

April the Giraffe: The Dark Side of Breeding Giraffes for Entertainment

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Introduction

Animal Adventure Park, an unaccredited [roadside zoo](#) in New York with a history of violating minimal welfare laws, has just forced April the giraffe to give birth on camera yet again, exposing her to the world during one of her most vulnerable, intimate moments.

This report exposes the truth behind Animal Adventure's exploitation of animals, the conditions endured by captive giraffes like April and her offspring at roadside zoos, and the serious health and welfare problems that result. The world should be mourning—not celebrating—the birth of yet another giraffe who will spend his life confined to conditions that deprive him of everything that is natural and important to him.

Animal Adventure Park

Although most known for its exploitation of April the giraffe, Animal Adventure confines hundreds of other animals, including bears, kangaroos, lemurs, lions, monkeys, and parrots. Records obtained from the state of New York reveal that, in addition to profiting off of exhibiting these animals to the public, Animal Adventure also sells animals to other shady roadside zoos.

Because it is not accredited, Animal Adventure is governed only by the bare minimum standards of the federal Animal Welfare Act (AWA), whose enforcement is notoriously lax. Notably, despite the fact that the U.S. Department of Agriculture touts an AWA substantial compliance rate of 96%, Animal Adventures has been cited for numerous violations in the last few years alone, including inadequate veterinary care, allowing animals to escape, and endangering animal safety by allowing unsupervised public contact.

Reputable accrediting bodies generally prohibit public contact with captive wildlife, which is dangerous for animals and humans alike, and has been shown to undermine conservation efforts. Yet Animal Adventure encourages the public to interact with wild animals, often without

supervision, and charges hundreds of dollars for exploitative animal encounters, both on and off-site.

Contrary to claims by facilities like Animal Adventure, these encounters have nothing to do with conservation and everything to do with profit. April's calves and the other animals born at Animal Adventure will never be reintroduced to the wild and are instead frequently traded between shady roadside zoos to be exploited for profit. Study after study shows that captive animal displays have no positive conservation education value. In fact, recent studies have found that allowing direct human contact with imperiled animals—like the feeding and other public interactions that Animal Adventure promotes—can *undermine* legitimate conservation efforts by misleading people into believing that wild populations are more stable and healthy than they are and making them less likely to donate to conservation.

April, and especially the cute calves she so reliably and publicly births, are all part of Animal Adventure's money-making scheme. Baby animals are good for business and are exploited by roadside zoos as profitable commodities because of the influx of paying visitors they bring in. Unfortunately the public doesn't realize the sad future that lies ahead for these animals.

April and Her Calves

In the wild, giraffe calves suckle for up to two years, and female giraffes often stay with their mothers for life. But April was taken from her mother and bottle-raised at the notorious Catskill Game Farm, a roadside zoo in New York with a history of neglecting animals and selling them off to [canned hunts](#). April was spared this fate only to be used as a breeding machine, first at Adirondack Animal Land, yet another New York roadside zoo. There she was known as "Tiny" and was kept almost continually pregnant, giving birth to four calves in rapid succession: Autumn, Jase, Levi, and Jigsaw.

All four were taken from April prematurely:

- **Levi:** At just seven months old, Levi was sold and shipped off to Living Treasures Wild Animal Park, a roadside zoo in Pennsylvania. Transporting giraffes—the world's tallest animals—is psychologically and physically distressing and extremely risky. Because it can be life threatening, transporting giraffes should only be done when absolutely necessary. Yet for roadside zoos like Animal Adventure, transporting giraffes is business as usual.

Living Treasures, which has a history of prematurely removing baby animals from their mothers, has used Levi for breeding. The roadside zoo has faced federal enforcement action for failing to provide adequate veterinary care to numerous animals and for feeding animals improper and contaminated food. It has also been [cited for a host of other animal welfare violations](#), including animals with untreated infections and injuries, filthy enclosures, failure to protect animals from the elements, and failing to provide drinkable water.

- **Autumn:** Autumn was taken from April almost immediately after birth in an appalling effort to prevent her from “stay[ing] a wild animal” and to try to make her bond with humans rather than giraffes. Reportedly Autumn has been or will be transferred to another roadside zoo for yet more breeding.
- **Jigsaw:** At just four weeks old, Jigsaw was shipped to [Zootastic](#), a notorious roadside zoo in Troutman, North Carolina. Despite the very serious risks inherent in transporting giraffes, since acquiring Jigsaw, Zootastic reportedly also acquired another neonatal giraffe calf last year—this one just one week old.

Zootastic has faced at least four enforcement actions for violating federal animal welfare laws, including, most recently, a [fine](#) for failing to provide numerous suffering animals with veterinary care, allowing an employee to be attacked and seriously injured by an animal, allowing an animal to escape and be killed, confining animals to cages with excessive buildups of feces, and more. Despite these enforcement actions, Zootastic has continued to rack up animal welfare violations, including recently for putting giraffes and other animals at risk of disease by forcing them to eat from unsanitary food receptacles that were coated in brown grime, and for endangering animals and the public by allowing unsupervised public contact.

Zootastic frequently removes baby animals from their mothers to exploit them for photo ops and other public encounters, causing the animals stress, trauma, and increased risk of illness. Jigsaw was forced into public contact when he was only four weeks old and dragged to public appearances including to a local news studio. Zootastic has even allowed *unsupervised* public contact with giraffes, including calves, putting the animals and the public at risk of injury.

- **Jase:** Adirondack Animal Land sent Jase to The Wild Animal Park in Chittenango, New York, well before his second birthday. This roadside zoo has been cited for numerous animal welfare violations, including inappropriate diets, failing to provide sufficient shade for animals to find relief from the sun on hot days, unsupervised public contact, and failing to provide adequate veterinary care to a zebra with overgrown hooves, which can pose a risk of injury and gait abnormalities.

The Wild Animal Park hopes to breed Jase.

In 2017, after being transferred to Animal Adventure, April’s birth of yet another calf, Tajiri, was livestreamed. Tajiri has since been separated from his mother and confined to an enclosure with a newly acquired female giraffe in the hopes that they will breed.

Roadside Zoos Like Animal Adventure Deprive Giraffes of Everything That Is Natural and Important to Them

Giraffes are highly sensitive and social animals who exhibit behavioral and psychological indications of stress similar to those expressed by primates, elephants, and other highly social and far-ranging wild animals. Captive environments can exacerbate this stress by failing to provide the animals with proper social groupings, space, and enrichment, all of which discourages their ability to exhibit natural behaviors.

1. April and Her Offspring Are Denied Their Complex Social Needs

Giraffes have complex social structures that are governed by a wide range of variables including relatedness, age, range, and personal preferences.

Particularly for females, mothers and their offspring sometimes stay together for life, even over multiple generations in some cases.

Giraffe calves are generally not completely weaned until at least one year old, and suckling can continue from around nine months to one-and-a-half or even up to two years. Mother and calf bonds may remain strong even beyond the nursing period, and the time when the calf will decide to leave, if ever, cannot be predicted.

Studies have found that giraffes maintain strong social bonds regardless of variable environmental conditions, and one study found a dramatic increase in abnormal, stereotypic behavior in two giraffes at a zoo after a companion was removed.

Despite these complex social needs, April was separated from all of her calves when they were between the ages of a few weeks old to a year and a half.

2. April and Her Offspring Are Deprived of Space to Roam and Opportunities to Engage in Normal Behaviors

April and her offspring are held in enclosures that represent a tiny fraction of their natural range, and are denied opportunities to engage in their most basic behaviors, including using their long tongues to explore and search for food. Such chronic deprivation can lead to abnormal behaviors that are clear indications of psychological distress and frustration, including abnormal pacing and repetitive, compulsive tongue movements.

In the wild, giraffes have ranges of up to 1,200 square miles and spend many hours of the day and night browsing for leaves, shoots, and fruits from tall trees. Giraffes are in fact *the* example used in classrooms across the planet to illustrate the principle of natural selection because their extremely long necks evolved to reach the tallest trees, allowing them to thrive by carving out a unique role for the species in their natural habitat. Yet roadside zoos often confine giraffes to inadequate and barren enclosures.

Giraffes evolved to live on the warm African savannah and, as a result, are particularly susceptible to disease during times of cold stress. Needless to say, giraffes do not do well in New

York. And yet, April and her calves are held in New York and other parts of the United States that have very cold winters. As a result, they likely are locked away for days, weeks, or even months on end in tiny barns like those April can be seen in on Animal Adventure's YouTube. These stalls have no trees, no space to roam, no sweeping savannas to explore. Deprived of an appropriate environment, giraffes at roadside zoos routinely suffer boredom, frustration, and psychological distress.

3. Giraffes at Roadside Zoos Are Frequently Fed Improper Diets

Giraffes at roadside zoos are commonly fed high energy food concentrates that are consumed quickly and do not fulfill their physiological or nutritional needs, nor their psychological need to utilize their long and powerful tongues for browsing the treetops. As ruminants, giraffes require a high-fiber diet and natural grazing/browsing activities. Decreased rumination is common in captivity, and is linked to inadequate nutrition, which can ultimately lead to problems such as peracute mortality syndrome, chronic wasting, laminitis, and behavioral problems such as oral stereotypy, all discussed further below.

Low fiber, high carbohydrate diets can also cause gastrointestinal dysfunction in giraffes, resulting in mucosal damage, ulcers, oral stereotypies, and acidosis. One study found that 50% of captive giraffes surveyed suffered from gastrointestinal pathology associated with inadequate roughage in the diet.

Substandard Conditions Like Those at Animal Adventure Can Cause Serious Health Problems

Substandard conditions like those detailed above have serious repercussions, causing a wide range of health problems for giraffes, and even premature death. Indeed, captive [giraffes have died prematurely by the dozens in the United States](#).

1. Peracute Mortality Syndrome/Serous Fat Atrophy and Sudden Death

Captive giraffes are predisposed to a mysterious syndrome that causes sudden death without pre-existing evidence of disease or illness. Historically, this syndrome was referred to in the literature as "peracute mortality syndrome," but recent studies have noted that the common finding in these cases on necropsy is serous fat atrophy around the heart, a condition where the fat reserves of the body have wasted. Therefore, the term "serous fat atrophy" or SFA, is now frequently used in the literature to refer to this disease.

Although the underlying pathophysiology of this disease is still not fully known, it is typically linked to cases of chronic malnutrition, specifically inadequate total energy content of the diet.

Giraffes have unique nutritional needs and cannot survive solely on grass and alfalfa hay as other ruminants can because when the energy content of the feed is not sufficient, they will not compensate for their energy imbalance with increase in intake. Thus, a proper and balanced diet is essential for normal giraffe energy balance and to safeguard against disease.

Death by serous fat atrophy is more likely to occur in colder climates in the wintertime, which supports an etiology of malnutrition and insufficient energy reserves required for thermoregulation in cold climates.

2. Kidney/Bladder Stones

A condition of the urinary tract found commonly in captive giraffes in which minerals develop and build up in the bladder and urethra (“kidney/bladder stones”). If they become large enough they can result in complete or partial obstruction of the urinary tract, most commonly of the urethra of castrated male ruminants, and may result in rupture, uremic crisis, and death. It is associated with the feeding of high nutrient concentrates and has been reported in a number of studies as a cause of death in captive giraffes.

One study surveyed the feeding practices at 41 captive institutions comparing giraffe blood and urine nutrient levels and found that giraffes in at least half were being fed an imbalanced diet, specifically too much phosphorus, which could predispose giraffes to urolithiasis. The study also highlighted that “[t]he feeding practices of giraffes in the wild would be extremely difficult to duplicate in captivity in North America. While it would be ideal to be able to provide enough live browse to sustain giraffes in captivity, economic and practical factors disallow browse from becoming a dietary majority in North American institutions” ([Sullivan et al.](#), 2010).

3. Abnormal Tooth Wear

Studies show that captive giraffes have a much different pattern of tooth wear over their lifespan than wild giraffes and it is speculated “that the abnormal wear pattern in captivity compromises tooth function in captive giraffe, with deleterious long-term consequences” ([Clauss, 2006](#)). During a single year two giraffes at one zoo died of similar digestive and dental complications including worn teeth, gum disease, bloat, and wasting, and recently at another zoo an 11-year old giraffe died while under anesthesia for a dental procedure to treat a condition that was a threat to his quality of life.

4. Pancreatic Disease

Pancreatic disease of captive giraffes has been documented and resembles an exocrine pancreatic insufficiency (EPI)-like disease whereby the pancreas fails to produce adequate amounts of enzymes that are essential for healthy digestion. This condition is believed to be linked to nutrition and studies of normal serum values of pancreatic enzymes demonstrates that wild

giraffes have higher levels of lipase than captive giraffes. Lipase, an enzyme that helps breakdown fats, is deficient in cases of EPI, and thus the observation of higher rates of pancreatic disease in captive giraffes is consistent with this finding.

5. Laminitis, Overgrown Hooves, and Joint Problems

Laminitis, overgrown hooves, and joint problems are common in captive giraffes and are also predominantly believed to be linked to improper diet. In one study, more than half of the captive giraffe populations surveyed were reported to have at least one problem with the locomotor system. The husbandry circumstances associated with locomotor problems in these animals were: 1) being housed on concrete or asphalt, and 2) being fed diets with considerable amounts of non-forage feeds like concentrates ([Hummel et al, 2000](#)).

To exacerbate the problem, captive giraffes frequently go without routine hoof care due to their massive size / height and the risks of immobilization and restraint, which require specialized expertise and equipment. Overgrown hooves are a significant problem that can lead to deep cracks, foot infections, abscesses, and chronic lameness. These conditions can be extremely painful and may interfere with ambulation and even result in the death of an affected animal. Proper hoof care is essential for the health and well-being of the animal.

6. Neck Injuries

Giraffes are herd animals and are prone to flight in stressful situations, which has proven to be hazardous for these animals in captivity and makes them prone to fatal injuries particularly to the neck. Numerous captive giraffes have died at U.S. facilities due to neck injuries in recent years.

Such injuries are especially likely when transporting giraffes. When one of the primary giraffe transporters in the United States trucked a pregnant giraffe to a zoo, the animal arrived with a broken neck and extensive muscle damage—and ultimately died. Another giraffe hauled by the same transporter was euthanized after breaking his neck during unloading.

Roadside Zoo Conditions Also Cause Psychological Distress in Giraffes

Research has found that nearly *80 percent* of captive giraffes engage in *at least* one abnormal behavior, such as pacing and licking nonfood objects. Repetitive, abnormal behavior patterns such as these develop as a result of being held in chronically under-stimulating or stressful environments resulting in long-term stress, frustration, or deprivation. Factors that appear to be related to captive giraffe stereotypy include number of hours spent indoors, restriction of access to conspecifics, feeding frequency, method of feeding, type of food provided, size of indoor enclosures, and environmental change.

Another study compared enamel in wild and captive giraffes of various ages to determine differences in enamel appearance related to stress. The study found that “[l]inear defects were

only observed in captive giraffes and those from unknown origins, indicating that wild animals are comparatively stress-free during the first 6 years of life.” ([Franz-Odendaal](#), 2004)

Conclusion

There’s no denying that baby giraffes are adorable, but incessantly breeding them in captivity serves only to entertain humans, and does so at a well-documented severe cost to giraffe health and wellbeing, as well as to conservation efforts. Anyone who cares about giraffes should turn off the giraffe cam and urge Animal Adventure to halt its self-serving giraffe breeding.