

Deaths of 11 sanctuary animals spur controversy

Lion's Gate operators say safety issues drove decision to euthanize

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On the heels of Lion's Gate Sanctuary's denied bid to relocate, owners Joan Laub and Peter Winney had their remaining 11 animals euthanized on April 20.

The actions came seven days after the owners were denied the right to move the sanctuary, which was home to three lions, three tigers and five bears, from the eastern portion of Elbert County near Agate to a site just south of Elizabeth. The three county commissioners denied the application, citing an inadequate emergency operations plan,

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financial oversights and overall safety concerns.

"I asked Joan at the hearing, 'If you don't get approved to move, what would you do?'" County Commissioner Danny Willcox said. "And she said that they'd continue to take care of them and let them live out the rest of their lives."

The owners of Lion's Gate said the decision to euthanize the animals was about safety.

"We want to be clear we did not put our animals down because we were denied by the Elbert County commissioners. We put our animals down because it was no longer safe for them and no longer safe for the public," Laub and Winney said in a statement April 27. "This was made abundantly clear to the Elbert County commissioners. The commissioners were not concerned with the safety of residents around the Sanctuary, only the residents at the relocation site."

Patrick Craig, executive director of the Wildlife Sanctuary in Keenesburg, stated that his sanctuary had been contacted two weeks ago by Lion's Gate, but the message did not get relayed to him.

"I was unaware of anything," he said. "Even if I had gotten the message, it didn't say anything about euthanizing the animals. If I had known that, we would have taken them right away. That's what we do."



Duke, a tiger euthanized April 20 at Lion's Gate Sanctuary.

COURTESY PHOTO

Colorado Parks and Wildlife spokesperson Jennifer Churchill said the sanctuary owners were not required to notify the state agency prior to any measures taken to shut down the facility, including euthanasia.

The statement from the owners pre-

sented several reasons why they could not re-home the animals, including exposure to public viewing in other sanctuaries.

If the animals would have been moved to a location with public viewing, the statement said, "They likely

would have become depressed, hide in their den houses or develop symptoms of stress like pacing back and forth constantly and rubbing themselves right down to the bone," the statement said. "In most cases the stress would have killed them."

The animals' age and disabilities were also noted as reasons for not relocating the animals to another facility.

"For example, we had a 20-year-old lioness that was blind. Her habitat was set up so she knew where everything was. She knew our voices so we could guide her to come to us at feeding time," the statement said.

"It's not our egos, it's 40 years of collective experience and 10 years caring for these particular animals. Other sanctuaries that think they know better are grandstanding for the publicity," the statement said.

Public reaction has been furious on both ends.

"We are getting so much hate mail, phone calls," Willcox said. "People have this impression that we actually required them to kill those animals."

The Lion's Gate Sanctuary Facebook page lit up with comments opposed to the actions of the owners. Many people expressed anger that the owners did not do more to re-home the animals. Others are calling for an investigation.

"In all the conversations at the meetings, execution was never discussed or threatened," County Commissioner Grant Thayer said. "It's really, really strange for them, after all their hard work and good intentions, to execute those animals."