



## Position Statement: Public Tours and Visitation Policy

**GFAS does not require sanctuaries or rescue centers to offer tours or other public visitation programs. Tours may be acceptable under the GFAS standards if the visits are guided, educational in nature, and meet other criteria that promote and protect animal welfare and safety.**

The GFAS standard on *Public Access, Viewing, and Tours* provides that access by the visiting public is always supervised and conducted in a careful manner that minimizes the impact on the animals and their environment, does not cause them stress, and gives them the ability to seek undisturbed privacy and quiet.

The intent of the standard is to allow sanctuaries and rescue centers to offer education programming and community outreach, recognizing that tours may form part of these activities. However, GFAS believes that tours should not in any way jeopardize animal welfare or the safety of animals and humans, or misinform visitors about natural behaviors of the wild animals viewed in the sanctuary. For this reason, certain criteria are expected to be met.

***Tours are conducted by sanctuary personnel and tour groups are of a size that allows for close supervision.***

GFAS takes the position that any tours follow a protocol that ensures safety and minimal intrusion into animals' environments. For this reason, tours are to be guided by appropriate personnel (staff or volunteer), with the tour group being small enough to stay within view so that no one is allowed to wander off to restricted areas, and any inappropriate behavior (such as taunting an animal or trying to reach into an enclosure) can be prevented or stopped immediately.

***The public does not have any direct contact with wildlife and is not given any opportunity to feed wildlife that involves direct contact (by hand feeding or by using a tool to place food into an animal's mouth).***

No wild animal needs to be handled by the visiting public. All too often, we read about facilities that call themselves "sanctuaries" or "conservation centers" that allow activities such as tiger cub petting, selfies with wildlife, or opportunities to have direct contact with wildlife through walking with the animals, hand feeding them, or other activities. This "pay to play" activity is never in the best interests of the animal, sends an inappropriate message about wild animals, and potentially threatens the animal's health (due to the risk of disease transmission) as well as the safety of both the animal and the public. Because tours under GFAS standards are expected to be educational in nature, they provide an opportunity for sanctuaries to educate the public about the need for sanctuaries and the reasons that animals come into captivity.

Additionally, individual animals of *any* species can be potentially dangerous; this can include equine and large farm animals. Sanctuaries and rescues should take care to prevent the public from coming into contact with those animals, for both the animal's welfare and the public's safety.

***The sanctuary does not deviate from normal protocols during tours and does not put animals on display or otherwise portray them as tractable or as entertainment.***

Visitors on tours may view sanctuary animals in their enclosures, but animals should have the choice to retreat from view (whether into a forested enclosure, a night house, or some other area that provides a visual barrier). Ideally, while it may not be possible in all facility layouts, areas that house easily stressed animals should be excluded from tours.

Animals are also not expected to be moved from their enclosures into a special area for viewing or "entertaining" visitors, nor should wildlife be presented in a way that suggests that they are tractable, *i.e.*, that they would make desirable pets. For this reason, actions such as walking wildlife on leashes or dressing them in human clothing are not acceptable. While visitors may observe animal feedings and participate in food preparation, food types and quantities are expected to be consistent with the animal's normal diet and provided according to the established feeding schedule.

***Animals being rehabilitated for a return to the wild are not available for public viewing.***

Animals that are potential candidates for release/reintroduction programs should have minimal exposure to humans. For this reason, enclosures housing such animals should generally be excluded from tours or other visitor programs, or included only when steps are put in place (*e.g.*, one-way glass barriers) to minimize any noise or visual stimulation other than what the animal would experience upon return to the wild. While not all rehabilitation candidates are ultimately deemed suitable for release, these limitations should be in place until such time that it is determined that the animal is in permanent sanctuary care and is moved to an enclosure that does not house other potentially releasable animals.