

Considerations for Keeping Captive Fish and Wildlife in a Scout Camp

INTRODUCTION

Nature exhibits, aquariums, and terrariums with captive fish and wildlife are often used in camp nature centers as methods of sharing nature with Scouts. If managed properly in a safe and ethical way, these exhibits serve as excellent teaching tools. Scouts receive a meaningful learning experience and feel inspired and connected with nature. They gain a greater respect for wildlife, ultimately becoming more conservation-minded.

While there truly is no substitute for viewing nature in the wild, such opportunities are limited or non-existent at some Scout camp properties. With that in mind, the BSA National Conservation and Environment Task Force offers these recommendations to guide captive fish and wildlife nature programs at BSA camps.

Note that there is no national BSA policy or standard related to keeping captive fish and wildlife in Scout camps or other program areas. Aquariums, terrariums, and nature exhibits with fish and wildlife are maintained on Scout property solely at the discretion of the local council.

OUTDOOR ETHICS

Activities that we cherish in our Scouting programs may, at times, come into conflict with our principles of outdoor ethics. If we aren't careful, camping in the back country, fishing, holding a campfire, or even keeping a box turtle as a pet may have an unintended impact on our environment. For that reason, whenever we enjoy the outdoors, we should consider the benefits and costs of our actions and choose alternatives, if appropriate, to reduce our impact.

The nature program area at a Scout camp is no exception. A council should only keep captured fish and wildlife in a camp nature center if it clearly benefits the Scouts and provides a quality learning experience. Implications for outdoor ethics, as well as costs, should be carefully assessed before an exhibit is planned. Our actions must always send the proper message as we teach Scouts about ecology, conservation, and the natural world.

Recommendations

- ***Abide by federal, local, and state laws and regulations.*** Before developing a program or exhibit with captive fish and wildlife, Scout councils should check with

the state's Wildlife Division or Fish and Game Department to make sure their plans will be in compliance. Permits may be required, and there may be regulations that limit the quantity and species being kept for educational purposes. For example, federal laws such as the [Migratory Bird Treaty Act](#) make it illegal for anyone to take or possess "any migratory bird, or the parts, nests, or eggs of such a bird" without a federal permit. The [Endangered Species Act](#) requires permits for activities that affect federally listed species; the use of live endangered species for educational purposes is not a permitted use. States have similar laws covering endangered species. Councils and their camp ecology staff must become familiar with all endangered plant and animal species that inhabit their area. Federal- and state-protected species should not be captured, collected, harmed, harassed, or used in any Scout nature exhibit or display.

- ***Avoid keeping venomous animals.*** Venomous or otherwise poisonous reptiles, amphibians, fish, insects, spiders or scorpions, and the like, should not be kept in Scout program areas nor handled by Scouts or Scouters. Many of these species are protected by regulations, and common sense dictates that possessing them places Scouts, visitors, and camp staff at risk.
- ***Avoid keeping wild birds, mammals, and protected wildlife.*** Captured wild mammals of any kind should not be kept in Scout camps. Birds and mammals in particular may carry diseases that can be transferred to humans. Federal law prohibits possessing migratory birds and there are likely local regulations that prohibit the possession of mammals.
- ***Reptiles and amphibians.*** Whenever feasible, it is always best for your nature exhibit to contain store-purchased and captive-bred reptiles and amphibians, as opposed to removing them from the wild. Local stores and licensed breeders may offer the same types of native species that inhabit your Scout property.
- ***Avoid keeping breeding animals, eggs, or juveniles.*** Avoid impacting the reproductive potential, life cycles, and population of the camp's native wildlife.
- ***Follow proper procedures when an exhibit animal dies.*** The body of a deceased animal should be treated with respect and disposed of in an appropriate manner. Avoid disturbing native plant vegetation if you are burying the animal. As an alternative, taxidermy may allow the animal to continue serving an educational purpose.

- ***Keeping and caring for fish and wildlife.*** If a Scout council chooses to maintain a natural exhibit with captive fish and wildlife, steps should be taken to ensure that the animals receive proper care. Animals should be kept in a habitat that resembles their native environment with suitable cover, water, and other necessities such as a heat source. Adequate and proper food should be provided, and animals should be properly handled. Exhibits should be kept in clean order, and only compatible fish and animals should be kept in the same exhibit. Sick or injured animals may be unpredictable and should not be kept in a nature exhibit. Sanitation resources should be provided if animals are being handled by Scouts, and they should be directed to wash their hands immediately afterward. Ensure that soaps and hand sanitizers do not come into contact with the wildlife and are not dumped into nearby streams, other bodies of water, or wetlands. Keep any captured animals for only a limited time, such as one week, and release them back to their original location and natural environment.
- ***Closing captive fish and wildlife exhibits.*** It is critically important to properly close the nature exhibit at the end of the program season. Native, adult wild species need to be returned to the exact habitat location where they were captured. Non-native species that were obtained from any place outside their natural habitats should never be released into the wild; invasive species pose a key threat to endangered species and populations of native species throughout the U.S. If non-native plants were used in the captive animal exhibit, those plants should be sealed in a plastic bag and placed in the trash.

Following these recommendations will connect Scouts to nature while teaching them to be good stewards of the environment.