



**LIONS, TIGERS AND BEARS OH MY!: A SOCIOLOGICAL EXAMINATION  
OF THE ZANESVILLE, OHIO EXOTIC ANIMAL APOCALYPSE**

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**Abstract:** On October 19, 2011, a single individual unleashed an exotic animal apocalypse unlike any similar event preceding it. In Zanesville, Ohio, prior to committing suicide, Terry Thompson released over 50 exotic animals on his private farm, which included lions, tigers, and bears. This resulted in the death of 49 animals, 18 of which were on the endangered species list. This article traces Terry Thompson's bizarre behavior and probes the connections between the effects of deindustrialization on individuals who use coping mechanisms to counteract its deleterious effects. In addition, this article suggests policy directions for stricter laws regarding dangerous exotic animal ownership for the future to counteract the potential threat to citizens and property in surrounding communities.

**Keywords:** Exotic Animals, Coping, Animal Ownership

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## INTRODUCTION

After researching the social connections between animals and humans, especially exotic, wild animals and the meaning of human ownership of animals and/or their captivity, this research revealed with greater certitude the connections of these social conditions. This included to a larger extent associated social problems such as environmental degradation, inequality, and crime. The introduction of social science research in a field historically dominated by natural scientists, while somewhat new, has become a necessity due to the intersection of societal wishes and the natural environment's ability to successfully adapt to human desires.

It is necessary that environmental sociologists examine the problems associated with the ownership and captivity of wild animals. According to Andrew N. Rowan, "Anyone who campaigns for the improved welfare of animals sooner or later faces the accusation that worrying about animals is a waste of time when so much human suffering should be studied and ultimately addressed" (Rowan, 1988, p. 1). However, Rowan counters this argument by suggesting that those who are interested in animal suffering are helping ameliorate problems associated with a global crisis that is connected to the maintenance of planetary health. Rowan continued by noting that animal activists often stress the connections between those who regularly abuse or harm animals to those who harm humans and the environment. To round out his argument Rowan used the famous Gandhi quote, "the greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by

the way its animals are treated". (Gandhi, 1959 as quoted in Rowan, 1988, p. 1) Rowan's argument suggested that anyone who is concerned with the welfare of wild animals and pets, both domesticated and exotic, are contributing to the improvement of planetary health and human civilization. The internal logic of this paper agrees with Rowan's suggestion that helping ameliorate problems associated with harming animals is also the province of environmental sociologists.

Questions arose as to why Thompson wished to keep so many dangerous exotic animals, especially large carnivorous cats that were on the endangered species list. What prompted Thompson to let loose wild animals for which he so deeply cared to ultimately be destroyed in an effort by local law enforcement to protect the local community? Why had local, state, or national authorities not intervened to prevent such a tragedy? All of these questions should be analyzed through a sociological lens in hopes that a practical solution could be discovered.

To tackle this case study this research first examined specifically the ownership of dangerous, wild animals (primarily large predatory cats), historically thought of as only permissible by zoos. Permitting zoos to keep wild animals in custody is of course a moderate position. A radical solution would suggest that both individuals and zoos should be barred from keeping wild animals. However, more moderate positions concerning the province of zoos keeping wild animals indicate that without zoos many wild animals would have already become

extinct, or pushed to the margins so that their ultimate extinction would soon come to fruition (Bostock, 1993). The examination of the loss of wild animal habitat seems superfluous to readers well aware of the loss of areas in which wild animals once roamed. The following is offered as an example of the loss of large predatory animal (tiger) habitat.

According to The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) website calculations, only 3,200 Bengal Tigers are left living naturally in the wild. WWF argued that there are, however, more endangered tigers (5,000) living in the United States in personal zoos than actually living naturally in the wild. The WWF has asked the U.S. government to totally ban the private ownership of tigers (WWF, 2012).

WWF continued their pleas for increased government regulation, arguing that when private ownership and breeding is not monitored captive tigers become easy targets for black market sales, which increases the threat to wild tiger populations. According to WWF, unregulated trade in such animals stimulates demand, especially for truly wild tigers. This pressure generates intensified tiger poaching. Ultimately, WWF argued that a lack of government regulation is a threat to public safety. Due to lenient government supervision tigers can be legally held by private citizens in insufficiently secured locales with untrained staff and poorly appointed natural environments, with little in the way of security for the surrounding communities.

Zanesville, Ohio had been affected in many ways by the deindustrialization process. It was once a leading city in clay pottery manufacturing and railroad transportation. How did this economic transformation affect the local

population? Had deindustrialization had negative effects on folks in Zanesville? What methods of coping with this transformative period did many citizens develop? How did they cope in an area associated with economic downturns?

The small town of Zanesville, Ohio is located southeast of the state capital Columbus, Ohio. The city has in recent years re-invented its downtown to include an art district, no doubt to offset the deterioration of the downtown business district. Zanesville has consistently lost population since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, dropping from 40,517 in 1950 to 25,487 residents in 2010, a 37% drop in the city's total population.

It appeared that a sagging local economy and a growing Columbus economy activated massive population loss in Zanesville, Ohio. As a coping mechanism, many Zanesville residents left the traditional neighborhoods that had developed near the downtown area for newer neighborhoods along the expanding retail growth corridors, and into neighborhoods that had enlarged to meet the new housing market activated by the Baby Boomers in search of places to live and raise a family after WWII. Zanesville's economy had previously been known as a leading pottery and railroad employer. As the U.S. decreased its use of railroads for transportation of goods and people, and the demand for Ohio pottery declined, many former downtown residents left in-city neighborhoods abandoned.

Among Zanesville's historic and well-known early residents was Zane Grey. Many American literature scholars argue that Grey's novels promoted a sense of American Exceptionalism. Zane Grey often promoted a concern for the closing of

the frontier, or what David Wrobel described as a sort of frontier anxiety (Wrobel, 1993). The question raised after learning of one of Zanesville, Ohio's most prominent citizens was could this affect Terry Thompson's desire to in some way stave off the ravages of the loss of wild animal habitat and in some way also push back the deleterious effects of deindustrialization process? I suggest that Thompson was engaged in what I refer to as the "post-industrial negotiation process." A conversation that has seen the outcome of what appeared to be a failed era of industrialization followed by the deindustrialization process that was wrought with the perils of unemployment, widespread poverty, and population dislocation. Ultimately, this is in a tangential way connected to a "back to nature" movement. The industrialization era had failed to deliver what was promised. The deindustrialization process destroyed what was built during the preceding era, yielding joblessness and a despoiled natural environment. An escape route would be necessary to avoid the destroyed economic and environmentally deleterious conditions associated with the deindustrialization process. The escape route for Terry Thompson was unfortunately connected to a peculiar, homespun "back to nature" ideology that was laced with what appeared to be a sort of self-activated American Exceptionalist approach, namely hoarding or keeping dangerous animals that were with great speed being placed on the endangered species list.

What this study suggested was an analysis of the relationship between Zanesville's deindustrialization and concomitant community strain placed upon everyday Zanesville citizens such

as Terry Thompson, which ultimately generated various forms of coping mechanisms. Thompson appeared to be coping with what he felt was a loss of the commons for wild animals, namely predatory cats. An analysis of Thompson's life leading up to the tragic events of the release of the wild, exotic animal zoo inhabitants, which resulted in the loss of almost his entire zoo population and resulted in his own suicide, appeared to be a last ditch effort to cope with what he must have interpreted as no-win situation.

On October 19, 2011 a horrific scene unfolded in Zanesville, Ohio when 56 exotic animals housed in a makeshift zoo named The Muskingum County Animal Farm run by Terry Thompson were released prior to Thompson committing suicide (Tapper, 2011, p. 1). According to Scott Simon on National Public Radio (NPR), six additional animals were captured alive, leaving one monkey missing (Simon, 2011). It was suspected that the missing monkey might be carrying the Herpes B virus, which is common and benign in this species of monkey, but could pose a health threat to humans (Rodgers, 2011, p.1). This human and non-human animal tragedy served as a snapshot of a larger problem; the loss of animal habitat worldwide, and the growing concern among environmentally minded groups of this loss and its connection to rapid economic development. This paper's conclusion suggests practical solutions to the problem of private ownership of dangerous exotic animals.

Initially, the aforementioned tragedy resulted in the shooting deaths of 48 exotic animals. Sheriff deputies were given permission to hunt and shoot these dangerous animals due to the perceived threat to the surrounding community.

Later, a dead wolf was discovered by local law enforcement (Tapper 2011, p.1). The majority of animals on Terry Thompson's farm were large predatory land mammals. The total list of animals that were destroyed included 18 tigers, 17 lions, six black bears, three mountain lions, three leopards, three Celebes macaque monkeys, three grizzly bears, two wolves, and one baboon (Ogles, 2012 p. 208). Of the animals that were shot by local Muskingum County Sheriff deputies, 18 were Bengal tigers, which are currently on the endangered species list.

According to Jonah Ogles, several people had the chance to meet and befriend Terry Thompson. Several of these acquaintances reported that Thompson was possibly suffering from undiagnosed Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Ogles reported that Thompson's longtime friend Mike Marshall stated that Thompson had seen horrible things while serving as a helicopter mechanic in Vietnam (though Thompson on several occasions stated that he had been a helicopter gunship door gunner in Vietnam). Marshall was quoted in the article saying that the violence Thompson witnessed in Vietnam stayed with him for 40 years.

An article written by Liz Navratil quoted the Muskingum County Sheriff Matthew Lutz concerning Thompson's daredevil personality. According to Navratil, who was quoting Sheriff Lutz, "I described him as a guy that kind of pushed the envelope, a liked-to-live-on-the-edge type of person" (Navratil, 2012, p.1). Navratil added another Sheriff Lutz quote that sheds light on Thompson's personality. Lutz stated, "There's a lot of stories out there about the wild things he [Thompson] did. I wouldn't say he's a legend, but I would

say that he's well known" (Navratil, 2012, p.1). Navratil's article further suggested that Thompson's behavior was always on the line. Quoting Gary Brock, one of Thompson's childhood friends who remained a friend until Thompson went to a federal penitentiary, "Terry was Terry – he always had something that we were doing – not breaking the law, but always on the line" (Navratil, 2012, p. 2).

In 1977, Thompson married his wife Marian, and opened a Harley Davidson Motorcycle shop aptly named T's Harley Davidson (Navratil, 2012, p. 3). Due to economic downturns and population loss, cycle sales sagged and Thompson was forced to close his cycle shop in 1991. Interestingly, according to Navratil, "Years later, sheriff's deputies would jokingly call his farm 'T's World' in reference to the rundown business and Thompson's eccentric habits" (Navratil, 2012, p. 3).

In an attempt to offset the loss of income due to his cycle shop's closure, Thompson became a licensed gun dealer regularly selling firearms out of his home. He sold firearms until 2003, when he turned in his gun dealership license to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF). Though Thompson collected many guns during his lifetime, the ATF still suspected him of illegally selling guns out of his home.

According to Navratil (2012) many neighbors noticed a change in Thompson and Marian's attitudes. Navratil quoted one of Thompson's neighbors named Ms. Perone who stated, "they became unusual" (Navratil, 2012, p. 3). This description echoed the opinion of local sheriff's deputies. It was indeed "T's World." A world that was difficult to penetrate or even understand. Contents of the farm were unknown to

surrounding neighbors. Lions' roars heard at night forced many to sleep with several loaded guns. Not trusting outsiders is quite common among populations affected by deindustrialization. It's a protection mechanism that shields one from the decisions made from without, but having disastrous effects within.

Purchasing such exotic animals may sound odd and perhaps illegal. However, the auction was well within the personal animal ownership laws within the state of Ohio. Ogles states, "Some states have relaxed laws regarding ownership of exotic animals; other states have loose sales laws. For decades, Ohio has had both" (Ogles, 2012, p. 205).

Documents required in the state of Ohio cover only animals brought into the state, verifying that they were healthy and free of disease. If the animals were sold to a zoo or professional breeder ownership papers were required. No documentation was necessary for private individuals wishing to own an animal with no intent of making a profit. Ann Rodgers (2011) quoted Debbie Leahy, a captive-wildlife specialist from the Humane Society of the United States saying, "the entire situation could have been prevented if the Ohio governor had enforced one particular executive order that his predecessor signed before leaving office" (Rodgers, 2011, p. 1). Leahy continued her attack on the incoming Ohio governor stating, "It's unfortunate that rural officers are forced to deal with rampaging chimpanzees and tigers running amok because of **lax laws**" [emphasis mine] (Rodgers 2011, p. 2). Amelia Robinson expressed similar outrage with Ohio's lax exotic animal ownership laws stating, "The outrage should not be directed toward

the cops... the complaint should be with the State of Ohio which allows places like Thompson's to exist. These places should be better monitored and restricted" (Robinson, 2011, p. 2). Robinson further suggested her support for former governor Ted Strickland's exotic animal ownership ban stating, "Earlier this year, then Governor Ted Strickland approved ownership restrictions and banned new private ownership of big cats, bears, primates, alligators, crocodiles, large constricting snakes and venomous snakes. The ban expired in April. Governor John Kasich said the issue needs review" (Robinson, 2011, p.2).

Outgoing Ohio Governor Ted Strickland (D) delivered an executive order that forbade the private possession of exotic animals on January 6, 2011. Unfortunately, the ban expired 90 days after its issue. The newly elected Ohio Governor John Kasich (R), like many governors from rival political parties, allowed his gubernatorial predecessor Ted Strickland's executive order to expire before acting upon it so that it could be enforced. Amelia Robinson continued her disappointment with the incoming governor John Kasich's decision to allow outgoing governor Ted Strickland's executive order to expire stating, "If the ban had been extended, the Humane Society said Thompson would have been banned from owning his exotic animals because of his record. Thompson was convicted in 2005 of cruelty to animals and related charges" (Robinson, 2011, p. 2).

From a sociological perspective, the state's legal apparatus (social institution) failed to prevent ownership of dangerous animals by individuals (human agency) with little or no professional training and possessing little in the way of the

necessary financial resources required to keep such animals safely and humanely.

This appeared a political blunder given the events that transpired just days after the order's expiration date. Senate Bill 310 (SB310) moved through the Ohio legislature much like a political football. Eight months after the Zanesville Animal apocalypse, Ohio passed its first law restricting ownership of dangerous exotic animals. The law will take effect in 2014. According to Jim Provance the law will, "bar individuals from acquiring or transferring ownership of wild animals including bears, big cats, crocodiles, elephants, and most apes" (Provance, 2012, p. 1). Provance continued that current "owners of such animals will have to register their animals with the state within 60 days of the laws' effective date" (Provance, 2012, p.1). The state's legal structure in Ohio was the likely target of critics of Ohio's lax exotic animal ownership laws. However, according to Ogles, Ohio was not alone in lax exotic animal ownership and sales. More than 20 states in the U.S. still allow private exotic animal ownership and many also permit the trade of these dangerous animals.

Thompson's distress was exacerbated when he was given a tax bill for the sum of \$33,244.54. He also owed the Internal Revenue Service back taxes, which raised his debt load to more than \$55,000.00. Debt was not the only problem that Thompson would face that year. Following his animal cruelty trial, an investigation of Thompson's possible illegal arms sales was activated by the ATF. In 2008, the ATF sent a confidential informant who wore a listening and recoding device to buy guns from Thompson. According to the ATF, Thompson sold the informant a

handgun and a shotgun, and bragged that he had recently sold an AK-47 assault rifle to another customer only weeks earlier. As the ATF searched the premises officials from the Columbus Zoo inspected Thompson's exotic animal zoo. Columbus Zoo officials reported numerous violations. According to Ogles' article, a Columbus Zoo veterinarian on site reported that Thompson was breeding animals on his farm (Ogles, 2012, p.207).

In 2009 a U.S. District judge suppressed ATF evidence gathered during their raid on Thompson's farm in 2008. The judge found that the ATF search violated Thompson's Fourth Amendment rights. The system failed once more due to lax exotic animal laws. Though the system failed, Thompson was accruing large legal bills.

Thompson was faced with two choices. He could either pay the lawyer's fees required to fight the court's decision or use his money to feed his animals. Thompson chose to feed his animals. In April 2010 Thompson pled guilty to possessing unregistered weapons, which is a violation of the law. On October 8, 2010 Thompson was sentenced to 12 months and one day jail term. Thompson went to a federal minimum-security prison located in Morgantown, West Virginia. Thompson served his prison sentence and was released on September 30, 2011. It was reported by Thompson's probation officer that Marian would not be home when Thompson was released, and that the couple was having marital problems.

Alone on the farm, Terry Thompson walked out to the animal cages with a handgun in one hand, and bolt cutters in the other. He released the dangerous animals by cutting holes in the metal fencing that kept the animals enclosed.

He then turned the gun on himself and fired one shot into his mouth. The animals were now free to prey upon an unsuspecting public.

Ironically close to Halloween, the horrific news of the animal apocalypse was reported by local and national news agencies. This particular story was quite shocking given the scale of animal death and that the incident posed a greater threat to the surrounding community. News broadcasts urged many who were traveling in the area to remain in their automobiles, local schools were dismissed, and those at home were told to remain indoors and report any sightings of large animals such as lions and tigers.

When the sheriff's department deputies arrived they immediately discovered a dead body lying on its back with pants pulled down around its ankles with a handgun nearby. A lion had his head in its jaws and the body showed claws marks. With little in the way of planning for an animal escape of this magnitude, the deputies who responded were given the order to kill any animal that was considered a danger to the officers or the public. This resulted in the tragic death of 49 animals, 18 of which were on the endangered species list.

Andrew Mach suggested that Ohio's lax exotic animal laws resulted in a free-for-all for exotic animals. According to Mach, who was quoting Debbie Leahy, the captive wildlife regulatory specialist for the Humane Society of the United States, "Ohio continues to be a free-for-all for unqualified and inexperienced people keeping dangerous animals" (Mach, 2011, p. 1). Mach suggested that this was not an isolated incidence by recalling three other exotic animal escapes resulting in one death and

costing the taxpayers of Ohio thousands of dollars when state and local law enforcement agencies responded. According to Leahy, "Ohio is one of eight states that doesn't regulate private ownership of animals, according to Humane Society figures. Ms. Leahy says the lack of regulations pose a serious threat to public safety and animal welfare" (Mach, 2011, p. 2). Mach continued quoting Leahy stating, "There's a culture of antigovernment regulation where people view these animals as property, and they say, 'Don't tell me what I can and cannot do with my property'" (Mach, 2011, p. 2). In essence, the state taxpayers are footing the bill for those who argue that these exotic animals are their property, and it is their right to handle their property as they see fit.

This tragedy demonstrated the need for new state laws regulating exotic animal ownership. New, stricter policies would help create practical solutions in terms of avoiding disasters such as that which occurred in Zanesville, Ohio in October 2011. This research is not suggesting that environmental movements on a grand scale should be avoided (the protection of natural environments), or that zoos are an ultimate solution to animal extinction. It is, however, suggesting that these movements should and will move as intended, and that with proper regulation zoos can provide shelter for animals on the verge of extinction.

"Lax state laws coupled with an urge to own exotic creatures is often a death sentence for owners and their pets. Animal care experts insist that private ownership is a public health and safety issue because the animal's behavior is often misunderstood and their health diagnosed by their owners who are ill

equipped to be tending to their care” (Guarino, 2011, p. 2). Guarino additionally pointed out that according to the Captive Wild Animal Protection Campaign in Washington D.C., 90% of all large, wild animals die within the first two years of captivity (Guarino, 2011, p. 2). Therefore stricter regulation of the ownership of exotic animals would actually increase the chances of an individual animal’s survival and perhaps help prevent eventual extinction of entire animals species.

The tragic events that resulted in the mass slaughter of innocent exotic animals in Zanesville, Ohio could have been circumvented had the necessary laws been in place prior to Terry Thompson creating his exotic animal zoo. It is seldom that individuals possess the funds or knowledge to handle such a great undertaking. Government oversight of exotic animal ownership is necessary to prevent future animal destruction.

A second but just as important rationale for more stringent exotic animal ownership laws is the maintenance of public safety. It was unfortunate that so many animals had to be destroyed to protect the surrounding Zanesville community. With strict laws regulating exotic animal ownership Thompson would have had to submit to regular inspections by qualified personnel. It is likely that Thompson would not have even qualified to obtain an exotic animal ownership permit. Stricter laws would have required that the animal enclosures would have had to meet both safety and ergonomic regulations. The possible outcome would have been unimaginable had the predatory cats escaped Thompson’s farm and moved into the Zanesville suburbs. Had the animals, especially the

predatory cats, made it to Zanesville’s population center after dark it would have ended in possibly the loss of more human lives.

Reports of Thompson’s undiagnosed PTSD remain unclear and would have to have been verified by a licensed professional. I argue that if PTSD was the only reason that Thompson exhibited somewhat bizarre behavior, why was his wife also thought of as acting strange, especially after she and Thompson began caging exotic animals? Therefore Thompson’s undiagnosed PTSD was not the only cause of strange behavior. I, however, argue that the poor economic conditions such as those found throughout the Ohio River Valley and its constituent regions often produce coping mechanisms that border on the bizarre. In a weak social structure coping mechanisms developed to counter the effects of deleterious social situations often yield negative consequences; in this case, horrific exotic animal destruction of a magnitude never before witnessed in the U.S., and the suicide of a deeply troubled man, Terry Thompson.

Public outcry against such animal slaughter has appeared in various forms and will soon blossom into a plank on political ladders. Unfortunately, it often requires a tragedy such as this to activate political machinery to develop laws and governmental organizations responsible for oversight. Other states are examining this case and will possibly prepare similar legislation to prevent a similar tragedy in their state. Ultimately, after such an event we need to examine the social conditions that generate this type of behavior and demand that elected officials take notice that there is a recent increase in those concerned with the environment and they are preparing to vote for politicians and political parties

that are in agreement that the natural environment should be preserved for future generations. Our collective lives may depend on it. While doing that which is practical may not be a grand solution to environmental degradation, it is a start and can prevent repeating similar events.

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