

Octagon Wildlife Sanctuary is still going thanks to the efforts of many

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Lauri Caron, her volunteers and vets keep doors open

SOUTHEASTERN CHARLOTTE COUNTY -- Octagon Wildlife Sanctuary is surviving and almost thriving thanks to the unrelenting efforts of Lauri Caron who owns and operates the private zoo for a couple of hundred big cats and exotic wild animals people no longer want.

With a small band of dedicated volunteers and four local veterinarians, she has kept the place going since her husband, Peter, died unexpectedly in May of last year. He ran Octagon, located in southeastern Charlotte County, for nearly three decades.

Caron has done more than keep the place going. She has managed to make major improvements to the 10-acre zoo that has become "a retirement home for old animals."

Thanks to a recent \$35,000 grant from the Southwest Florida Community Foundation, the sanctuary just installed new Cyclone barrier fencing in front of every animal's cage to keep visitors from sticking a finger into a lion or tiger's mouth. It's just one of several grants Caron has obtained in recent months from local philanthropic groups.

Octagon is home for 19 tigers, 11 cougars, 10 lions, seven bears, four leopards, three coyotes and one very rare Liger, a cross between a lion and a tiger, named "Kodi." At upwards of 800 pounds, the big male cat can do pretty much what he wants within the confines of his cage.

In addition, there are a bunch of smaller animals. The current "Animal Inventory List" at Octagon totals 212 critters of all shapes and sizes.

Operating the facility costs \$8,000 per month, Caron said.

"We get no government funding of any kind. It's strictly grant money, public donations from people coming to see the animals on the weekends and donations from local businesses," she said. "I can't say it's been an easy year since Pete passed. It's been a very difficult year to do all those things that Pete left unfinished."

Caron buys the 12,000 to 15,000 pounds of meat for her animals from suppliers in Tampa and Miami at a good price, she said. Then there are the local business that have come through for Octagon.

"We get our fruit and vegetables free from Sweetbay Supermarket on Bayshore Road in North Fort Myers. Wal-Mart in North Fort Myers donates dog food, cat food and bird seed to us. Target in Fort Myers provides bedding material for the animals, dog and cat food and cleaning supplies," she said.

What's Caron's biggest problem?

"Finances -- keeping the money flowing. It's always been a struggle. If I really get short of funds, I have a few angles I can go to," she said.

Caron also has a "Wish List."

"What I would really like to have is a Bob Cat (tractor) with a bucket so I could move the sand more easily." The facility uses sand by the ton. Also needed are "all the rakes, shovels and wheelbarrows I can get."

Besides her two dozen plus volunteers who clean cages, maintain the grounds and feed the animals, Caron is thankful for four veterinarians who donate their time and experience to Octagon. They do house calls which makes life a lot easier for her and her animals. They include:

- Dr. Kurt Winter, Punta Gorda Animal Hospital.
- Dr. Laura Bogart, North Cape Animal Clinic.
- Dr. Scott Folk, retired vet.
- Dr. Deeter Rutie, retired vet.

"People don't understand when we pick up one of these animals from someplace that no longer wants it, the care starts immediately and continues for the rest of the animal's life," Caron explained. "We have a lifetime commitment until the animal passes. It consists of around-the-clock care -- feeding, cleaning and medication. The older these animals get, the more care they require."

Ninety percent of Octagon's animals are over the hill, some are way over. A bear that died recently at the sanctuary lived to be 50 years old, Caron said. Delilah, an 18-year-old female lion, is still going strong. Her male partner, Baxter, is even older.

Most of the animals were born in captivity and were personal pets, or they worked for a living in circuses, as photographic models or in Hollywood movies.

Their cages aren't large, but they're adequate. Each cage is clean and the cats and bears have their own private pools they swim in on a daily basis to escape the heat of the Florida summer. All of the cages have protective screening on the top to shade them from the sun's rays.

It's been a long, hard road for Lauri Caron since she first arrived 15 years ago at Octagon. She was a young woman from Rockford, Ill. who loved animals, but knew nothing about anything bigger than a dog or cat. She convinced Peter she had a way with his critters and would work hard, too.

He put her to work as a part-time volunteer for the first few years. Eventually she worked her way up to become his assistant after five years at no pay. She held various side jobs to keep food on her table.

Four years ago, Pete and Lauri got married and she not only became his wife, but part owner of Octagon, too. Peter was a Barnum & Bailey act with lots of charisma and razzle-dazzle who kept the place going despite occasional run-ins with the state law enforcement agencies over the animals.

Since Lauri took over, a little more than a year ago, she has managed to do more than keep Octagon on the right side of the law. In a recent letter, Lt. Steve Mevers of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, notes: "I want to take a moment to recognize the valuable partnership that has developed between Florida Fish and Wildlife and the Sanctuary.

"The Octagon Sanctuary has time and time again assisted officers with issues relating to the care, housing and capture of wildlife. The assistance has been invaluable in the state's efforts to manage wildlife and protect citizens and the environment from free-roaming exotics."

Caron estimates 35,000 people came through Octagon's gates since she's been running the place, an increase of 15 percent over the year before. The donations they deposit in a jug out front aren't nearly enough to keep the place afloat, but they help.

"We need more public support to keep Octagon going. It's a much-needed place not only for the animals, but for all of us," she said as she surveyed her domain she has grown to love.