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Ohio animal massacre a devastating waste of life

Sharon Abercrombie | Oct. 24, 2011 Eco Catholic

A heartbreaking waste of life at both the human and animal levels took place in Zanesville, Ohio, last week. On Tuesday, Oct. 18, Terry W. Thompson, an exotic animal owner, unlocked the cage doors of more than 18 endangered Bengal tigers, 17 lions, eight bears and an assortment of wolves and monkeys. Then he committed suicide.

Deputies responding to a neighbor's phone call had no choice but to kill the aggressive, disoriented animals as they roamed the countryside in the rainy dusk near a major freeway interchange. Six members of the menagerie -- a grizzly bear, three leopards and two monkeys -- stayed in their cages. They were captured by Columbus, Ohio, zoo staff and taken to the facility for safe keeping. At this writing, one of the escaped monkeys remains at large.

"It's like Noah wrecking his ark right here in Zanesville," said Jack Hanna, director emeritus for the Columbus Zoo and Aquarium, after surveying the scene.

Hanna told a *Columbus Dispatch* reporter that conditions at Thompson's 45-acre farm were "absolutely horrific and filthy." In 2005, Thompson was convicted of animal cruelty and two other related convictions.

A former gun dealer, Thompson had returned home a few weeks ago after serving a year in prison for federal firearms violations. Federal agents said he had an illegal collection of automatic weapons and sawed-off rifles and shotguns. His wife, Marian, had recently left him, according to the newspaper.

A *Dispatch* editorial last Sunday, Oct. 23, cited the Zanesville incident as an illustration of "what the thoughtlessness of humans can mean for animals out of their element. These animals did not deserve death. Because of the actions of their keeper, Terry Thompson, officers have been forced to put them down ... to protect the public.

"Ohio's lax regulations make it easier to own a jungle cat than a dog," said the editorial. "Session after session, the General Assembly has declined to handle the exotic animal problem, letting proposed legislation die."

In 2010, then-Gov. Ted Strickland issued an executive order banning anyone convicted of animal neglect or abuse from owning an exotic animal, but the order lapsed in April. An Ohio Natural Department of Natural Resources official said his department had "determined that the agency never was given the legal authority to enforce the ban."

Several words from the *Dispatch* editorial strike home at the heart level: "What the thoughtlessness of humans can mean for animals out of their element."

This Eco Catholic writer views the Zanesville tragedy as another example of our persistent "power over" mindset regarding creatures and the natural world. Blessedly, while there are growing numbers of compassionate people at the grass-roots level who are working to heal the planet, our predominantly industrial,

profit-driven economic model still insists that everything on the planet belongs to us to be used as we see fit. The results play out as misery, suffering, and for some species, impending extinction, not to mention environmental ruin for our forests, mountains, rivers and oceans.

Look at the polar bear. Its icy home is melting because of global warming and fossil fuels, methane gas and the disappearance of trees.

Look at the Sumatran tiger in Indonesia -- a victim to Asian Pulp & Paper's destruction of the rainforest.

What about the dolphins living near drilling rigs that must swim through oily gunk in order to get to the surface so they can breathe?

Or consider the cows, pigs and chickens. They are no longer allowed to graze naturally and eat what nourishes them, but are instead fed foods to quickly fatten them up for our dinner plates.

If we go back to the beginning of the modern environmental movement, we can also ask: What about those poor robins that keeled over on people's lawns when they were poisoned by DDT, as documented by biologist Rachel Carson in her 1962 book, *The Silent Spring*?

Yes, thoughtlessness still prevails. If we continue along its path, we will find ourselves unwilling members of the caravan called extinction. Failing to walk in the footsteps of our feathered, furred and finned friends and identify with them will ultimately be to our peril.

Poet James Bertolino reminds us in his poem *Like a Planet* (published in his 1995 *Snail River* volume):

To survive
our minds must taste
redwood and agate,
octopi, bat, and in
the bat's mouth,
Insect. It's hard
To think like a planet.
We've got to try.

My next Eco Catholic story will feature information about a ritual called The Council of All Beings. It is an experiential process that helps us acknowledge and give voice to the suffering of our world and describes council co-creator Joanna Macy, a Buddhist teacher and peace activist.

Macy's words coincide beautifully with those of Andrew Linzey's, author of *Christianity and the Rights of Animals*. B.J. Kelley quotes Linzey in a recent St. Anthony messenger article about St. Francis of Assisi:

"To love animals is not sentimentality but true spirituality. To go out of our way to expend effort to secure their protection and to feel with them their suffering and to be moved by it -- these are surely signs of spiritual greatness."

Kelley concludes that all life, human, the unborn, animals -- is sacred, "and if we put this potential into action, it will reflect our highest self."

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