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Controversial Christian zoo skinned tiger Tira and stored her head in freezer

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A Christian zoo decapitated a dead tiger and cut off its paws before it dumped the carcass on farmland and stored the head in a freezer, an investigation has revealed.

The female Bengal tiger called Tira was skinned after she died of natural causes and then buried in a black bin bag at Noah's Ark Zoo Farm.

Investigators also discovered she was on loan from the owner of the Great British Circus - one of the last big top shows in Britain to use live tigers in performances.

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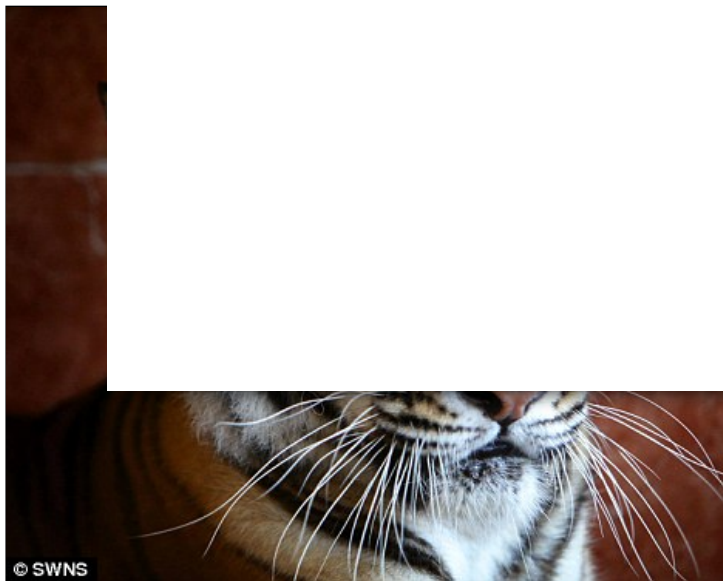
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Natural causes: Tira the Bengal tiger, who was decapitated after her death

Bosses at the zoo, in Wraxall near Bristol, admitted the skin, paws and head were removed to be hung on the wall as part of a display for 'secondary education'.

After the revelations, staff at Noah's Ark - which promotes creationism and denies the theory of evolution - dug up the remains and incinerated them.

The case emerged in an undercover investigation by campaign group the Captive Animals Protection Society (CAPS), which planted an undercover worker at the zoo.

The organisation also claims the zoo is raising young tigers as part of a breeding programme to hand back to the circus.

Campaign Director Craig Redmond today called for the attraction to be closed down.

He said: 'What we discovered was shocking but really only scratched at the surface of what goes on in zoos.'

'We initially planned just to confirm that the zoo was a breeding centre for the circus owner but the fate of the tiger Tira, her mutilated body dumped in a hole, shows how these animals are treated as commodities, bred to attract tourists.'

'We have reported the zoo to various authorities including the local council which licenses the zoo, calling for an investigation as well as its licence to be revoked.'

The undercover 'employee' spent two months working as a volunteer at the site from early June to mid August and secretly filmed conversations.

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Investigated: Noah's Ark Zoo Farm in Wraxall near Bristol

During that time, recorded conversations confirmed that staff were aware animals were received from Martin Lacey, who owns the Great British Circus.

But when asked, members of the public were told the animals were bought in from a 'private collection in the north' - which it emerged was Mr Lacey.

Three tigers arrived at the zoo in June and July, one of which was the heavily pregnant six-year-old Bengal tiger, Tira.

Three of her cubs were stillborn and the fourth was immediately removed and hand-reared but died three weeks later.

Tira died ten days after the birth and staff cut off her head and paws before her skin was removed and her body dumped on the farm's grounds.

Mr Redmond added: 'The body was buried for reasons unknown, but before any test or a post mortem could be carried out to ascertain the cause of death.'

'The head was later seen by our undercover investigator wrapped in a black bag in a freezer, but the paws were never seen again.'

'Our insider was told the skin would be hung on the wall as a decoration.'

Anthony Bush, the owner of Noah's Ark, said he has since dug the tiger up and corrected his mistake after Defra vowed to investigate.

A spokeswoman for the zoo said: 'Noah's Ark does not own or hold circus tigers and they are not the property of the Great British Circus.'

'The Tigers at Noah's Ark Zoo Farm belong to Linctrek Ltd, a company providing trained animals for use in film, other collections and TV.'

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'However, on subsequently being informed of other regulations we acted instantly to remedy this situation.

'The tiger skin, head and feet will be used for secondary education here at the Zoo and is a common practice within the zoo community.

'The welfare of the animals is exceptional with Noah's Ark passing government and institutionally accredited inspections.'

However, the zoo denied claims that it is part of a breeding programme and says it had 'no immediate plans' to hand back Tira's cubs.

The British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums, Somerset Trading Standards and Defra have all vowed to investigate the allegations.

Professional group the British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums said it would also investigate.

** The investigation into Noah's Ark's links with the circus featured as part of BBC 1's Inside Out West at 7.30pm tonight.*

a scandal

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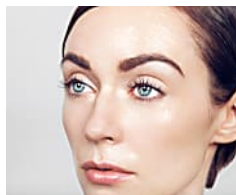
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