



GET UP CLOSE AND  
*Purrsonal*  
WITH  
**Big Cat**  
**Rescue**

**By Doug Eadie**

Carole and Howard Baskin are real partners, not only in marriage, but also in running an extraordinary Tampa nonprofit, Big Cat Rescue. A 45-acre sanctuary for over 150 exotic (meaning not domestic) big cats – lions, tigers, and many more – located just minutes from Citrus Park Mall, Big Cat Rescue is also a powerhouse in the international movement to end the abuse and abandonment of captive exotic animals and to promote the preservation of big cats in the wild.

I recently spent a delightful couple of hours at Big Cat Rescue, interviewing Carole and Howard about their work as Big Cat Champions for this first in a series of columns about local nonprofit leaders. Here are some highlights from our discussion.

**DOUG:** In addition to being married, you two run a large, complex nonprofit corporation with a budget of approximately \$1.2 million and over 100 volunteers. What's the Big Cat Rescue "business" all about?

**HOWARD:** We've got a two-pronged mission, Doug. Big Cat Rescue is the largest accredited sanctuary devoted to big cats in the world. We don't buy, sell, breed, or parade these magnificent animals in public; basically, we provide them with a comfortable retirement home. Secondly, we're in the business of educating the public so that abusive behavior is eliminated and eventually sanctuaries like ours won't need to exist.

**CAROLE:** I'd like to pick up on Howard's point about education. He and I agree that Big Cat Rescue should in the future become much more aggressive in carrying out our educational and advocacy roles. Howard and I, along with our staff and volunteers, love our Big Cat residents, and seeing them live comfortable, safe, and healthy lives free of abuse gives us tremendous satisfaction. But real, fundamental change in the lives of big cats – both in the wild and in captivity – around the world depends on changing the way people behave and the laws that regulate their behavior. It's simply the highest impact strategy over the long run.



*left to right: Howard Baskin, Carole Baskin and Doug Eadie*

**DOUG:** Well, fortunately for your current residents, Carole, you did found Big Cat Rescue, which must make for a fascinating story. Tell me about it.

**CAROLE:** I'd be happy to, Doug. It's anything but a classic case of long-range planning, to put it mildly. In the early 90s, my late husband and I were at an exotic animal auction to buy llamas, when a man walked in with a darling – but really terrified – bobcat kitten on a leash. We felt so bad for her that when the fellow said his wife didn't want her as a pet any longer, I jumped at the chance to buy her, and probably paid more than anyone ever had for a bobcat just to free her from that terrible situation. So back to Tampa we went, our adorable kitten in tow. As it turned out, our new pet bonded with me, but couldn't stand my husband, so we decided to find one or more bobcat kittens for him to raise.

About a year later, we found a place in Minnesota that sold bobcat and lynx kittens, so we drove up there to look them over. This was our introduction to what's called a "fur farm," where a few kittens were sold every year, but the great majority were slaughtered for their fur. When we saw a pile of skinned corpses,

covered with flies, my husband and I decided on the spot to buy all 56 of the cats the owner had, if he'd agree not to kill any more for their fur. He agreed, so back to Tampa we went again, accompanied this time by a veritable menagerie of bobcat and lynx kittens.

That's how Big Cat Rescue began. Over the next five years or so, it grew into the sanctuary we now have. Almost all of our growth came from people around the country who, learning about the sanctuary, called to ask if we could take the cougar, leopard, or other big cat they couldn't any longer care for. Over the years we created the physical infrastructure that provides a comfortable home for our 100-some big cat residents, and we eventually quit buying cats, not only because of the expense, but also not to support the animal brokers and breeders who were causing so much misery.



**DOUG:** Creating a comfortable retirement community for so many big cats must have come with a pretty hefty price tag. Tell me a bit about the financial side of the Big Cat Rescue enterprise.

**HOWARD:** Without question, Doug, financial concerns topped the list of strategic issues until around 2002, when Big Cat Rescue finally began to break even after years of running an

annual deficit. Our initial thrust was building up our earned income from tours, special events, and the gift shop, which doubled between 2003 and 2005. Since 2005, we've focused on building our donor base and beefing up contributions, which had almost tripled by 2009.

You know, our obligation to care for our big cats to the end of their lives is like a pension liability, which will require an estimated \$5 million in the bank. Our goal is to have this big cat "pension liability" fully funded with reserves, and we're making progress, but we've got a long way to go. Bottom line: Big Cat Rescue at this point, knock on wood, is on a sound financial footing, but providing for our big cats through their lifetimes will be a tremendous ongoing challenge.

**DOUG:** You two obviously work as a pretty cohesive leadership team at the top of Big Cat Rescue. How do you divvy up the executive turf?

**CAROLE:** Writing our "job descriptions" was probably the easiest thing we've had to do on the management front, since Howard and I each concentrate on the functions we have an affinity for and are really good at, with very little overlapping. The fact that our executive roles are complementary and don't involve an ounce of competition makes for a tension-free life in the executive suite, at least the great majority of the time.

As the founder and chief executive officer, I spend lots of time managing internal operations and communicating with the wider world and our constituents via our interactive web site, which I've played a hands-on role in developing. Howard is in essence the Chief Administrative Officer of Big Cat Rescue, handling business services like financial planning and management, marketing, and financial resource development. He's officially our Treasurer, and he also chairs our high-level Advisory Board, which is made up of experts in such areas as law, public relations, and finance.

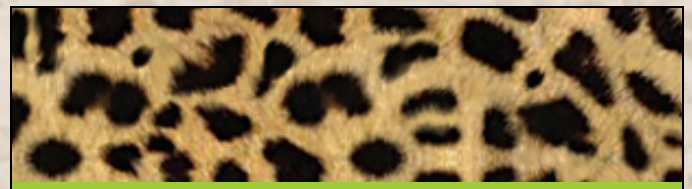
**HOWARD:** Carole and I talk a lot, of course. Our mantra is communicate, communicate, communicate, and collaborate,

collaborate, collaborate. I respect the fact that she's the CEO of Big Cat Rescue, and I make a real effort to run administrative and financial issues by her so she's never caught off-guard or presented with some kind of *fait accompli*. And we make all of the really high-stakes strategic decisions together.

For example, as we look toward the long-range future of Big Cat Rescue, we both see the need to focus increasingly on education and advocacy. We've got to move beyond the original sanctuary model if we want to make a significant difference over the long haul.

Not your typical animal theme park, Big Cat Rescue bills itself as an educational sanctuary in which visitors can get up close and "purr-sonal" with more than 150 big wild cats. Accredited by the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries, Big Cat Rescue is the world's largest accredited sanctuary for exotic cats. It's located at 12802 Easy St. in Tampa. For more information, call (813) 920-4130 or visit their web site at [www.bigcatrescue.org](http://www.bigcatrescue.org).

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