



Photos by MEI-CHUN JAU/Staff Photo

Tilk, a 4-year-old female tiger, lives with Charles and Rita Ehrhardt of Scroggins, Texas.

# Big cats, big questions

It's up to Texas counties to regulate ownership of lions, tigers and cougars. Are owners, neighbors and animal-welfare advocates on a collision course?

By STEFFI KAMMERER  
Staff Writer

On the morning of his mid-September trial, Charles Ehrhardt put on a T-shirt with the American flag. He thought it would remind the judge of what it stands for. "At least the America I thought I live in. I thought, on my own property I could do whatever I wanted."

And for him, that includes having three tigers and a lion in his yard. But in Franklin County, Texas, there are limits.

Last year, Texas required counties to regulate dangerous animals through an extensive permit process or to ban ownership. With this, Texas joined the majority of states, which control the private possession of exotic animals as pets.



Charles Ehrhardt plays with Tilk, one of four exotic cats he and his wife own.



George, a male tiger owned by the Ehrhardts, gets 15 pounds of meat daily.

There had been no regulation since the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department ended its oversight of exotic animals in 1997. As a result, Texas, with its wide-open spaces, became a haven for wild animals.

The Ehrhardt case is an example of a classic confrontation between Texas' spirit of individualism and the competing interests of public safety and animal welfare. The laws regulating the ownership of exotic cats in Texas are still taking shape, putting private owners at odds with neighbors and animal-welfare activists.

Nobody knows for sure how many big cats live in Texas households. State Rep. Toby Goodman, R-Arlington, estimates about 10,000. Patricia Mercer, director of the Houston Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, agrees with that number. "At least," she says. "I guess there are 3,000 in the metropolitan areas alone. There are certainly more than 500 in Houston."

Two weeks ago, Ms. Mercer says, she seized her latest tiger from a private owner near Houston. It was in a makeshift cage attached on the top of a...

er. The animal was pregnant and weighed 160 pounds. It should have been at least 400 pounds. The tiger died within 48 hours.

It's easy to get a big cat. They are advertised in special magazines and on the Internet. "Lion, tiger, cougar, hand-raised and on the bottle, 1 go," states a typical ad. Prices range from \$300. Celebrity tiger owners, like Michael Jackson and Mike Tyson, increase their appeal.

But cute little critters grow into potentially uncontrollable beasts.

All over the country, attacks have alarmed the public. In Texas, three children have been injured in recent years. Last October, a 10-year-old boy in Lexington in Kentucky was killed by a pet tiger. A year before, a 4-year-old's arm was ripped off by a pet tiger kept by her father in Channelview, near Houston. In 1999, a 10-year-old girl was killed by her stepfather's pet tiger in York...

# Should big cats be allowed as pets?

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near San Antonio.

None of their animals would ever do anything like this, Charles Ehrhardt and his wife, Rita, argued in the Mount Vernon Courthouse. Ms. Ehrhardt told the judge that her animals "have no instincts left." She believes they are scared when a kitten or a chicken comes near them.

"People say they are wild, but you really have to go to a dictionary to see what wild is," Mr. Ehrhardt says. "They are 100 generations away from wilderness."

Teresa Parker, the neighbor who filed the complaint, offered a different perspective. Her house is next to the three mobile home lots, which the Ehrhardts bought in May. One of the lots is occupied by their house, the two others by the animals. Two of the big cats are in cages the size of a child's bedroom. The other two are staying in a transport trailer until their cage is finished. They can turn around, but can't do much more.

Ms. Parker says she is afraid to let her 8-year-old son play outside. She had 400 residents in the Mount Vernon area sign a petition asking that the cats be removed.

Judge Paul Lovier said the Ehrhardts violated the law. Keeping wild animals in Franklin County is prohibited, no matter what license you have, no matter how well the animals are cared for. He issued them a fine of \$400 for every day the animals stay where they are.

Almost a month after the trial, Mr. Ehrhardt has still not moved the cats. The fines are adding up, but he has not paid anything. With his income as a construc-

tion worker, there's no way he can afford it, he says. If they don't pay, they may be arrested.

"This is a violation of constitutional rights." He's considering moving. He would never give his animals away, he says. "If I have to, I'm ready to go to jail."

He thinks of himself as a rescuer. He has collected the animals over the last three years, he says. The first one was 3 months old — a pet-store owner gave him the tiger cub for free. He adopted the others from people who could not care for them anymore, he says.

"I play with them every day. We cuddle, wrestle, roll around the yard. It's part of their enrichment, part of their lives." And, yes, he has been bitten. "But not severely."

He has been reading about tigers since he was a little boy.

"You get addicted to them. This is worse than any drug you can take." And he believes the animals could not live without him and his wife. "They are so used to us. They would get aggressive if we were not around."

## Uneven administration

The Ehrhardts might find fewer legal problems in other counties.

The state passed the law but left it up to the counties to enforce it. The effect is chaotic. Some counties officially prohibit the private ownership of big cats but do nothing to actually stop pet owners, says Robert "Skip" Trimble, a Dallas lawyer who has studied the issue for years.

Mr. Trimble works for the Texas Human Legislation Network, a grass-roots organization that works for laws that protect animals. He lobbied for passing the bill and says there is nothing



Photos by MEI-CHUN JAU/Staff P

Shera, a 3-year-old Chinese female tiger owned by Charles and Rita Ehrhardt, licks her paw.

wrong with the law. "But many counties, for whatever reason, are not enforcing it. Some might not want to deal with the paperwork of registration. Others decided to ban big cats but to make exceptions for certain individuals."

The situation around Dallas represents the confusion pretty well, Mr. Trimble says. Dallas County does not allow private ownership of wild animals. Collin County also prohibits private ownership but has a grandfather clause for people who kept wild animals and had a U.S. Department of Agriculture license on the day the ordinance passed. However, they are not allowed to breed the animals, and they have to register. Tarrant County and Denton County both prohibit

ownership.

Out of the 254 Texas counties, 22 decided that anybody can have a dangerous wild animal as long as it is registered, 166 counties ban ownership, a rule that includes shelters and roadside zoos. "I know of many sanctuaries that really should not be where they are," says Mr. Trimble.

About 35 counties have not set up the registration program required by the state, Mr. Trimble says. Regulations in the rest of the counties fall someplace in between.

The law states that people who got their certificate from the county have to send it to the Texas Department of Health within 10 days for notification. So far, the department has only received eight registrations for a total of 51 animals.

Mr. Goodman, the state representative from Arlington, asked Attorney General John Cornyn to issue an opinion reinforcing the law. Mr. Cornyn responded in early September, saying the counties need to take action.

"If they thought there was another way to interpret the law, they now know that this is not the case," says Mr. Trimble.

If the counties still don't comply, "we will have the attorney general filing lawsuits against them," says Mr. Goodman. Recently, a man told him that he saw a Bengal tiger and two cubs on a field in Central Texas. "I am sick of hearing stories like this."

## Big cat sanctuary

Carol Asvestas runs the Wild Animal Orphanage in San Antonio. It is a nonprofit sanctuary with 90 big cats. They come there malnourished, one's missing a leg, another is almost bald. They have been chained in basements, kept as guard animals by drug dealers, as props by photographers, as housepets.

In the past two months, Ms.

Asvestas has had 60 requests to place big cats in her sanctuary. "Now that some action is taken against the owners, they need to get rid of their animals."

She has to send everybody away unless they are willing to fund the \$12,000 cages. And they have to sterilize their animals.

"So what do you think people do if I cannot take them? Bring them to the vet and pay for their euthanization?" She doubts it.

She worries that if nothing is done, people will set some of the animals free to fend for themselves.

Ms. Asvestas was one of the founders of the American Association of Sanctuaries, a nonprofit group of shelters like hers. Two months ago she resigned. The standards were not high enough, she says. She did not want to be associated with shelters that play with their animals in public view, a dangerous practice that sometimes encourages people to buy the cats.

The existing law is not efficient in stopping the pet industry, she says.

"In some counties, all that breeders have to do is call themselves sanctuaries and keep breeding." She says out of the 300 to 400 shelters in Texas, 75 percent are "pseudo-sanctuaries."

The public is often misled by impressive sounding credentials, such as USDA licenses. To qualify for a license, you must only convince the officer who handles your case that you are a "knowledgeable and experienced animal handler," and that the cage is large enough for the animal to stand, sit and turn around in, says Jim Rogers, spokesman for USDA.

Since tigers have become so cheap, breeders let their animals have cubs two or three times a year to maintain their income, Ms. Asvestas says. The people who buy them may do so with good intentions. They might even

think they are saving a endangered species. But their knowledge is dangerous. The gentle behavior of a tiger is deceptive. Neither she nor her co-workers ever touch the animals — a precaution owners take.

Ms. Asvestas says that there were no need for a license. She wants private ownership of big cats to be stopped.

## The bigger picture

Relief may also come at the national level.

A coalition of animal groups, headed by the American Zoo and Aquarium Association and the Humane Society of the United States, is backing Captive Wildlife Safety Act, introduced in July by George Miller, D-Calif. The bill seeks to bar the interstate transport of pet bears and big cats.

"It is an attempt to stop the idemic proliferation of big cats," Wayne Pacelle, senior vice president of the humane society, says. "This alone would not be sufficient." He says private ownership of big cats needs to be banned on a national level.

After years of controversy, Texas has at least outlawed big cats in "canned hunt areas" where the animals are killed in a closed area. Mr. Pacelle hasn't heard about that law being broken. "But my guess is it happens, knowing the way the industry," he says. "It's too many unscrupulous people out there."

No matter the purpose, it is no justifiable reason to keep a tiger or a lion, he says.

"These are potentially dangerous animals and they belong in the wild, not languishing in a dirty cage in someone's yard," he says.

"A tiger in a community is a time bomb. It is not the question of if there will be a fatal incident, but when."



Rita and Charles Ehrhardt say their exotic animals don't pose a threat to neighbors. They are presently violating a court ruling that ordered the couple to remove their lion and three tigers from the premises.

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