

Sanctuary offers permanent home for cougars and other wild animals

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Safe Haven Wildlife Refuge Center, Inc., a sanctuary designed to meet the needs of displaced or injured wildlife, is scheduled to be open to the public by next spring, said Linda Sugasa, co-founder.

The sanctuary will be located in Imlay. It has been in operation for several years in Marengo, Ill., but is being moved in order to provide a larger facility for the animals, as well as allow the Sugasa family to live near their family members, she said.

The facility offers rescue and rehabilitation to various types of wildlife, although large cats, including cougars and bobcats are the most common residents. "We never, ever release these cats back into the wild. When they join us, they are given a home for life," Sugasa said.

This requires planning and commitment, since a cougar in captivity can live as long as 20 years. Cougars in the wild rarely live longer than 10 years, she said.

The sanctuary is designed for safety—both for the animals living there and for the residents living nearby. The containment areas are designed in a manner that makes human contact with the animals unnecessary. Feeding chambers are designed with guillotine-type doors that can close behind the animals, trapping them temporarily so that staff and volunteers can complete necessary cleanup and maintenance tasks, she said,

These chambers are also removable and transportable. They can attach directly to a vehicle so animals can be taken for necessary medical care. Additionally, there are small openings that allow for humane sedation, should an animal need acute care. "We try to reduce the level of stress and keep the level of human contact as minimal as possible," she said.

"There is a strict 'no contact' policy. There is no contact between the animals and the public—ever," she said.

The sanctuary was granted a special use permit earlier this year by the Pershing County Board of Commissioners. "This permit requires that all conditions, stipulations and guidelines established for the sanctuary are strictly followed," said Daren Bloyed, commission chairman. Animals will be enclosed by a number of barricades to protect against escape or injury. The sanctuary is permitted to house up to 20 animals. There are currently nine animals that have been placed for permanent care. In addition to wild cats, other species are sometimes housed, including some animals that are indigenous to the area and others that result from the illegal pet trade, Sugasa said.

The illegal pet market has grown tremendously over the past few years. As information becomes more widely available about various species of wildlife, people become interested in owning "exotic" pets. Owners often become disillusioned, with these animals after acquisition. The animals are often expensive to feed properly, require more space or attention than was anticipated or have other needs owners cannot fulfill. They are often abandoned or abused, she said.

Only a very few sanctuaries in the world are accredited. Safe Haven is one of those few. It is also licensed by the USDA and the state, she said.

The facility will include large, well-constructed steel buildings that can be used as an animal clinic/hospital, food preparation site, and isolation area. A residence will also be constructed on the property to allow for constant supervision, she said.

Sugasa said she plans to offer educational and training opportunities at the sanctuary. Children can tour the facilities to view the animals as they are engaged in environmental programs—activities designed to draw out "species appropriate behavior."

She said an internship program similar to the program that exists at their present location is planned. This will provide veterinary students an opportunity to finish their educational requirements while also gaining a valuable insight into the behavior and treatment of wild animals.

There are also plans to incorporate rescue activities for birds of prey into the facility. Sugasa said she is currently enrolled in a class on raptors.

Sugasa will welcome any assistance people might want to offer. "We always welcome volunteers," she said. Those interested in volunteering can contact the sanctuary by phone at 815-923-2286 or by mail at Safe Haven Rescue, P. O. Box 184, Imlay, Nev.

Tours of the facility will be provided prior to completion beginning in November. "I want people to feel welcome and to have the opportunity to view the construction as it progresses," she said.