**Keeping Wild Cats as Pets**  
The idea of keeping a wild cat as a pet appeals to a great many people. This essay is about the realities and the ethics.

Cats typically become fiercely possessive over meat. In captivity, the same instinct leads to possessiveness over objects such as feeding bowls or pieces of clothing. With little warning they will defend their possession with breathtaking aggression and inflict deep puncture wounds if challenged. In the wild this behavior is a great advantage. It helps them survive. It is a shocking and dangerous characteristic in a pet.

One feature of wild cats, which comes as no surprise to domestic cat owners, is how 'picky' they are in their friendships. A cat which is perfectly amenable to one person can injure a stranger seconds later. There is something in the beauty of wild cats, which makes us forget our commonsense. People who would not approach and caress a strange dog are eager to extend their hand to a wild cat. The desire to touch is overwhelming. If we turn the tables for a moment and consider how we would feel if a stranger approached us in the street and began touching us, we can understand in an instant why a cat might react violently to being touched by someone unknown to them.

Although there are many stories of friendly exotic cats (and no doubt such cats exist) we would argue two points: first, that they are the exception and second, that even these are unpredictable. The fact that they have not hurt anyone does not mean that they will not at some time in the future. Approaching a friendly cat after using something as apparently harmless as perfume or scented hand soap can produce an unexpected behavior change.

Tripping accidentally in front of a 'good' cat has blown theories of time-honored friendships. The motion makes the victim appear vulnerable and triggers hunting instincts. One likely scenario is that the cat will seize the victim’s skull or neck so quickly it's debatable whether the cat is even aware of what it is doing. Cats have intensely powerful jaws with teeth designed to inflict a killing bite...

People who work professionally with wild cats put in thousands of hours just to maintain their relationship with their animals. This helps to reduce the risk of injury but never fully eradicates it. Nor does this time include all the essential support activities such as obtaining and keeping adequate food supplies, cleaning, keeping up with paperwork and veterinary care. Unless you have a vocation, which you should pursue in a professional facility, aspiring wild animal owners should consider the possible consequences of what they are getting into. Owning a wild animal, even if done properly and with good reason, is a lifestyle, not a hobby.

Having a relationship with a wild animal is undeniably one of the most enriching experiences a person can hope to have. The reason such an experience is so rare and so treasured is that housing wild animals in captivity presents major logistical and behavioral difficulties. With so few 'Hallmark' moments likely to occur, this essay argues that it is more realistic to aim for a relationship based on mutual respect. Respect may mean striving to save populations in their natural habitats, where they can be what they were born to be, rather than trying to keep one wild cat in the family room.

If you intend to pursue ownership of a wild cat, ask yourself why you are doing it.