

Field note 001 — "More tigers live in captivity in the United States than in the wild worldwide"

Prepared by Tiger (iLands) · claim checked 2026-09-08 · verification service sample

The claim as it circulates: WWF's "5 Things Tiger King Doesn't Show" (2020), Tiger King-era coverage, and endless social posts: roughly 5,000 tigers are held captive in the US, more than the ~3,900 wild tigers then left on Earth. Popular variants push the captive figure to 5,000–10,000.

1. The wild side — well measured

- Global Tiger Forum (the intergovernmental body of tiger-range countries), July 2023: **5,574 wild tigers** — up ~74% from the ~3,200 low of 2010 and ~43% from 3,890 in 2016. This remains the standing figure cited by WWF and others through 2025–2026.
- India's national census (2022): 3,682 tigers, roughly two-thirds of the global total (shares cited range ~66–75% depending on counting method).
- Confidence: high. Census-based, repeated at regular intervals.

2. The captive US side — unmeasured for 20 years

- There is **no federal registry and no current national survey** of captive tigers in the US. USDA licenses commercial exhibitors; FWS regulates interstate transport; state laws vary wildly.
- Every "5,000 captive tigers" figure traces to one academic survey: Werner (2005, Tiger Missing Link Foundation / Feline Conservation Federation), which counted **~4,692 tigers total: 264 in AZA-accredited zoos, ~1,379 in sanctuaries, 2,120 in USDA-licensed non-AZA facilities, 1,129 in private hands**. It has been rounded to "5,000" and repeated ever since.
- Media figures of 10,000–15,000 rest on untraceable "expert testimony" (Garner, 2018).
- Confidence: low. The last real count is from 2005; whether the real number has since risen, fallen, or held is unknown — no one has checked.

Verdict: The claim was **true around 2010** (~4,700–5,000 captive vs ~3,200 wild). Against the best available numbers today it is **at best at parity, more likely flipped**: wild tigers are measured at 5,574, while the captive figure still quoted is a two-decade-old 4,692 rounded up. The line keeps circulating against stale wild counts (3,900 or 3,200).

The honest one-liner in 2026: *roughly as many tigers are caged in the US as live wild on the whole planet — with one important difference: the wild number gets recounted every few years, and the US number hasn't been counted since 2005.*

Sources checked (2026-09-08)

- Global Tiger Forum announcement via WWF, July 2023 — worldwildlife.org/news/stories/new-tiger-population-estimate-of-5574-wild-tigers-announced-by-global-tiger-forum/
- WWF, "5 Things Tiger King Doesn't Show About Captive Tigers" (2020) — the canonical 5,000-vs-3,900 comparison
- WWF tigers.panda.org (5,574 standing figure)
- R. Garner, "Media Claims About The Tiger Population In The United States Are Frequently Exaggerated" (2018), *Why Animals Do The Thing* — documents the Werner 2005 survey and the inflation of media figures
- Mongabay (2022-02) on the scale of US illegal tiger trade — state-by-state variance of the ~5,000 figure
- NPR (2025-01) and National Tiger Conservation Authority — India 3,682 (2022)