

Bear Necessities

adapted from a guest column for Michigan Local News by Brittany Peet, PETA¹⁾ Foundation



- 1 Kind people are drawn to facilities that rescue animals, a fact that many for-profit breeders, dealers and exhibitors use to their advantage. Claiming to offer refuge to animals in trouble brings visitors through the gates and donations in the mail. Case in point: Oswald's Bear Ranch, a roadside zoo that shamelessly markets itself as a rescue facility, even though it has only taken in three orphaned cubs in the last decade. By contrast, it has bred 13 cubs in the past 24 years and purchased or received 70 others from shady captive-breeding operations for use in photo ops.
- 2 This roadside zoo's owner, Dean Oswald, treats vulnerable bear cubs as 28. In the wild, cubs stay with their mothers for years, and premature separation of cubs from their mothers causes extreme distress to both. Experts believe that a cub's immune system does not fully develop until after about 12 months, but apparently, that's of little concern when there are coffers to be filled. Oswald has taken cubs as young as 6 weeks old to a bar.

- 3 Bear cubs can catch common human illnesses such as colds and the flu. Removing them from their mother before the period of natural weaning causes abnormalities in brain development that can lead to stereotypic (neurotic) behavior, compromise natural exploratory and social behavior, and can be detrimental to their mental and physical well-being throughout their lives. Bears avoid contact with humans, whom they perceive as predators, and being forced into close proximity with the public causes them to feel trapped and vulnerable. Such exposure is a constant, never-ending stressor. When not being used as photo props, bears at Oswald's exist in conditions that are incompatible with their needs. Cubs are confined to a concrete-floored enclosure, which can lead to foot injuries and is particularly damaging to young cubs, as their developing musculoskeletal systems are fragile and can easily be injured if they run or jump on a hard surface.
- 4 As a Michigan native, I find it infuriating to see this kind of blatant animal exploitation in my home state. 30 Take notorious tiger abuser Jeff Lowe, who was featured in Tiger King: he lived in Michigan for many years and kept big cats there. When I was a kid, I used to visit a park in nearby Mt. Pleasant. There, a bear named Smoky paced around his cramped pen. He has been dead for a long time, but his suffering motivated me to fight to ensure that other bears would not be sentenced to a life of exploitation.
- 5 Bears belong in the woods, not in the arms of the public. If you care about animals, never pay to interact with wildlife. Urge Oswald's to let the cubs and other bears be transferred to legitimate sanctuaries so they can spend the rest of their lives in comfort and peace.

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noot 1 PETA = People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals