

The lions ate his tiger, police say. Inside the troubled journey of Ontario's Tiger King and the exotic animal's grisly death

Mark Drysdale said he has done nothing wrong and that his zoos help educate the public about tigers and other at-risk species.

By [Grant LaFleche](#) Standard Reporter

Sarah Crookall Special to the Star

Fri., Jan. 14, 2022

timer 12 min. read

Tamara the tiger died among the old-growth yellow birch and sugar maple trees of a dense Ontario forest. She was mauled by a pack of lions inside the lumber-and-wire enclosure where they all lived.

The man responsible for caring for the animals was nowhere in sight.

Exactly how the lions got to Tamara, who lived in a roadside zoo in Maynooth just south of Algonquin Park on a July Sunday, isn't clear.

An Ontario Provincial Police report says the lions tunneled out of their enclosure and ate her.

The tiger's owner, Mark Drysdale, says the OPP have it wrong. He says Tamara squeezed into the lion's cage.

"She shouldn't have went through the door. I f--ked up. The door should have been closed. I made a big mistake."

Drysdale still lives on the remote property along a highway 25 km north of Bancroft, but the roadside zoo is gone. The enclosures were taken down and his animals sent away. The premature end of his zoo closed another chapter in a history of trouble that has followed Drysdale for nearly a decade. He had zoos in two other Ontario communities that closed after complaints and running afoul of municipal zoning bylaws. In one incident, a lynx attacked a child.

Drysdale's travelling menagerie has triggered some small towns to pass exotic animal bylaws to forbid roadside zoos. But without provincial legislation, the patchwork of bylaws is the only thing standing in the way of roadside zoos.

His story shows the difficulty Ontario has had in dealing with what animal rights activists, humane societies and accredited zoos say is a decades-old problem in the province that has led to the mistreatment and deaths of animals.

As recently as Christmas Eve, the Ontario Provincial Police found the corpses of an alligator and five large snakes in a Caledon ditch.

“Ontario is basically like the wild west when it comes to exotic animals. It’s crazy,” said Julie Woodyer, campaigns director of the Toronto-based animal rights group Zoocheck. “The minuscule regulations that are here are just not enforced.”

Drysdale said he used a bulldozer to dig Tamara’s grave at the hardscrabble compound hemmed in by tall trees a few days before police arrived.

“I was bent over in pain like losing a child. I love my animals,” Drysdale said. “Anyone who tries to pretend that I don’t and that I just do this for money and that I just stand back and let them get killed is just so disgusting for even someone to say that.”

When Tamara died on July 4, Drysdale was in the custody of the OPP after an incident in a car with his now ex-wife, Tammy Cavers-Nyyssonen, who the tiger was named after. Drysdale later pleaded guilty to assault.

His legal woes are not over. Drysdale also faces charges under the Provincial Animal Welfare Services (PAWS) Act for failing to provide proper care for his animals.

Drysdale said he has done nothing wrong, cares deeply for his animals, and his zoos educate the public about, and protect, at-risk species like tigers.

“People who know me know what I stand for, know how well I treat my animals, know how much my animals love me,” he said.



Drysdale's first exotic animal was a coatimundi, a raccoon-like mammal from Mexico and South America. His collection grew to include lemurs, spider and squirrel monkeys, marmosets, foxes, wolves, a water buffalo, a kangaroo, a donkey, a lynx and, eventually, lions.

Alongside his then-wife, Joni Cook, Drysdale created the Ringtail Ranch and Rescue zoo in Wainfleet, Ont., in 2013. The animals were sometimes uncaged, including a lion, foxes and wolves.

By summer 2016, there had been 10 incidents of bites and scratches involving seven of the animals, including the monkeys, foxes and coatimundi, according to Niagara Region public health records.

Drysdale says he reported most of those incidents to the public health department as part of a mandatory reporting requirement.

"The municipality kind of used that against us," he said.

More than a thousand people visited the ranch during a 2016 open house.

One person was bitten by a donkey. Another by a monkey.

A six-year-old girl was attacked by the lynx.

At the time, Drysdale told a local newspaper the lynx cage was “not safe enough,” but he now blames the child, claiming she frightened the cat by smashing “the window in the house the cat was in. And it was just a Canadian lynx. That’s what’s in everyone’s backyard.” He says the girl “got a scratch.”

According to a 2017 lawsuit filed by the girl’s family, the lynx allegedly “lurched through the window of the shed and viciously attacked and mauled” the girl’s face and neck which required surgical repair and caused “permanent disfigurement.”

Drysdale, who did not file a defence with the court, was ordered to pay the child \$20,000 in 2019. He told Torstar he did not know about the order.



The Ontario Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals gave the ranch a passing grade later that summer. Four more biting or scratching incidents followed over the next two years, including one involving a lion. In March 2018, Wainfleet council passed an exotic animal bylaw prohibiting dangerous animals, including big cats. Five months later, citing insufficient enclosures for wild carnivores and predators, the public health department stepped in with an order prohibiting public access to Drysdale’s animals.

“There is an ongoing high degree of risk that these animals will bite and scratch visitors,” the order said.

In January 2019, Niagara public health received a call from the Brant County health unit. Drysdale, still listing his address as Wainfleet, came to a Brantford hospital after being bitten in both arms by a lion, according to Brant public health records. In an interview, Drysdale initially could not recall the incident, then said he scratched himself on a lion cage.

When a public health inspector arrived at Ringtail to follow up, he found the ranch abandoned.

Drysdale and Cook divorced, and he left Niagara.

Drysdale said he was not forced to move. “I met Tammy. Tammy and I went to Grand Bend.”



Embarking on a fresh start, Drysdale and his new wife Cavers-Nyssonon revamped Grand Bend's former Pineridge Zoo into their own cat oasis, Roaring Cat Retreat.

By spring of 2019, the couple repossessed some of their animals and moved to the small beach town on Lake Huron just northwest of London. They also acquired two more predator cats — Tamara and Tony the tigers.

Although tigers are typically solitary animals, Tamara and Tony shared a cage within a whisker's length of Drysdale's lion pride. At Drysdale's homespun zoos, lions and tigers share a fence line. It's so the animals get comfortable with one another, said Drysdale in a 2020 YouTube video.

In the video, Tamara roars before one of the lions charges at the fence. Tamara swats, hitting the fence.

"It's not a good idea to keep an animal and a species that that animal preys on within sight and sound of each other, for obvious reasons," says Barry Kent MacKay, director of Animal Alliance of Canada, an animal advocacy group. "It can be very stressful for both."

Tamara had another fence-line faceoff with a lion just days later. Oden — a lion Drysdale describes as "anti-social" — attacked Tamara through the fence while she slept, tearing flesh on her hip.

In a YouTube video after the attack, Drysdale is in a cage with Tamara showing her wound to the camera and treating it with a veterinary antiseptic spray used to soothe superficial wounds. Larger zoos sometimes tranquilize animals to treat wounds like Tamara's, causing them stress, he adds.

Amy Naylor, a spokesperson for the Toronto Zoo, said, generally, that staffers don't have to treat minor injuries on tigers, occasionally feeding them oral pain killers if a wound appears painful. In more serious cases, zoo handlers would tranquilize an injured tiger and ensure it was sleeping before getting into an enclosure to treat it.

Drysdale says he does not sedate his animals. A former volunteer for Drysdale told Torstar the zookeeper allegedly castrated a water buffalo in Wainfleet without sedation. Drysdale said sedation was not necessary for the procedure. The Toronto Zoo said that, in general, staff perform castrations under general anesthesia because they are so painful.

Drysdale said he is a self-taught engineer, animal wrangler for films and a world class archer. His name does not appear in the credits of movies he says he trained animals for. "I don't want to be on these things," he said of the movie credits.

Drysdale, who says there is no education for handling big cats, has no advanced education in veterinary medicine or zoology.

At the Toronto Zoo, applicants need a degree in biology and a minimum of two years working at a vet clinic, wildlife rehab centre or another zoo, said Naylor. Staff receive at least another two years of training before they qualify to handle tigers and other dangerous animals.

"Accreditation covers everything from health and safety, to the security of people, to the security of animals, like the whole gamut," said Eric Cole, wildlife care director for the zoo, which is accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, the industry gold standard.

None of Drysdale's zoos were accredited, although he says he is not opposed to provincial care standards for exotic animals.



Tigers and lions are never allowed to interact at the Toronto Zoo, Cole said, and zoo staff touch the animals through barriers and only for medical purposes.

Drysdale says his animals receive excellent care. He says he does not train his volunteers.

“All they did was feed and clean up crap,” Drysdale said. “There is no education that you can go to. There is no course you can take.”

He dismisses critics of his methods, including Zoocheck, which he claims is targeting him. Those who criticize his big cat videos — including one in which a juvenile lion in Wainfleet is fed a package of frozen chicken in styrofoam packaging and cellophane wrap — don’t know anything about big cats, he said.

Soon after Drysdale and his wife opened their animal retreat in Grand Bend, problems began.

Residents complained about their screeching monkey and roaring cat neighbours, whose territorial calls can reach nearly 115 decibels.

In April 2019, 19 days after the Drysdale’s set up in Grand Bend, municipal councillors passed a bylaw banning exotic pets in a matter of minutes. It typically takes months to pass a bylaw. By that December, a judge granted the municipality’s request for an injunction requiring the Drysdales to remove their animals from the property.

The Drysdals fundraised \$1,000 before they packed up and temporarily moved to northeastern Ontario.

By fall 2020, Drysdale and Cavers-Nyssonen were sharing a small trailer with some of their animals, including lion cubs, as they searched for a new location for their zoo.



The Drysdals had a million-dollar idea for Maynooth.

Their zoo would become a safari-like experience. Visitors could stay in yurts at the Highland Big Cat Adventures site and take a tour of the exotic animals. He reckoned it would attract tens of thousands of visitors.

“All our animals are very tame but of course safety is our main concern to protect guests and residents,” Drysdale wrote to the Hastings County government in September 2020.

Drysdale purchased a 36-hectare plot of land along Peterson Road. The lumber-and-wire enclosures, hidden behind trees and a small red barn, could not be seen from the road.

The property was zoned for agriculture, and the township told the Drysdales that exotic animals weren't considered livestock. Drysdale dismissed the warnings.

"They just opened up and began to operate," said Hastings Highlands Councillor Alex Walder, adding the Drysdales ignored repeated requests for zoning applications.

There were public complaints about Drysdale's property. While the process started with "good intentions really from both sides," recalled then-mayor Vic Bodnar, the municipality was shocked to learn of Drysdale's troubled history.

With no provincial laws banning the private ownership of dangerous, exotic animals, municipalities are often left to craft bylaws after the fact — as had been the case with Drysdale's previous zoos.

The township turned to Queen's Park for help.

There was already legislation mandating the humane care of animals — from dogs to orca whales — enforced by 100 inspectors province-wide. But the Provincial Animal Welfare Services Act does not ban private ownership of lions or tigers.

In March 2021, Ontario's Solicitor General Sylvia Jones responded to Hastings Highlands's request for more exotic animal legislation, saying the ministry had a desire to develop regulations but that "retroactivity would be an issue." She recommended that the municipality pass its own bylaw in the meantime.

"Had (regulations/legislation) been done by the province, it would have been done in one fell swoop and it would have taken a lot of the pressure off the municipalities," Bodnar said.

It would take nearly a year for Hastings Highlands to pass a bylaw banning dangerous animals, a laborious process Walder said was necessary to avoid a lawsuit.

While the politicians and lawyers debated, Drysdale's feline family expanded. Gabby the lioness birthed three cubs, although only two survived.

Animal rights groups say Ontario has some of the weakest laws in Canada.

There are fewer legislative barriers to buying a lion than there are to buying a pit bull in Ontario, a jurisdiction that bans the dogs. Under B.C.'s Wildlife Act, most of Drysdale's animals are illegal for individuals to own without a special permit.

When asked why Ontario does not have provincial exotic animal laws, a spokesperson for the Ministry of the Solicitor General and Animal Welfare Services said Ontario's current regulations are superior to past legislation.

Those regulations did nothing to protect Tamara, who was left alone on July 4, 2021, when Drysdale and his wife took a drive in the late afternoon. The tiger was in a common area, connected to the tiger and lion cages.

Drysdale and Tammy got into an altercation. Police arrested Drysdale.

While he was in custody, his wife's namesake was killed by the lions. Drysdale said he left a swing door — essentially a large doggy door — unlocked and Tamara squeezed through into a cage filled with lions.



But an OPP report says holes had been dug from the lion cages into the common area. At least one was blocked with a rock when officers arrived on July 7. The report said the hungry lions dug their way out to attack the tiger. Drysdale says he feeds his lions every three days, “that’s why my cats aren’t overweight.” He said the lions did not eat Tamara during the fatal encounter.

Drysdale later pleaded guilty to assault, forcible confinement, dangerous operation of a motor vehicle and possessing firearms in a place other than where he was allowed to have them. Drysdale claims the July 4 altercation with Cavers-Nyyssonen was not violent and the gun charge was the result of keeping his custom-made AR-15 rifles on a property other than his home.

According to court records, he served 61 days in pretrial custody and was sentenced to an additional 30 days in jail. He said he spent some of that time in hospital to be treated for an unrelated brain injury.

Cavers-Nyyssonen could not be reached by Torstar.

As for the PAWS animal welfare charges, Drysdale says he intends to fight them in court.

After Tamara's death and his arrest, Drysdale's zoo was hastily torn down and his animals were given to other people but Torstar could not confirm who has them.

Animal rights groups and city officials say they don't know where the animals are.

Drysdale, who insists he is the victim of overzealous animal rights groups, corrupt politicians and unfair news media, said he is considering setting up a new zoo.

"I am bringing them back. That's for sure," he said, although he also mused about leaving Canada entirely. "I will be getting all my animals back."