

Wildlife conference features Hedren

Star: Exotic pets risky; spread word of its dangers

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LANCASTER – Despite a smaller-than-expected crowd, screen

star Tippi Hedren spoke passionately Friday at Antelope Valley College, asking members of the audience to spread the word about the dangers of keeping exotic animals as private pets.

Hedren, best known for her roles in Alfred Hitchcock's "The Birds" and "Marnie," founded The Shambala Preserve in 1983 and has spent countless hours since then campaigning for it.

Hedren developed her compassion for exotic animals while working on the 1981 film "Roar" in Africa. The movie starred dozens of African lions, which producers found nearby to participate in the plot.

When filming was complete, Hedren transformed the "Roar" set into a safe haven for abused, abandoned or unwanted exotic cats. She has created a similar refuge in Acton with The Shambala Preserve.

Her mission is to end the private breeding for sale of such animals in the United States.

"Many people don't even research the type of (dog or cat) they are getting," Hedren said. "When you are taking in a lion or tiger, you're taking on a whole different animal."

Ignorance almost always is the culprit, Hedren said, when these large pets attack – sometimes even kill – their owners.

"They can be sweet, caring and compassionate one minute," she said. "Then the next minute they might jump you and think nothing of it."

A number of the animals Hedren houses on her 80-acre preserve are rescued from private captivity in the Midwest. She denounced private breeders who seem interested solely in making large amounts of money from the sale of these pets.

"Some go for hundreds of dollars," Hedren said. "Others can be much more. I saw one on the Internet being sold for \$24,000."

Breeders will do just about anything for a buck, Hedren said, sometimes bringing two different species together to mate, regardless of the genetic consequences.

To combat the problem, Hedren has taken her frustrations to the federal government. The Captive Wildlife Safety Act, co-authored by Hedren, was signed into law by President George W. Bush in December 2003, making it illegal to move live big cats like lions, tigers, leopards cheetahs and cougars across state lines. She is working on a second bill, which would ban breeding of exotic felines for personal possession.

Hedren's appearance was part of an endangered species conference put on by the Antelope Valley Conservancy.

Eight panelists from various sectors of environmental management spoke, all conveying the need to educate the public about problems that are undetected and growing in our ecosystem.

Los Angeles County Regional Park Superintendent Jack Farley said illegal desert dumping continues to threaten endangered species in wildlife preserves around the county. Farley, who oversees 12 sites, said he fights dumping by marking the areas as best he can so people know what they are doing when they are leaving behind garbage.

Kathleen Spoor, president of the Rosamond Community Services District, advocated the removal of nitrates from water sources.

"If we don't take ammonia out of our life cycle, we're going to ruin our environment," Spoor said. "We are flushing this into our rivers and streams and breaking down food chains."

Among other panelists were Pete Johnston of the United States Forest Service; Mark Hagan, Environmental Management natural resources manager at Edwards Air Force Base; Tom Gunther of the California State Parks department; and Camille Gadwood of the Feline Conservation Center in Rosamond.

Wendy Reed, executive director of the Antelope Valley Conservancy, organized the conference and encouraged everyone to get involved in preserving the high desert's ecosystem.

"Sometimes we're just tempted to say the problem is so big there's nothing we can really do," Reed said. "But we need to focus on the things we can do, what we buy and who we elect. Every plan and policy we look into can help."

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