Bull elk feed from a trough on a game ranch in Montana. Soon they will have their antlers removed in a cruel procedure known as “antler-ing.” The antlers (opposite) will be sold for up to $1,500 each for the Hong Kong market—and will grow back for “harvesting” next year.
Blindfolded and immobilized, the elk shudders as the saw blade bites through its living antlers. Bone, blood vessels, and nerves are severed. Briefly medicated, the elk stumbles back to pasture to begin a slow, painful recovery—and to start growing next year’s “rack” for its owners. At $85–$100 a pound, the “velvet” antlers will fetch $1,300–$1,500 from a purchaser for the Hong Kong market.

In Corwin Springs, Montana, just north of Yellowstone National Park, a long-time elk rancher is convicted of capturing and holding eighty publicly owned wild elk for his private herd. An elk shipped north from Corwin Springs is the first to die in an epidemic of bovine tuberculosis (TB) that is decimating private elk herds in Canada.

In Texas, a tame, declawed black leopard is prodded from its cage, attacked by dogs, and dispatched with a gunshot. The killer, Ty Bourgeois, is congratulated by onlookers.

Each of these stories shows a different, but equally ugly, side of game ranching, the breeding and raising of native and exotic wild animals for profit. At its best, game ranching is frivolous; at worst, it is cruel and destructive. The HSUS is firmly committed to exposing and eradicating it.

Game ranching takes many forms and yields profit in as many markets as clever (and sometimes unscrupulous) entrepreneurs can find or invent. In several American states, including Montana and New Mexico, and in the Canadian province of Alberta, American elk are raised on open range like cattle. Depending on local laws and market conditions, antlers, venison, and live animals may be sold.

More common in the United States are game ranches operated as hunting preserves. In these, clients—seemingly motivated largely by the “joy” of killing and the desire to acquire without effort the “status” conferred by the display of a gruesome trophy—pay fees of from hundreds to thousands of dollars to shoot animals enclosed on private lands. Both native and exotic (non-native) species are hunted: elk, bison, deer, wild sheep, wild boars, African or Indian antelope, and lions or other large cats. The “canned hunt” is the most appalling of these exercises in pleasure killing.

Game ranchers also participate actively in the growing trade in exotic animals, buying and selling animals through advertisements in trade publications and at exotic-animal auctions. As HSUS investigations have shown, exotic-animal auctions are themselves the sites of great cruelty: animals are tightly confined in small crates or wire cages, often in unsanitary conditions and with inadequate food and water. Zoos and circuses also dump surplus animals into this market, and some of these animals may end their lives as victims of canned hunts (see the Spring 1988 and Summer 1989 issues of the HSUS News). The captive-wildlife trade is lucrative indeed; a recent sales report from one Missouri auction house priced female red deer at $1,750–$2,500; zebra mares fetched up to $7,000.

Making money from wildlife is nothing new for Americans. Before 1900 wildlife in the United States could be killed, bought, and sold more or less...
without restriction. The consequences of the wildlife trade were painfully familiar. The passenger pigeon vanished forever, “harvested” to extinction to satisfy the appetites of city-restaurant customers. By 1890 the appetites of railroad workers and the markets for hide in the eastern United States and Europe nearly finished off the American bison. From coast to coast, market hunters shotgunned, cannoned, and netted ducks by the millions, killing throughout spring and fall, day and night. Deer, antelope, and elk retreated to remote wilderness.

Approval of the Migratory Bird Protection Treaty in 1918 marked the end of commercial sale of native wild birds, and state game agencies were assigned the task of restoring populations of favorite game animals. Protected species—songbirds, ducks, deer, elk, and other animals—began a slow recovery that, for some species, has continued to the present day.

However, as grazing land deteriorates from overuse and drought and as meat consumption declines, ranchers and other landowners have sought novel ways to supplement their incomes. Distressingly, growing numbers have turned to game ranching and canned hunts. Semi-tame animals are shot in fenced pastures as they consume carcasses set out as bait or after they have been released from small cages. The unsuspecting animals have no chance of escape.

Publicly defending his role in arranging a series of ghastly canned hunts, California game rancher Floyd Patterson rationalized: “Four or five cats helped me get out of a pinch for the year.” (Fortunately, the California court was unimpressed: Mr. Patterson was convicted on numerous misdemeanor counts and faces a six-month prison sentence, pending his appeal.) Legal in at least seventeen states, game ranching is now big business, but how big, no one is sure. Estimates of the number of game ranches in the United States range from 1,000 to 4,000. Texas, the nation’s unchallenged leader with nearly 500 legally registered game ranches, supports between 150,000 and 200,000 exotic animals.

Invisible to the public, clients of hunting preserves may display extraordinary indifference to suffering. The Los Angeles Times reported that many of the cats killed on the Patterson ranch were old and barely able to walk. One frightened cat refused to leave its cage and was shot as it cowered in a corner.

Glenn Randall, in Buzzworm magazine, describes one particularly gruesome black-buck shoot on a Texas game ranch. According to Mr. Randall, the guide and his clients drove out to the pasture in a pickup truck. Expecting a handout, the animals approached. After the ranch foreman scattered hay and corn, the client started shooting from inside the pickup. The trophy black buck was hit twice, one shot passing through the gut, the other nearly severing a leg, before the guide (or foreman) put the tormented animal out of its misery.

Neither tracking skill, perseverance, nor marksmanship is required of the canned-hunt client. The only prerequisite is the money to pay for the hunt. Bare of any pretense of “fair chase” or enjoyment of nature, the canned hunt strips sport hunting to its essential ingredient, killing for pleasure.

Amazingly, much of this activity is perfectly legal. Ty Bourgeois and the other men responsible for the brutal death of the black leopard described above were convicted only because the animal that was killed happened to belong to a species protected by the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA). Exotic species not protected by the ESA are classified by Texas state law as livestock, and they may be killed with impunity. Responding to protests from The HSUS—and national public outrage—the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department last summer prepared legislation banning the killing of big cats and other large carnivores on game ranches. Because the Texas House of Representatives failed to consider the bill in the 1991 special session, no action is expected until the next regular session of the Texas legislature opens in 1993. However, Gov. Ann Richards has publicly endorsed the legislation. The HSUS will continue to support this bill actively and to press for further legal prohibition for all captive animals on Texas game ranches.

Cruelty to captive wild animals—confinement, antlering, and brutal shooting—is the most immediate and direct abuse seen on game ranches. However, if game ranches continue to spread, wildlife will be harmed in other ways that are less direct but no less serious. Game ranches spread disease, release exotic species into fragile native plant and animal communities, and encourage poaching.

Threats To Indigenous Species

Unfortunately, disease has already gained a foothold on game ranches. Bovine TB, a fatal disease with symptoms similar to human tuberculosis, has struck elk ranches in Alberta, Canada. As of the fall of 1991, 80 percent of Alberta’s 4,200 ranch elk had
contracted or been exposed to bovine TB and will have to be euthanatized. Bovine TB was also reported among exotic fallow deer and sika deer at Catskill Game Farm in New York State, and more than a dozen deer were destroyed. The source of this outbreak is unknown.

Distressingly, the Alberta epidemic has been traced to elk shipped from a Montana ranch just north of Yellowstone National Park. Yellowstone's wild elk—many of which spend their winters near the ranch—and other park wildlife have never been exposed to TB and may be susceptible.

Highly contagious, TB spreads rapidly among animals forced into close contact. Infected animals may transmit the disease long before the first symptoms appear. Moreover, the TB microbe can live for months in the soil or on feeding troughs, threatening reinfection at any time. Thus, game ranches provide ideal breeding grounds for the spread of the disease.

Bovine TB also poses some threat to public health. Alberta’s infected elk have passed the disease to at least forty people who worked closely with the elk or handled elk meat. These human victims now face a year of drug treatments.

Game ranching presents more of a disease threat than does the ranching of cattle, sheep, or other livestock. Veterinary medicine knows comparatively little about diagnosis, prevention, and treatment of diseases of wildlife. Vaccines and diagnostic tests developed for livestock often fail when applied to elk, deer, and other species. Because wildlife diseases are so poorly understood, game ranches pose what The HSUS considers to be an unacceptable risk to their captives, to the free-roaming wildlife that surround them, and to the people who work with them.

Exotic species on game ranches pose other threats to native wildlife. Inevitably, exotics escape. A flood washes out a section of fence, a visitor forgets to close a gate, or a cash-strapped rancher delays fence maintenance for an extra month. Liberated from captivity, exotic animals go about their business in an ecosystem unaccustomed to their presence. Sometimes they prosper. Exotics such as fallow deer, sika deer, and mouflon sheep have established thriving populations in states as far apart as Maryland, Texas, and Colorado. Unfortunately, such prosperity sometimes occurs at a cost to native species such as white-tailed deer and bighorn sheep, whose numbers may be reduced. European wild boars (pigs) have also been released by American game ranchers, and they are extremely good at what they do—which is to eat grasses, seedlings, bulbs, nuts, fruits, worms, insects, carrion, eggs, baby birds, and anything else within snuffling distance. With few predators remaining in our forests to control boar numbers, these wild pigs may eat more than their share. While we may now choose simply to live peaceably with established populations of exotics, that doesn’t mean we want to introduce more.

Poaching Takes A Toll
Poaching is a colossal problem in the United States. Eagle feathers, bear paws and gall bladders, elk antlers, and deer meat from illegally killed animals have all been seized in massive “sting” operations conducted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and cooperating state game departments. Some of these operations have confiscated millions of dollars worth of wildlife products. Yet agents concede that enforcement efforts barely scratch the surface of the problem.

Nevertheless, poaching would grow much worse if game ranching and the sale of elk and deer meat and antlers became widely legalized. In Germany, the sale of deer meat is legal. To combat poachers, Germany has to employ almost as many wildlife enforcement agents as are in all fifty U.S. state and federal governments combined, and it deputizes ten times that many landowners to enforce poaching laws on their own properties.

Such a brute-force approach to protecting wildlife is neither practical nor desirable in the United States. But just as