

May 4, 2020

Major Rob Beaton  
 Captive Wildlife Investigations  
 Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission  
 Division of Law Enforcement

Via e-mail: [REDACTED]

Re: Request for Investigation of Monica Welde's Dangerous  
 Handling of an Adult Bear During a Wedding at Bearadise  
 Ranch

Dear Major Beaton,

I am writing on behalf of PETA to request that the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) investigate Monica Welde's dangerous exhibition of an adult bear at a Bearadise Ranch event.

According to a recent New York Times article, Monica Welde hosted a wedding on March 21, 2020 at Bearadise Ranch in Myakka City, Florida using an adult bear named Carroll as a ringbearer.<sup>1</sup> According to the article, Welde led Carroll around on a leash in the presence of the couple and their 15 guests.<sup>2</sup> An additional photo depicted the bear in close proximity to the couple.<sup>3</sup> According to the photos, there did not appear to be any barrier in place between the attendees and Carroll. It appears that a thin wire cable was all that stood between the attendees and the bear, which Welde held in only one hand at times.<sup>4</sup>

FWC rules classify bears as "Class I" captive wildlife, subjecting them to additional safety requirements.<sup>5</sup> In Florida, a "structural safety barrier . . . must be present to prevent physical contact with unconfined Class I . . . wildlife except in instances where public contact is allowed . . ."<sup>6</sup> "Structural barriers may be constructed from materials such as fencing, moats, landscaping, or close-mesh wire, provided that materials used are safe and effective in preventing public contact."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ex. A., Vincent M. Mallozzi, Their Ring Bearer Was a Bear, N.Y. Times, Apr. 17, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> Ex. B, Allison Forsyth, St. Petersburg Couple Marries With an Actual Bear as Their Ring Bearer, Sarasota Magazine, April 28, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> *See id.* (including a photograph of Welde with a bottle but no leash in one hand); *see also* Mallozzi, *supra* note 1 (including a photograph of Welde holding a leash in one hand and a bottle in the other).

<sup>5</sup> Fla. Admin. Code Ann. r. 68A-6.002(1)(a).

<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at r. 68A-6.016.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at r. 68A-6.009(2)(b).

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The photographs of the event indicate that there was no barrier between Carroll and the attendees, and the thin wire cable with which Welde attempted to restrain Carroll is not sufficient to be safe and effective in preventing public contact. An adult bear could easily overpower and pull away from someone who is attempting to control them with only a leash, subjecting everyone in the bear's vicinity to the risk of severe injuries or death, according to captive wildlife veterinarian Dr. Monica Bando, who has more than 12 years of clinical and research experience, including as the senior veterinary surgeon at Animals Asia's China Bear Rescue Centre.

The rules provide two lists of animals with whom direct and incidental contact, which is defined as "situations in which an exhibitor or employee handler maintains control, possession and supervision of the animal while permitting the public to come into contact with it[.]" is allowed, but neither list includes bears weighing over 40 lbs.<sup>8</sup>

Any other "[i]ncidental contact with other Class I wildlife must be approved in writing by the Commission prior to the use of wildlife for incidental contact with the public."<sup>9</sup> While it is not clear what incidental contact took place at the ceremony, incidental contact with prior FWC approval is the only exception to the general rule requiring a structural safety barrier to prevent contact with bears weighing over 40 lbs. Therefore, Welde's use of a leash and failure to use an appropriate safety barrier appears to violate FWC rules.

FWC rules provide that "[n]o person shall maintain captive wildlife in any unsafe or unsanitary condition, or in a manner which results in threats to the public safety, or the maltreatment or neglect of such wildlife."<sup>10</sup> According to Dr. Bando, bears' size, strength, and speed coupled with their long claws and large teeth make them particularly dangerous to exhibit publicly, especially without safety barriers. Captive bears are wild animals that can react instinctually with defensive, protective, attack, and predatory behavior. These instinctual behaviors can result in death and serious injuries, including lacerations, blunt force trauma, puncture wounds, bone and skull fractures, crush injuries, evisceration, and scalping. Because this behavior can occur with little or no warning and bears can run very quickly, exhibitors and bystanders may not have enough time to react. This is particularly true where a bear is exposed to the unnatural sights, sounds, and smells that may accompany a large social gathering such as a wedding ceremony with 15 guests.

Exhibiting adult bears without safety barriers in place is inherently dangerous, and is precisely why FWC prohibits such exhibition. Failure to comply with FWC rules is grounds for revocation of a permit.<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, PETA urges FWC to investigate and pursue any and all available penalties for these apparent violations of FWC rules, including revocation of Welde's captive wildlife permit.

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<sup>8</sup> *Id.* at r. 68A-6.016(b).

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at r. 68A-6.016(1)(b).

<sup>10</sup> *Id.* at r. 68A-6.009.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.* at r. 68-1.010(2)(b), (d).

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'JM' with a flourish.

Jonathan Morris  
Counsel, Captive Animal Law Enforcement



Exhibits