

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee,

My name is Matt Fouts and I am the Assistant Director of Tanganyika Wildlife Park. I am here in support of SB97. My goal is to help you understand the positive impact this change can have for education and conservation.

H.P. Lovecraft is quoted as saying, “The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown.” But fear is nothing more than False Evidence Appearing Real.

Groups like HSUS, and other institutions with limited experience handling baby cats, use fear to prey on legislators and the uniformed public. For instance, they will testify that approving SB97 is a real danger to the public. They will evoke mental images of full-grown 500-pound tigers or talk about sharp claws and teeth. They will discuss the wild, killer instincts of mature cats and exploit tragedies like the one that befell Haley Hildebrand. They will use misdirection and half-truths to paint false images for you in hopes you believe there is a real and imminent danger to the public by allowing limited contact with baby cats.

When it comes to SB97, FDR said it best, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” Here is why I believe accredited zoological institutions can and should use baby cats to open the hearts and minds of people.

For starters, we passionately believe that humans have the responsibility to be stewards for animals in captivity and the wild, so we strive to strengthen the connection between people and the natural world by providing REAL experiences that are entertaining and educational.

For over 15 years, we have accomplished this mission utilizing the philosophy of an ancient Chinese proverb, “Tell me, and I will forget. Show me, and I may remember. Involve me, and I will understand.”

To demonstrate how we implement this philosophy, I would like to share a couple of stories with you. The first story involves a group called Envision, which assists people with poor or no vision. A couple of years ago, they visited Tanganyika and this little girl had the opportunity to “see” a lemur. As you can tell she is actually blind, and by allowing her to visit our lemur island she was able to experience the ring-tailed lemurs for the first time.

The second story involves a member from Colorado named Courtney Whitfield. Her family found us while a loved one was sick and receiving treatment in a Wichita hospital. Tanganyika became an escape for their family during this troubled time because it had so many opportunities for Courtney, who is confined to her wheelchair and has limited motor abilities, to enjoy the animals in a way she can’t anywhere else.

SB97 would allow us to provide similar experiences with baby cats while still preserving the intent of the law, and preventing unprofessional ownership and interaction with larger and more mature cats.

A great example of how we use the cats to educate people occurred just last month. We were invited by Visit Wichita to attend the Travel Industry Association of Kansas’s Day on the Hill at the Ramada. We brought an African penguin, a 3 banded-armadillo, and an African serval. They stole the show with large crowds surrounding the animals and individuals taking turns petting the nearly 25-pound serval. They were able to connect with the animals in a whole new way and no one was injured or died.

For us to strengthen the connection, we shouldn't settle for "telling" and "showing" people animals. Zoos have been doing that for centuries and a new species still goes extinct every day. If we are truly going to touch the hearts and minds of people today, and especially in the future, we must find ways to allow them to safely interact with animals.

How do we know this is the best way to reach people? Simple. The trends in the zoo industry, and attraction industry in general, are adopting this philosophy. It has been further validated by our visitors and the general public.

Convention and visitors bureaus nationwide are working with attractions to create immersive experiences. In fact, the Wichita CVB recently spent tens of thousands of dollars to hire an expert that does nothing but work with local attractions to create interactive experiences. He utilizes the same philosophy we do because he has seen the demand and impact it has.

The zoo industry has also taken notice. Zoos like San Diego, Dallas, Houston, Columbus, Cincinnati, etc. have created more and more interactive exhibits and experiences; many of them even involve "big cats". Even Rolling Hills and Sedgwick County now offer some sort of interaction like giraffe feeding.

Finally, the results further validate this philosophy. In just eight short years, Tanganyika Wildlife Park has become one of the largest attractions in the state of Kansas. We have voted the 'Best Place to Take the Family' by *Wichita Family Magazine*, 'Best Local Attraction' & 'Best Place to Bring Out-of-Town Visitors' by *Wichita Magazine*, and won the Certificate of Excellence from TripAdvisor the past 4 years.

You can see on the faces of people that visit and on social media. For instance, there were numerous posts and pictures from the Travel Industry Association of Kansas's Day on the Hill because had an experience they felt was worthy of sharing.

Finally, we have seen the impact it can have on a boy like Cyrus Shubert. Cyrus was a four year old boy from Manhattan, KS. He found us through the Make-A-Wish foundation. He loved animals. His dying wish was to experience a zoo. The foundation could have called Sunset Zoo, Rolling Hills Zoo, or Sedgwick County Zoo. But they chose Tanganyika Wildlife Park because they knew the intimate experience would be treasured by him and his family.

We had a similar opportunity to help a little girl with cancer from Western Kansas. Her dying wish was to touch a baby lion or leopard. But because of the current law, we couldn't fulfill her wish despite having the animals. She did not fear a baby cat. Like most kids, her fear was replaced with a sense of awe and curiosity.

Brian Krans said, "Fear is the thief of dreams". I urge you to pass SB97 so that accredited zoological institutions like Tanganyika can once again make those dreams come true!