

Alligator Hugging & Other Stupid People Tricks

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There's a guy in SW Florida who wants to bring an alligator hugging business to Naples.

As a former professional animal trainer and behaviorist, I speak with some authority in this matter.

Alligators don't want to be "hugged" by *anybody*, including other alligators.

I've been around animals in my life, including wild ones, making some mistakes along the way.

As a bottle-nosed dolphin and sea lion trainer in the 60's (at the now defunct Sea Arama Marineworld in Galveston, Texas), I got a little too cocky one day and ended up being bitten by a 350 pound bull sea lion.

"Jocko" could have disemboweled me. Instead, he chose to "nip" me after I ignored his earlier non-tactile warning. He then ducked his head, took a "gentle" swipe at me instead.

That swipe put ten stitches in my left thigh.

It was a hard, but valuable lesson, and I still have the scar to remind me.

But when Jocko was uncharacteristically silent during the three days I was out recuperating, I wondered if he was as disappointed in me as I was. I returned to work humbled and a great deal more mindful that wild animals deserve our respect, admiration, *and* caution.

The event was entirely my fault and Jocko was *not* punished. Sadly, that's not always the case.

Sometime later, Sea Arama acquired a 1000 lb elephant seal. I could rationalize the fact that dolphins and sea lions we trained performed stunts shaped from normal behaviors: jumping over things, pushing things around in the water, finding things through echo-location, etc. But even that was a stretch at times.

I had a hard time, however reconciling this magnificent elephant seal living in a concrete tank, heaving himself out of the water five times a day to sit motionless in a silly sailor hat as patrons gawked at him.

It wasn't overt cruelty. He was well fed and safe from physical injury. Part of his food ration was his "reward" for complying with the trainer's request. As far as I was concerned, that wasn't training, it was *extortion*.

Thankfully, most marine aquariums are a bit more sophisticated now. I still have concerns (see link to my published article on Sea World Tragedy below).

In 1965, however, animal welfare wasn't as pervasive as now.

In decades since, I've continued to study animals, promoting their welfare where I could. It's gratifying, educational, and fun.

I raised three orphaned wolf dogs from cubs. With 50-75% of their genetic heritage from gray wolves, they were extraordinary. But I had the proper facilities (fenced acres in the woods), training, patience, and time to do it. They rewarded me with loyalty and affection for 13 years before dying of natural causes. It was an amazing example of peaceful co-existence in as natural an environment as could be had under the circumstances .

I don't recommend it unless one has the resources and space for at least two of them. They need a great deal of physical contact, ideally with another canine, and they do not make good "house pets."

The Shy Wolf Education and Experience Center in Naples, Florida (link in comments section below) is a great way to learn more about these and other animals, some of whom were saved from unprepared owners. Some are adoptable, but only to people who'll provide the proper environment.

I somewhat reluctantly participated in a shark feeding in the Bahamas. I knew the sharks wouldn't harm me. I was concerned about whether *they* were being harmed by these activities.

Were all such events managed as well as this one, people would learn that sharks are not the vicious predators of humans as portrayed.

Naturally there was one SCUBA diver who insisted on swimming right next to the chum ball (shark food) contrary to instructions. I knew this guy was trouble when he showed a video of him "petting" a 15 foot tiger shark somewhere off the coast of South Africa.

I didn't bother to ask why he was missing three fingers.

While many people who work with wild animals do it right, many don't. When injuries occur, it's usually the human's fault, but the animal gets blamed and often "put down."

"Crocodile Hunter" Steve Irwin's death was probably an example of overconfidence or ignorance. There's no question Irwin did much for wildlife conservation. But the way he did it bears serious scrutiny.

Either Irwin knew little, or ignored what he did know about "Sting Rays." These relatives of the shark are also shark prey. Their voracious cousins approach them from behind and above, causing rays to flip their barbed tails up in self-defense. Colleagues said Irwin was hovering over the ray in just such a position at the time of the injury. Even so, he probably would have lived had he not removed the barb that penetrated his heart.

I've SCUBA dived with rays many times, without incident. They're harmless unless threatened. The key is learning what threatens them.

Anyone in risky occupations knows accidents happen. But those that occur between humans and animals are the *generally* the result of our ignorance, complacency, or arrogance.

The guy who wants to bring his pet alligators to Naples daily from home to pose "hugging" you for a fee claims it's perfectly safe. I couldn't help note, however, that he straps the gator's jaws shut during the "hugging," ostensibly to make the *humans* feel better.

The alligators will endure two hours daily in a vehicle to "pose" for hours on a succession of human shoulders in a *mall*.

Suggesting the 'gators are okay with it, as he does, is a stretch even for me. They may have been raised with a "lot of affection" as he claims, but I can't imagine they'd rather be muzzled in a mall than mucking about in the mud.

One or two small alligators sacrificed for an additional attraction seems innocuous enough, right? After all, they're only *alligators*.

So what's next? Burmese pythons draped across your shoulders in a photo kiosk on Naples Bay?

And what happens when the first alligators grow too big to hug? Are the second stringers being reared at home even now?

Amazingly, there's currently nothing in the city code of ordinances regarding animal exhibits, and some merchants are even in *favor* of this to bring business to the mall.

I'm all for the education "Gator Man" claims it will serve.

But what's it teaching? Carrying alligators two hours every day to a booth to sit in somebody's lap or "hug" strangers after having their jaws strapped shut (the 'gators, not the strangers) isn't precisely *education*.

Education is urging people to go to attractions where alligators live a *relatively* natural existence in ways one can observe.

And while I still have concerns about marine aquariums, at least those animals don't have to sit all day with muzzles on their faces in the middle of a mall.

This alligator "exhibit" is less about education than it is the \$5.00-plus-tip charge for the photos.

I don't doubt this man is proud of his 'gators, or even feels affection for them.

But if he *really* cares, he'll leave them home where I hope they have a relatively normal life, well-fed, and muzzle-free.

In September, the Naples City Council will vote the issue.

I hope their decision is made with thoughtful consideration for all parties involved, including the alligators, and the *precedent* it sets.

It's not merely about a man trying to make money with his two alligator "pets."

It's about providing *real* education that doesn't distort what these, and other wild animals are, or how they should be treated.

The Naples City Council has a chance to show the city's concern for its *indigenous* population as well as its people.

I hope they do.

The writer with sharks being fed in their native environment. This is education.



Photo of alligator feeding, courtesy Naples Zoo. This is education.



The writer's 84 year old mother with their wolf dogs. This is education.



This is *not*.



Alligator being posed, [Naples Daily News](#) 8/09/11 photos by Tristan Spinski



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