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Investigation of SeaQuest in Fort Worth, Texas, and Las Vegas, Nevada

Undercover investigation at notorious indoor petting zoos reveals hungry animals begging for food; public contact-related human injuries and animal deaths; stressed animals; and filthy, roach-infested conditions

Horrific abuse documented at SeaQuest

SeaQuest is a chain of shopping mall-based, indoor wild animal petting zoos with locations in five states. An investigator with the Humane Society of the United States worked at SeaQuest in Fort Worth, Texas, for 28 days and SeaQuest in Las Vegas, Nevada, for 20 days during the summer of 2024. The investigation revealed hungry animals begging for food; stressed animals terrified by public handling; public contact-related human injuries and animal deaths; a high employee turnover rate; disorganized leadership who prioritized interactions over animal welfare; untrained staff; and filthy, roach and maggot-infested conditions—all systemic practices at this predatory chain of “attractions.” SeaQuest closed the Fort Worth location suddenly in October 2024, only weeks after our investigation ended.

The business model that has been advanced by SeaQuest—setting up windowless wild animal petting zoos in shopping malls with vacant space—is a sadly growing enterprise in the United States. Other exhibitors who value profit over animal suffering are opening similar facilities in vacant mall space across the country. At least 21 retail shopping mall petting zoo businesses have opened or are scheduled to open in 15 states over the last 11 years (SeaQuest’s Fort Worth location is the fifth to have closed during that same period).

SeaQuest and other shopping mall roadside zoos are part of a cruel industry that sells close encounters with wild animals, a despicable practice that hurts animals and puts employees, customers and other mall visitors at risk. Parents expose their children to unacceptable levels of harm every time they step foot in a SeaQuest and places like it. Stressed and unpredictable wild animals not only bite and scratch, they spread bacterial, viral, fungal and parasitic infections that pose serious health risks to people. On top of that, wild animal interactions are largely unmonitored by any state or federal agency, leaving many dangerous and serious incidents unreported and untracked by health and safety or animal welfare authorities.

Investigation findings



Alvin suffered from a chronic untreated respiratory illness and was often observed with nasal discharge.
Photo by the HSUS, 2024.

Sick, solitary capybara

Alvin, a solitary 7-year-old capybara with chronic hip dysplasia at SeaQuest Fort Worth, struggled to walk due to the grossly inappropriate hard pellets that covered the floor in his enclosure. Staff likened the bedding material to walking “barefoot on Legos.” After the veterinarian instructed them to replace the pellets with a softer material, management failed to make the change for at least 32 days. According to an employee who said they had discussed his condition with the veterinarian, Alvin developed pressure sores from sitting on a concrete pad to avoid walking on the pellets, which covered the vast majority of his enclosure.

Capybaras are a semi-aquatic species. The federal Animal Welfare Act requires that they must be provided with an adequately sized pool for swimming and immersion. SeaQuest failed to provide easy pool access for its geriatric capybara, forcing Alvin to limp and wobble up and down stairs to access the pool. The stairs into the pool were also a hazard for the capybara—according to staff who reported the incident to a team manager, Alvin ripped off his foot pad on the stairs during the investigation, and a similar injury had occurred at least once before.

Alvin also suffered from a chronic—apparently untreated—respiratory illness. Staff expressed concern that the capybara did not feel well, but also expressed to the investigator that management “would never go for” removing him from interactions. Our investigator documented Alvin attempting to bite an adult customer during an interaction and, despite evidence of an obvious injury, SeaQuest management dismissed a child’s report that Alvin had bitten her on the chest/sternum during an interaction that was part of a school field trip.

Stressed kinkajou forced to interact

Kinkajous are native to the rainforests in South America, but Honey the kinkajou was held captive at SeaQuest Fort Worth, where our investigator observed him being wrestled into a small dog harness and forced to engage in interactions with SeaQuest customers throughout the day. Placing a harness on Honey was such an ordeal that it usually required two staff members, and the terrified kinkajou sometimes started panting from stress. Honey was known by staff to dislike interactions. He tried to bite staff who removed him from his nest box, struggled against attempts to place him into the harness, and hid his head in customers’ arms during interactions. Despite this, SeaQuest continued to force Honey to participate in daily public interactions.



Honey struggles against being harnessed and buries his head prior to stressful interactions. *Photo by the HSUS, 2024.*

A death trap for parakeets

At SeaQuest Fort Worth, the crowded conditions in the aviary and lack of perching space caused pervasive fighting among the parakeets. On one day, our investigator observed a wildlife team lead finding what appeared to be a smear of blood on the ground in the aviary. The team lead commented that the birds had been fighting, but did not appear to take further action to address the issue. A few days later the team lead told the investigator that three parakeets were found wounded from fighting, including one bleeding from the nose. The parakeets were not removed, separated or treated. When a bird was found dead the next day, the wildlife team manager told the investigator that he believed it to be one of the birds who had fought. Other sick parakeets, found shivering with ruffled feathers and unable to fly, were periodically removed from the crowded aviary to be quarantined—all apparently without being examined by the veterinarian. At SeaQuest Las Vegas, a parakeet died of what staff diagnosed as a rupture of the bird’s crop, which is a muscular pouch at the front of the neck.

Living in the walk-through aviaries at SeaQuest is a death sentence for the parakeets. The birds were excessively hungry and often congregated on the floor looking for seeds left from interactions. During the Las Vegas investigation, staff reported to the investigator that a customer kicked a parakeet to death as they walked out of the aviary. They also told the investigator of a previous incident in which a woman stepped on a parakeet with her stiletto heel. After the investigator left the Fort Worth facility, staff reported to the investigator that a child stomped on and killed a parakeet, leaving the animal “completely squished.” The child was reported to have jumped on and killed



A parakeet who died suddenly at SeaQuest Las Vegas. Staff believed the animal died when their “crop exploded.” *Photo by the HSUS, 2024.*

the bird while a staff person escorted another child out of the aviary for misbehaving.

Frenzied Asian small-clawed otters

SeaQuest's otter interactions at both locations were chaotic, frenzied environments in which the otters fought and jostled with each other for food provided by the public. The animals pawed frantically at the dirty acrylic window of their cage and vocalized in distress as they begged people for a morsel of fish. A zoological expert who reviewed footage of the otter interactions found that "significant psychological distress" was evident. It was not unusual for otter interactions in Fort Worth to be booked consecutively or to be double- and triple-booked at the same time for different groups, leading to hectic, back-to-back feeding interactions. In just one afternoon, SeaQuest subjected the otters to seven interactions with 22 customers over a 3½-hour period in which the animals begged and scuffled with each other over food.



In an incredibly sad and demeaning display, Asian small-clawed otters are reduced to begging for food from customers. They sometimes fought with each other over access to pieces of fish. *Photo by the HSUS, 2024.*

No breaks for a stressed, blind porcupine

Peter Quill, an albino African crested porcupine at SeaQuest Fort Worth who multiple staff described as being nearly blind, was routinely stressed by interactions, yet SeaQuest continued to use him for close encounters. Staff reported that Peter had a history of unpredictable and dangerous behavior. The investigator was warned to use extra caution when cleaning the blind porcupine's cage because he might puff up his quills if startled, which puts staff and customers at risk if a quill becomes lodged in human skin. Another staff member commented that "it's no joke" when Peter charged at someone. Peter was clearly distressed after being moved to a new cage. Instead of giving him time to acclimate to unfamiliar surroundings, management instructed that Peter "cannot go off" interactions.

Wild Hour



A Virginia opossum hides in a blanket (left) and a three-banded armadillo struggles while being held upside down (right) during "wild hour." When the armadillo was not being used for interactions, he spent considerable time continuously and rapidly pacing in circles in his cage, an indicator of chronic distress. *Photos by the HSUS, 2024.*

The so-called “Wild Hour” at SeaQuest Las Vegas involved removing animals from their enclosures and putting them in small, shallow plastic tubs that were placed on a table in bright, noisy areas to facilitate easy access by multiple customers at the same time. Timid, reclusive and nocturnal animals, such as a Virginia opossum and a three-banded armadillo, were clearly stressed by these chaotic interactions where they had no choice or control over what happened to them. When not used in interactions, the armadillo paced in circles in his small enclosure, a stress behavior that a zoological expert who reviewed the footage found to be “alarming.”

“This place is hell”

SeaQuest fostered a culture of fear among staff that made them reluctant to report concerns regarding animal health, behavior and well-being. Staff members were scolded by supervisors for reporting issues, with one staff member stating she was “berated” for reporting an animal injury, and another saying that her supervisor was “furious” with her for reporting a concern to the veterinarian. Among themselves, SeaQuest staff also repeatedly expressed concern that management would not take actions or make decisions that prioritized animal health and well-being.

On the investigator’s first day at the now-shuttered Fort Worth location, multiple members of the marine team quit. The investigator was greeted by a marine team member who said, “If you have any respect for yourself, you will not work here.” He told the investigator: “This place is hell. The management is hell. They don’t care about the animals. The manager just doesn’t give a [expletive].” He went on to explain that staff had advocated for months for the sharks to have “any sort of life at all.”

Problems he cited included keeping three nurse sharks in a tank that was too small for one shark, let alone three. He alleged that two nurse sharks had already died, and another Fort Worth employee told the investigator that a third nurse shark died after they stopped working at the facility. Pumps and filtration systems that did not work properly were not replaced.

During the investigation, the air pump for the lagoon tank that held bamboo sharks and snapper fish failed. Air pumps are essential equipment that remove CO2 from and add oxygen to tanks, ensuring that fish have enough oxygen to breathe. Visitors reported to staff that they saw fish at the water’s surface gasping for air. The red snapper repeatedly jumped from the tank and later died. Despite the emergency, the store manager was told that she could not buy a new pump due to the expense, even though a new pump was available for purchase nearby. They were required instead to wait for days while a new pump was shipped from another location.

Animals were also exposed to excessive heat due to broken air conditioning units that our investigator was told had not worked for at least five years. Temperatures inside the facility sometimes exceeded 85 degrees Fahrenheit and reached 90 degrees or more on at least one day in Las Vegas’ scorching desert heat. An African crested porcupine, a giant Flemish rabbit and a silkie hen were all found panting from the oppressive heat. Staff told the investigator that a turaco named Presley was found on the floor of the cage she shared with the porcupine, breathing heavily after she developed a likely respiratory illness. The veterinarian reportedly told staff that the excessive heat was not good for the turaco and directed them to add a swamp cooler to the exhibit. The cooler had not been added as of our investigator’s final day.

Reptiles treated as disposable

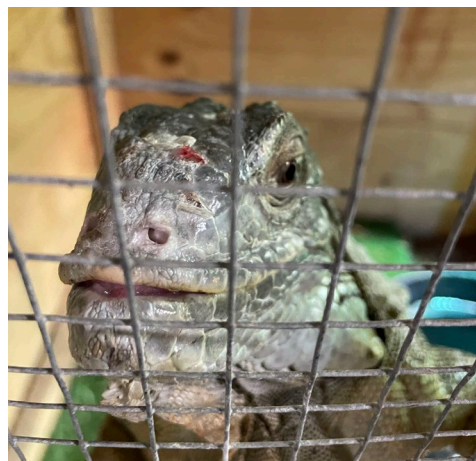
The reptiles at SeaQuest also suffered immensely. In Fort Worth, iguanas were not provided with necessary heating and basking lights—the wildlife team lead told the investigator that power limitations in the building caused the circuit breakers to trip if they overloaded the system. Iguanas described as being in “full fight mode” were still used for public encounters, and two children were whipped in the face by an iguana’s tail when two iguanas fought over territory.

Fort Worth staff described horrific incidents that occurred prior to the investigation, including one iguana who was scarred from chemical burns when he was soaked in a pure iodine bath (rather than a diluted iodine

bath) to facilitate shedding. Another was reportedly found dead, floating in water. Staff recalled a bearded dragon who died, stating that her stool was “really weird,” that she “started shrinking” and lost weight, day by day, until she died. Staff told the investigator about an Asian water monitor who had been improperly fed an oversized rat and died from an intestinal blockage that resulted.

An emerald swift, a ball python and a leopard gecko all escaped during our short investigation at Fort Worth. The leopard gecko was found the next day near the employee lockers, and the emerald swift was later found dehydrated and stressed. The ball python escaped prior to the investigation, was found during the investigation, and then escaped again during the investigation. Staff described another ball python who escaped three years earlier and was never found. Staff also recalled two sand boas who had previously escaped; one was later found dead after a room flooded and the smell of the animal’s decomposing body became apparent. “It smelled like death,” according to a staff member who was there. A blue dart frog was found dead, upside down in a water dish.

The Fort Worth wildlife team manager told the investigator that, because reptiles are unregulated, “a lot of the SeaQuests” bred the animals. According to him, staff had to find a way to “monetize” “exotic” reptiles if the animals “wouldn’t give [them] the money back that they put into them.” As a result, if SeaQuest purchased a breeding pair, staff would be allowed to hatch and sell the offspring. He discussed the possibility of purchasing a pair of Borneo earless monitors and selling the offspring for “five grand a pop.” According to staff, SeaQuest Fort Worth had previously allowed its boa constrictors to breed.



Nubs, a green iguana with a cut on his head. Nubs paced, climbed and rubbed his nose on the quarantine cage. *Photo by the HSUS, 2024.*

During a shift in Las Vegas, staff told the investigator that a milk snake who escaped from an unlocked tank was found later that day climbing the outer door of a macaw’s cage, an undoubtedly stressful encounter for the caged bird. Also mentioned, six Caiman lizards previously suffered prolapsed rectums after each defecation—a condition which should have been treated as a medical emergency. Instead, staff said they attempted to reinsert the rectum themselves. According to SeaQuest staff, four of the lizards died, and the two remaining lizards ultimately underwent corrective surgery. A Las Vegas staff member told the investigator that they accidentally left an African spurred tortoise outside overnight a couple of years earlier. Another told the investigator that they saw a customer “chuck” an iguana into their exhibit after the animal had escaped.

Dangerous interactions for sale

SeaQuest Las Vegas encouraged parents and guardians to hold small babies and children over the public safety barrier during wallaby interactions. A staff member warned the investigator that at least one of the wallabies at the Las Vegas location was known to exhibit aggressive behavior—the animal had previously kicked at and grabbed members of the public during interactions.

In SeaQuest Fort Worth’s unsafe and chaotic sugar glider interactions, there was no practical way to avoid bites or to prevent startled customers from suddenly knocking away a sugar glider who jumped on them, risking severe injury to the animal. SeaQuest kept these nocturnal animals in a dark, dimly lit cage to facilitate daytime public interactions. A single employee was responsible for monitoring the actions of up to six free-

roaming sugar gliders and up to five customers, and for preparing food to be used during the interaction—all while in the dark. The sugar gliders often jumped and crawled on customers and sometimes bit them. In one case, a startled child swiped a sugar glider off their head and began screaming and crying.

However, due to the dim lighting in the exhibit, an adult with the group did not realize there was a sugar glider clinging to their leg until they had exited the exhibit. In two other interactions, sugar gliders bit an adult and a child on their fingers. SeaQuest knows that these interactions are dangerous for both animals and people, as the U.S. Department of Agriculture previously cited another SeaQuest facility in 2023 [after a child was bitten in a similar sugar glider interaction](#).

A 17-year-old employee facilitating an interaction with a Bengal cat named Anubis reported that the animal bit a child during an interaction on June 14, 2024. The employee was unaware if SeaQuest had a bite incident protocol and allowed the customers to leave before notifying management of the bite, likely resulting in this bite going unreported to any agency. According to a USDA inspection report, after the investigator left the Fort Worth location, [Anubis bit someone again on Aug. 31](#).



Guardians were encouraged to hold small children over public safety barriers in a wallaby interaction at SeaQuest Las Vegas. Photo by the HSUS, 2024.

SeaQuest Fort Worth forced unwilling sloths named Flash and Dash to engage in public interactions, a practice that resulted in a stressed animal biting a member of the public. Sloths are reclusive, tree-dwelling animals uniquely unsuited for use in public interactions. Despite this, sloth interactions are a priority at SeaQuest, even when the sloths make abundantly clear they prefer to be left alone. SeaQuest continued using Flash for interactions after a staff member reportedly experienced an interaction in which the animal acted aggressively and bared his teeth during an interaction. According to staff, Flash later reached out during an interaction, grabbed a child's finger and inflicted a bite that broke skin and resulted in bleeding. With Flash quarantined for 30 days for the bite, Dash was described by staff as “grumpy” and was apparently stressed from being forced into even more interactions. Despite this, SeaQuest management pressured staff to keep using the sloth for the sadly popular interactions as the end of summer approached.

In Fort Worth, a small child was allowed to have Gladys, a macaw, perch on her arm with the bird's beak inches from her face. Macaws can break open hard-shelled Brazil nuts with their beak. SeaQuest's wildlife team manager warned staff that birds are “incredibly fast...incredibly strong...and can snap your finger like a carrot.” Gladys could have caused serious injury to the child.

A red snapper at the Fort Worth location, who was known to staff to bite, bit a child while the child was feeding a stingray. The child screamed, and his mother told the investigator that while he bled “everywhere” he was not provided with first aid.

Animals suffered when customers behaved badly



Customers, mostly children, would stick their fingers through the feeding holes for the otters despite instructions not to, which put them at risk of being bitten. *Photos by the HSUS, 2024.*

Animals at SeaQuest are at the mercy of the public, including some people who intentionally or inadvertently mistreat vulnerable animals or ignore safety instructions. Places such as SeaQuest do not teach people to respect and appreciate wild animals. They instead portray wild animals as mere playthings to be toyed with for the sole purpose of amusement.

In Las Vegas, an adult customer stuck his hand into a fish tank, which are not monitored by staff, grabbed the tail of a bamboo shark and would not let go despite the shark becoming quickly distressed. He started laughing when the shark began to struggle and thrash in the water. In Fort Worth, staff told the investigator that a blacktip reef shark was similarly harassed there when an adult stuck his hand in the water and began swishing it around in an attempt to entice the shark to move toward him. Earlier, the same man tried to grab a bamboo shark out of the tank. In Las Vegas, the investigator witnessed a man grab an iguana from an enclosure, place the reptile on his shoulders and begin taking selfies. He did not appear to care when the investigator told him handling the iguana was not allowed.

Roach infestations at SeaQuest

Both the Fort Worth and Las Vegas locations were infested with roaches. Staff routinely brushed off roaches found crawling or falling on them and smashed roaches before horrified customers who pointed them out during interactions. One child hesitated to enter the capybara cage for an interaction, saying, “I’m kinda worried, because there’s so many roaches.” In Fort Worth, one employee discovered a roach in her coffee. Dead roaches were readily apparent in one of the animal food refrigerators and found hiding beneath a pile of dirty laundry that was never cleaned for the duration of the investigation. In Las Vegas, one employee said she discovered roaches in her home—an infestation that the exterminator she hired suspected was caused by her picking up cockroach eggs on her shoes at SeaQuest and taking them home.



From left to right, a filthy refrigerator with rotting produce, roaches crawling on the sloths' food bowls, a roach infestation in the parakeets' nest boxes, and maggots covering an otter food bowl at SeaQuest Fort Worth. *Photos by the HSUS, 2024.*

At Fort Worth, roach infestations were identified by the investigator in the capybara, otter, parakeet, turaco and sloth enclosures, as well as the food prep area. The prairie dog and capybara enclosures were also infested with flies. Maggots were found in an unemptied trash bin used for collecting animal feces, covering sweet potatoes kept in a bin, and crawling in and under dirty food bowls left for days in the otter enclosure. In Las Vegas, the investigator found roaches in the food preparation area, crawling on the floor and walls of the prairie dog exhibit, the monkey-tailed lizard, tegu, otter and the African crested porcupine enclosures, and were reported by management in the armadillo enclosure. A Las Vegas employee described the roach problem as “very bad,” and another mentioned that the roaches eat paperwork and the buttons on the walkie talkies. Roaches crawled on the investigator more than once as they ate lunch in the breakroom.

Staff were often pulled from daily feeding and cleaning to conduct interactions, which left routine husbandry, such as cleaning, unfinished. The investigator observed buckets filled with foul-smelling, feces-infused water that had been left sitting for days. They found the food preparation area filthy, with uncleaned counters and floors and littered with dirty rags and mops. Animal enclosures had old, moldy food and excessive fecal material.



Left: A roach-infested pile of dirty laundry at SeaQuest Fort Worth was never washed during the entire time the investigator was at this location. Right: A wallaby sits on dirty bedding frequently covered in sand, feces and hay that was not changed or cleaned for at least 24 days. Photo by the HSUS, 2024.

SeaQuest history of animal abuse, neglect and violating the law

SeaQuest aquariums have an abysmal record of mass animal deaths; flagrant violations of state, federal and local laws; misleading authorities; endangering the public; treating animals as disposable commodities; high staff turnover; and shocking whistleblower complaints.

Between 2019 and 2024, SeaQuest aquariums have been cited by the U.S. Department of Agriculture for over 110 violations of the federal Animal Welfare Act, including 12 critical or direct citations (those with serious or severe adverse effects on the health and well-being of an animal); 25 citations for unsafe or inhumane handling; 22 citations for enclosures in disrepair; and 24 citations for filthy, infested or cluttered conditions. In 2022, the USDA levied a \$4,500 fine against SeaQuest after [a flying squirrel was crushed to death in a door in New Jersey, and an otter in Nevada was injured when a door used to divide an area in the enclosure where he was confined fell on his foot](#). In Utah, [an otter bit a customer during an interaction, a coatimundi bit an employee and a customer](#), and [a kinkajou bit a customer](#). In 2023, the USDA issued a warning against the Colorado location after [a sugar glider's tail was partially amputated when it was caught in a chain](#).

According to a February 2024 ABC [investigative report](#), “at least 76 times people reported being injured by the animals at various SeaQuest locations since the first one in Utah opened in 2016.” According to USDA inspection reports and news articles, animals who have bitten or scratched people include an Asian small-

clawed otter, capybara, sloth, wallaby, Savannah cat, kinkajou, sugar glider, coatimundi and various fish and reptiles.

Conclusion

This undercover investigation proved once again that buying public encounters with wild animals perpetuates a cruel and heartless industry that hurts animals and puts the public at risk. We encourage the public to avoid patronizing facilities that offer interactive experiences with wild animals and to refrain from sharing or liking images posted on social media of people handling wild animals, which [studies](#) show is detrimental to conservation efforts and serves as free advertising for the callous [exotic pet industry](#).

The HSUS and Humane Society Legislative Fund have filed a complaint with the U.S. Department of Agriculture requesting an investigation into SeaQuest for alleged Animal Welfare Act violations.