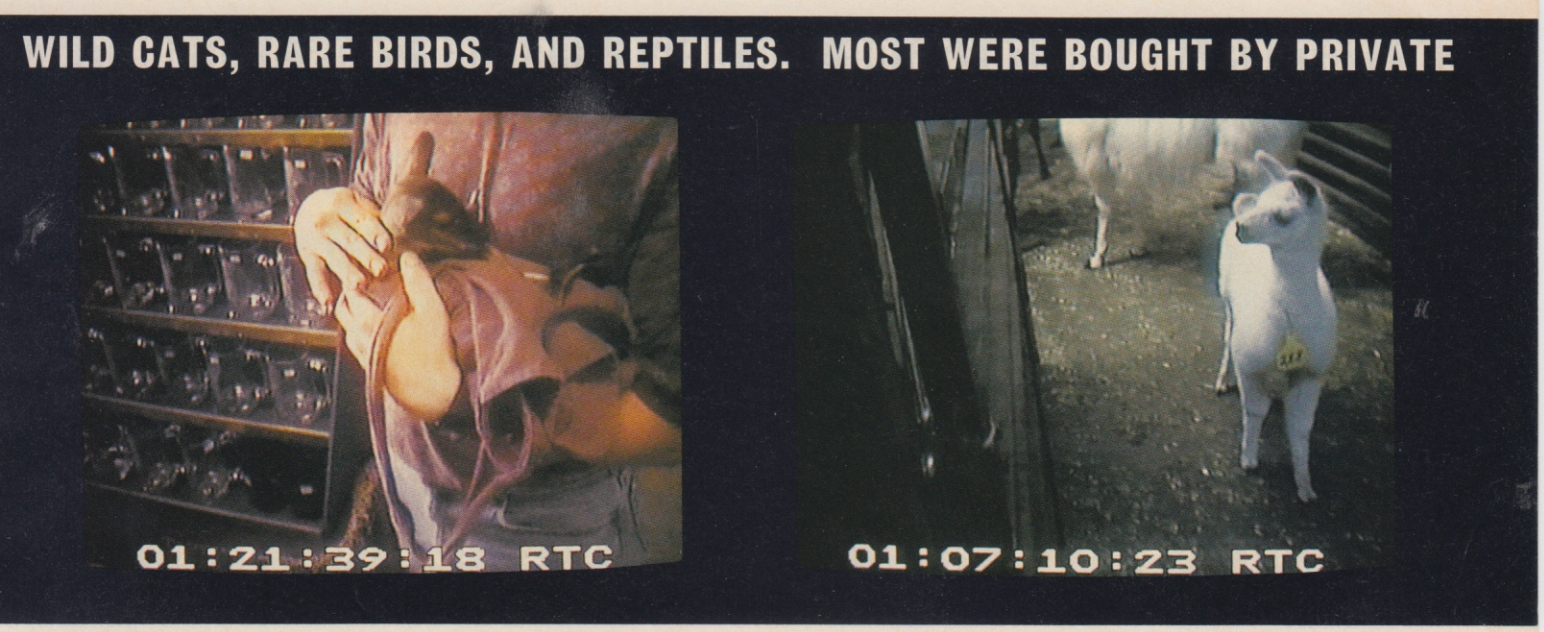
Feeling surrounded by the baying critics, Hoctor, who raises and sells exotics near Prairie Creek, Indiana, insists that his industry is "very, very responsible as a whole" in the management of its animals. "The problem is," he says, "when a cougar bites a kid in California, you read about it in New York. It's a media problem, actually."

Hoctor doesn't think much of state fish and game officials either. "It's very easy to understand why fish and game departments don't like us," he says. "What good are we to them? They don't know a damned thing about us, so they feel very inadequate regulating us. And where does their money come from? From selling licenses to shoot animals."

For a $500 stud fee you can have your very own "zorse" or "zonie," according to an advertisement in the September-October 1992 issue of *Rare Breeds Journal.* These offspring of zebras and horses or ponies are becoming trendy, as are "zedonks," hybrids of zebras and donkeys. For $700 you can buy one of Hoctor's "liger" cubs—a hybrid of a male lion and a female tiger—says an ad in the *Animal Finders' Guide* of November 1, 1992. (Ligers are "the nicest animals we've ever had in the way of cats," Hoctor says.) Another advertisement in that issue lists lions, a cheetah, and leopards for sale "to approved and licensed premises"; also "eland, kudu, impala, oryx," and other animals "directly from Africa." Yet another ad lists several white tigers, a snow leopard, and a clouded leopard ("hand raised") for sale from the Tanganyika Wildlife Company in Wichita, Kansas.

In the December 1, 1992, *Animal Finders' Guide,* one ad offers wolf cubs, another, wolf-dog hybrids. On another page an Indiana couple advertises "stocking stuffers"—rhea chicks, cougar cubs, and exotic sheep. In the January 1, 1993, issue a Missourian offers a six-week-old chimpanzee for $25,000. In the February 15 issue, a Floridian offers "cougars, $500; African leopards, $1,250; North Chinese leopards, $1,250–$1,500; Bengal tigers, $1,000–$1,500; snow leopards, $5,000–$7,000. All bottle-raised and well adjusted."

The laws protecting these exotic animals are not nearly as stringent as you might expect. Commercial trafficking of endangered species such as chimpanzees, cheetahs, leopards, wolves, and tigers is prohibited under federal law. But you can get one straight from the wild if your reasons persuade the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which can issue permits under the Endangered Species Act if the animal is needed for "scientific purposes or to enhance the propagation or survival of the species." If you register with Fish and Wildlife, you can buy an endangered animal born in captivity in the United States. To make matters more complicated, if you are trading a native endangered species across state lines, a permit is needed for every transaction, but if you are trading exotic endangered species you need none, provided that you



WRAPPED IN A CANVAS SACK INTENDED TO SIMULATE ITS MOTHER'S POUCH, BEING HELD BY A YOUNGSTER WHOSE FAMILY JUST PURCHASED IT; A BABY LLAMA IN A PEN.

and the person with whom you are trading are registered.

You need not have a Fish and Wildlife permit, however, to buy from an endangered-animal breeder in your state, because the federal government has no jurisdiction over intrastate transactions. Nor do you need a permit to own a liger or some other hybrid of an endangered species, because they are deemed nonmembers of the species. As for lions, cougars, zebras and their hybrids, and other nonendangered animals, it is perfectly legal to own one for a pet as long as you comply with state and local laws.

Welcome to the confusing array of laws that are supposed to keep rare wildlife in its native habitat and out of the auction ring. This crazy quilt of state statutes and local ordinances is so diverse and rapidly changing that an attempt to sort it out just might fry the circuits of an IBM mainframe. Bear in mind, too, that even where the laws are stringent and clear, enforcement often is inadequate.

With such a complex legal tangle, it's no wonder Pat Hoctor, Debbie Kolwyck, and their industry feel unfairly regulated. And it's no wonder that government authorities feel overwhelmed—or that so many animals, individuals as well as entire species, fall through the gaps.

There are two sets of legal protections: international and domestic. The flow of rare animals from foreign habitats into the United States is controlled primarily by the federal Endangered Species Act and the 118-nation Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), which are supposed to protect rare creatures from being destroyed by commercial demands. The problem is that the laws allow exceptions, and these create most of the confusion and the regulatory burdens.

Domestic protection of endangered animals also suffers because of what some see as the bungled implementation of the Endangered Species Act. Critics zero in on the captive-bred wildlife-registration system, by which the Fish and Wildlife Service allows ownership and domestic trade in endangered animals if they were born in captivity in the United States and are used for propagation, education, and purposes that enhance conservation. This system is supposed to keep captive-bred animals out of the stream of commerce.

But does it? "Something is very wrong" with the captive-bred registration system, according to Donald Bruning, curator and chairman of the Department of Ornithology at the Wildlife Conservation Society (formerly the New York Zoological Society). "Because of the way the system works—or doesn't work—anybody or his brother has been able to get a permit. So you have all kinds of people who can legally move animals back and forth. They breed any number they want, they sell them to whomever they want, they take them to shoot them, use the skins, do all kinds of things with them, which, to me, are very inappropriate for endangered species."

Even the Fish and Wildlife Service acknowledges problems with the captive-bred registration system, though in guarded, official language. "Yes, there's a lot of concern," says Kenneth Stansell, deputy division chief of the Office of Management Authority. "We have had ten years or so to look at the system, and we now realize that we need to take another look at it." His office is currently drafting new regulations.

Bruning, who has been consulted in the draft process, thinks the new regulations are probably on hold until after Congress reauthorizes funding for the Endangered Species Act, which is expected later this year. Meanwhile, the registration system's wide gates remain open.

I asked the Fish and Wildlife Service how many captive-bred endangered animals are now in the United States. They have figures on pheasants and some birds but "no reliable estimates" for chimps, tigers, leopards, and the like. This concerns zoo professionals like Michael Hutchins, director of conservation and science for the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums (AAZPA), who urges that endangered animals be bred only within programs organized or recognized by AAZPA zoos.

"The question is, why are so many [captive-bred] permits being given out?" asks Hutchins. The Fish and Wildlife Service says that as of 1990 there was a total of 850 individuals, zoos, and companies registered to trade in captive-bred en-

COLLECTORS AND BREEDERS OR FOR DRIVE-THROUGH ZOOS AND HUNTING

LEFT TO RIGHT: A CAGED CAPYBARA, A TYPE OF LARGE RODENT FOUND IN CENTRAL AND SOUTH AMERICA; A SCARLET MACAW; A FOX THAT WAS AMONG THE 1,000 TAXI-

dangered animals. But Hutchins estimates that maybe twice that number are actually doing captive breeding—and only 160 of them are AAZPA-accredited institutions. Though Hutchins won't point fingers, most of the country's captive breeders of endangered species clearly are the people who would like to be known as the alternative-livestock industry.

Maureen Neidhardt of *Rare Breeds Journal,* who is also an exotic-animal farmer, argues that her industry has "a very, very successful rate of preserving these animals," although she acknowledges there is "a bit of a rift" between exotics breeders and the zoo community over this issue. Conservationists say otherwise. The breeders' animals "are amateurly caged, amateurly cared for, and amateurly bred," says Sue Pressman, formerly director of captive wildlife for the Humane Society of the United States and now a private consultant.

"These quasi-zoologists will tell you that they are saving the tiger and the lion and the whatever-it-is in their backyard," says Pressman. "But if you talk to the zoo people they will tell you these are genetically dead animals." She maintains that no legitimate public zoo will buy anything from these exotic breeders because their animals are often inbred, hybridized, or otherwise not genetically fit for bona fide conservation programs. Such programs carefully organize all breeding, according to Hutchins, ensuring close monitoring of the gene pool of a captive population of endangered animals. The long-range aim is to keep the population genetically healthy so the animals will have a better chance of surviving when it becomes possible to return some to the wild.

How did the captive breeding of endangered animals get so out of control? Most experts in and out of government say it happened because there simply hasn't been much concern about captive-bred animals. The real emphasis has been on protecting wild-caught animals, on reducing the numbers being taken from natural habitat. Neither government officials nor conservationists have regarded captive-bred populations as very important in the grand scheme of conservation. The burden of closely regulating them, they say, would paralyze authorities and keep them from the more important work of protecting animals in the wild.

The good news is that most experts now realize that turning captive-bred animals into commodities hurts all conservation efforts. It keeps a price on the head of endangered animals, which encourages corruption and illegal trade. It also undermines educational efforts to build respect for the very animals we are trying to save in their habitat.

Perhaps we have been too single-mindedly focused on endangered species. If we truly want to save them and what's left of the natural world, we ought to consider the implications of the commoditization of nonendangered wildlife and freaks of nature. It does not help build respect for zebras and lions when those in captivity are turned into dancing acts and zorses and ligers. Nor does it help build respect for nature when one wild species after another is captive bred, bottle raised, and domesticated for the pet trade. And what about some of the other limits of domestication? What values about the living world are passed along when it is trendy and profitable to breed miniature horses and fainting goats?

Interestingly, many people I talked to felt disgust about the propagation of ligers, zedonks, fainting goats, and the like, but hardly anyone could explain what is wrong with it. It was just a gut reaction, hard to verbalize, they said. One said, "God almighty, whether you believe in God or what, these creatures are the products of millions of years of evolution. Just leave them to hell alone."

In a conversation with Pat Hoctor, I suggested that many saw the making of ligers, white tigers, wolf hybrids, and some of his industry's other new products of entrepreneurial breeding as frivolous—even offensive. Hoctor took offense. "I hope you realize you're talking to the biggest breeder of ligers in this state." He argued that the liger gave zoos and safari parks a healthier, more vital "crowd-getter" than the white tiger. Hoctor noted that white tigers are heavily inbred and have a lot of health problems, so many have to be destroyed. He dismissed the critics. "What I'm saying is, if that animal is of use to us and we are caring for it properly, what business is it of theirs?"

RESERVES. IT WAS TOUTED AS "THE LARGEST SALE OF ITS KIND IN THE WORLD."

DERMY MOUNTS SOLD DURING THE SIX-DAY LOLLI BROTHERS AUCTION; A YOUNG CAPTIVE-BRED ZEBRA THAT WAS SEPARATED FROM ITS MOTHER WHEN IT WAS SIX DAYS OLD.