

## 2016 FCF Big Cat Census

By Kevin Chambers

The FCF did its first big cat census in 2011. We have just completed a five-year follow-up to establish population trends in the big cat species: tiger, lion, cougar, leopard, cheetah, jaguar, snow leopard, and liger, as well as the number of facilities holding each.

We further broke down the facilities into three classifications: sanctuaries,



**The population of U.S. captive tigers has seen a dramatic decline in the past five years. This white Bengal tiger on exhibit at the Catoctin Zoo is included in the population of 545 tigers held by zoos, and the zoo population is outnumbered by more than two to one by tigers residing in sanctuaries. Photo by Kelly Hahn.**

zoos, and “all others.” The information was gathered through Freedom of Information Act data along with personal communication. The numbers reflect the number of cats and facilities found in 2016. It is known that two major sanctuaries (Serenity Springs Wildlife Center and Spirit of the Hills Sanctuary) have closed since the time this census was taken. The census information will be put up on the FCF website. The information has been broken down by species as well as by state. This should prove to be

invaluable in countering the ludicrous estimates made by animal rights groups when trying to influence legislation.

Overall, the total number of big cats in the United States fell from 6,563 in 2011, to 5,144, a decrease of 22%. The total number of facilities holding big cats fell 24%, from 718 to 548. These statistics show that the aging population is disappearing at a disproportionate rate to the number of births, as well as many facilities discontinuing the keeping of big cats. Considering that the average litter size of big cats is three, the number of births is dramatically down, to account for a 22% decrease. The number of big cats kept in sanctuaries went from 2,519 to 2,004 over this period, a loss of 20%, while the number of sanctuaries was down 8%, to 87. The zoo population stayed relatively stable, with only a 4% decrease to 1,966 big cats. By far and away, the greatest change occurred in the “other” sector. Forty-six percent (46%) of the cats either died in the last five years or were transferred to the sanctuary sector, leaving 1,068 big cats in 228 facilities. Forty-one percent (41%) of this sector closed their doors on the keeping of big cats.

We will now analyze the census numbers by species. Tigers remain far and away the most populous of all big cat species. The United States population was 2,330 in 2016, down 23% from the 2011 population of 3,013. They reside in 379 facilities, having lost 22% of their homes. Sanctuaries held 1,231 tigers in 2016, which is 53% of all American tigers. The number of tigers in sanctuaries is down 15% from the previous number in an unchanged number of sanctuaries. The zoo population decreased 27% to 545 tigers, largely due to the phasing out of generic tigers. The number of zoos holding tigers only fell 12% over this five-year period. Once again, the “all other” sector was hardest hit, losing 32% of its tigers and 36% of facilities. The 2016 numbers stood at 554 and 119 respectively. It should be noted that there were 13 generic tigers imported into the United States over this time period. These tigers all went to sanctuaries in non-breeding situations. The generic tiger exemption ruling for the Endangered Species Act was removed in 2016, making permits necessary for the interstate sale of all tigers. This will complicate sales and most likely will have a

negative effect on the population growth.

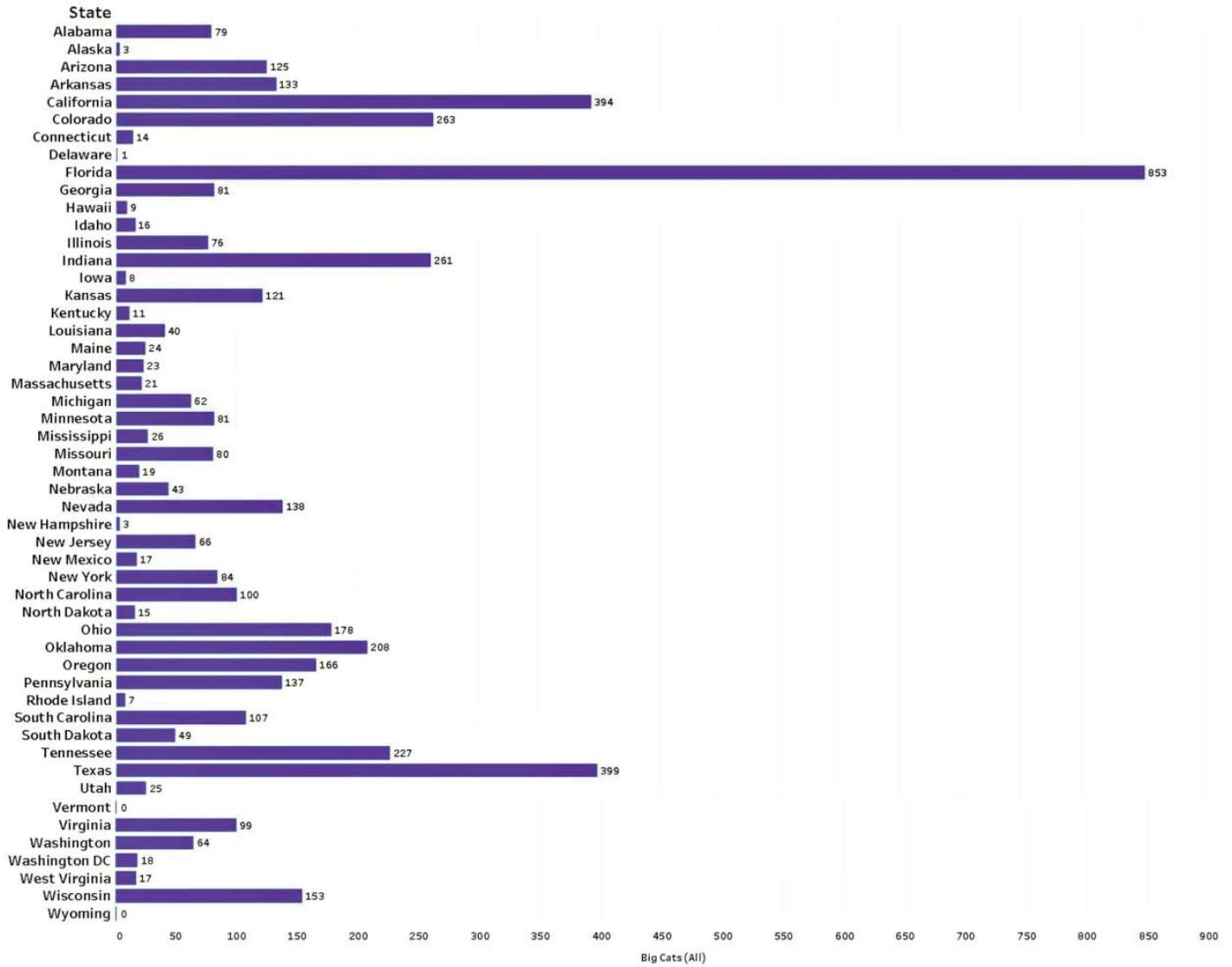
Lions came next in popularity. In 2016, 1,046 lions were found in 275 facilities, a 17% drop in animals and a 17% drop in facilities keeping them. Thirty-five percent (35%) of lions were held in sanctuaries. The sanctuaries held 362 lions in 61 facilities. The drop in these was 16% and 5%. The zoo population was stable at 489 lions in 142 zoos, which were only two less lions kept in 8% fewer zoos. The “all other” sector once again had a significant drop of 43% less lions, down to 195. The drop in other facilities was 37%, down to 72 places with lions. There were 56 lions imported into the U.S. by one sanctuary and another lion by another sanctuary. Lions were also placed on the Endangered Species Act in 2016. This will undoubtedly decrease the number of lions bred if the history of other species holds true.

Cougars felt the largest negative impact in the last five years of any of the eight species examined. The 43% decrease of cougar numbers to 674 cougars nationwide was dramatic. Thirty-one percent (31%) of the facilities stopped keeping cougars, leaving only 287 with them. The 244 cats in 31 sanctuaries represent 35% of the total population. The sanctuary sec-



**Of the seven species of big cats, cougars felt the largest decline. This cub on exhibit at the Panther Ridge Conservation Center is a true rarity. Photo by Jamie Thody.**

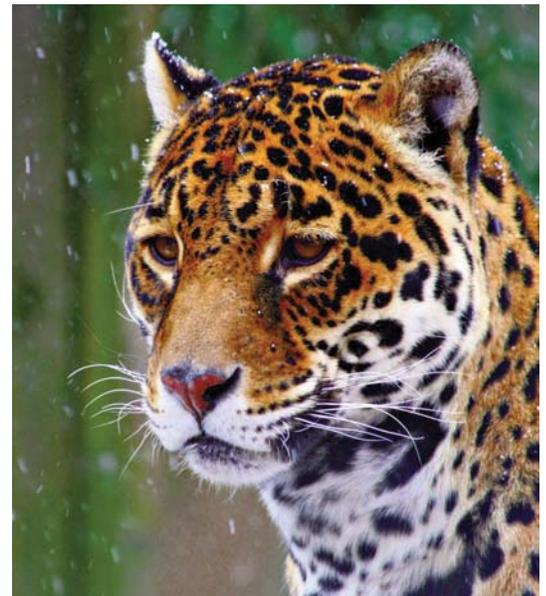
Bar - All Cats/State



Sum of Big Cats (All) for each State.



(Right) The 2016 FCF Feline Census documented a slight increase in the jaguar population. This growth is restricted to the zoo sector. Pictured here is one from the Catoctin Zoo in Maryland. Photo by Kelly Hahn.



(Above) Amur, African, and Asian subspecies of leopards make up the captive population. Amur leopards are intensively managed by the AZA zoo system. This leopard resides at Frenchak Farms Zoological Conservatory. Photo by Courtney Frenchak.

tor felt a 38% drop in cougars and a 56% drop in facilities keeping them. Zoos remained relatively stable again with 196 cougars in 100 institutions. The change was only 8% and 5% fewer. The all other sector reeled with a 78% drop in cats with 49% fewer facilities keeping them. There were only 121 places holding 127 cats in 2016. Another notable statistic is that there are 96 facilities holding only one cat in the zoo and all other sectors. These animals are effectively removed from the potential breeding population unless transferred to a facility with a mate. Both the zoo and sanctuary sectors currently have non-breeding policies for cougars. The captive population holds a very bleak outlook if these trends continue. The only positive light is that cougars are now the only big cat species not on the Endangered Species list.

Leopards fared only a little better. The overall number of leopards fell 36% to 367 leopards in 175 American facilities. The number of facilities dropped only 17% overall. Fifty-three (53) sanctuaries, 9% less, had 136 leopards, which was 38% less than in 2011. The zoos had 27% fewer leopards while there were 11% fewer zoos, 63, holding leopards. It should be noted that the data with which we were provided did not specify the subspecies of leopard. AZA is working only with the Amur leopard and has mandated that all other subspecies of leopards in their member zoos be “managed to extinction.” The “all other” sector fell 42% to only 117 leopards remaining in 60 facilities. The number of facilities holding



**Snow leopard populations are also on the rise in zoos and only one sanctuary listed a snow leopard in their inventory. This one above resides at Catoctin Zoo. Photo by Kelly Hahn.**

leopards had a drop of 27%. As with cougars, a significant number of leopards are the sole member of the species kept at a facility, 56 in the zoo and “all other” segments. Another factor facing leopards is that these figures represent leopards in general and do not break out the subspecies known to exist within the United States, African, Asian, North Chinese, Persian, Amur, and subspecies hybrids. When these already low numbers are further reduced into the proper subspecies, it becomes a critical number left for each subspecies.

Cheetahs found a unique place within the census. While all other big cats, except snow leopards and jaguars, had negative population trends in the last five years, cheetahs had a significant increase. Cheetahs are kept almost exclusively by zoos. In the 1990s, they were breeding very well. Enough so that the AZA’s cheetah SSP imposed a moratorium on breeding. When the moratorium was lifted, the cheetah population was either too old to breed or simply would not breed. This resulted in AZA importing dozens of cheetahs from Africa for a new start. These imports are now well established and are breeding freely. ZAA zoos have also done importations that are breeding well. Since AZA will not allow any of their stock to be dispersed to non-AZA members, it can be expected that breeding restrictions will soon be imposed so that they do not exceed their available space. Nationwide, there are already many facilities that house over 20 cheetahs each. The past five years saw an increase of 58% in the cheetah population, up to 386 speci-

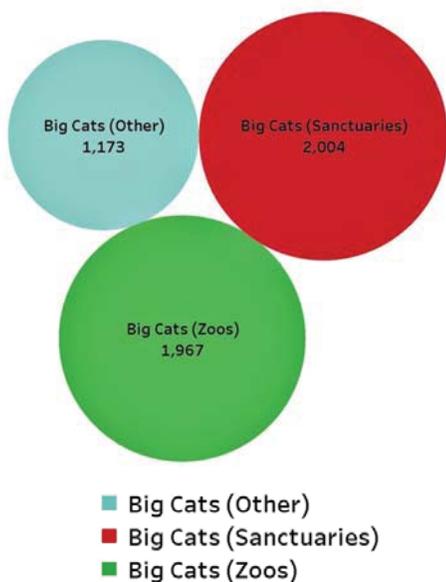
mens housed in 70 facilities. Zoos keeping cheetahs increased by 53%. Only five cheetahs in 2016 were housed in three sanctuaries and 17 in six non-zoo settings.

Jaguars also saw a slight increase in numbers on the whole. They were up 15% to 140 animals in facilities, which was up 10%. This growth was restricted to the zoo sector, which increased by 24% and 18%, to 110 jaguars housed in 53 zoos. The sanctuary population remained unchanged with six animals at five places. All other facilities saw a

decrease of 11% to 24 jaguars in nine facilities. Outside of the zoos, the jaguar population is in dire straits. It is very likely that they will disappear from the private sector soon.

Snow leopards are another species kept almost exclusively within the zoo realm, yet the number is increasing outside of zoos. Snow leopards are up 26% overall, with 164 in 70 locations, up by 15%. There remained only one snow leopard in one sanctuary and the “all other” segment was up 29% to 18 animals in nine locations. The overall population is foreseen to remain constant or with slight increases in the coming years.

Ligers, while not a naturally occurring species of wild feline, do exist in captivity. There have never been many, nor is it likely there ever will be, since they are hybrids and do not breed. The fact that the Endangered Species Act considers a hybrid to be classified the same as the lowest level of the two parent species means that ligers are now considered endangered with the elevation of lions to the endangered level in 2016. Previously, ligers were not considered endangered since one of the parent species, the lion, was not endangered. This will make it more difficult to sell ligers. It is doubtful that there will be any significant changes in the liger population in the future. In 2016, there were 37 ligers in 18 homes. This was down 14%, while the number of holding facilities increased 50%, up from 12. It should be noted that 51% of all ligers reside in sanctuaries with a population of 19.





Sum of Sanctuaries, sum of Zoos, sum of Other and sum of All for each Year1 broken down by State. Color shows sum of All. The view is filtered on State, which keeps 51 of 51 members.