

Q&A: Mobile Live Animal Programs (MLAPs) in Canada



What is a Mobile Live Animal Program?

- A Mobile Live Animal Program (MLAP) is typically a commercial program or activity in which live animals are brought to a location for the entertainment of the public. MLAPs are usually mobile zoos, but can also include travelling exhibits, offsite presentations or demonstrations, live animal shows and petting zoos; they do not include circuses, magic shows, pet shows (e.g., dog and cat shows), and agricultural fairs, exhibitions or shows (e.g., horse shows). Some zoos conduct offsite MLAPs as a major component of their businesses.

Are MLAPs regulated?

- Throughout Canada, specific laws or regulations governing who may own or operate an MLAP business or activity are uncommon and, in most jurisdictions, little official oversight occurs. In some jurisdictions permits may be required for certain species but MLAPs can still operate by acquiring permits or by using other animals that don't require them. In most jurisdictions, there are no mandatory standards regarding animal housing, husbandry, management, welfare, transport or human safety.

Canada's Accredited Zoos and Aquariums (CAZA) accredited zoo facilities operate MLAPs. Does CAZA monitor their MLAP activities?

- No, members of CAZA undergo an accreditation inspection only once every five years. The inspection merely focuses on the permanent zoo or home base facility. There appears to be little, if any, monitoring of offsite activities at other times.

Who can start an MLAP?

- Anybody with a vehicle, website and some animals can solicit bookings and commence operations. Operators are free to call themselves animal or conservation educators, animal rescuers or rehabilitators, or providers of animal therapy.

What education, training or experience is required to start an MLAP business or run an MLAP activity?

- None. There are no requirements for education, training or experience for operating an MLAP business or activity.

Has the number of MLAPs increased?

- Yes, it is evident that MLAP numbers have grown dramatically during the past decade, with the most significant growth in Ontario. While MLAPs did exist previously they were relatively few in number. Emerging trends like

growing accessibility and increased popularity of breeding and keeping exotic pets are thought to have contributed to the increasing number of MLAPs.

How many MLAPs are there?

- In 2020, estimates place the number of MLAPs at more than 150 in Canada, with the majority being active in Ontario. It should be noted that new MLAPs are encountered on a regular basis and others shut down without notice, so their numbers are dynamic and changing. The number of individual MLAP events taking place in Canada is thought to be in the thousands each year.

Where in Canada do MLAPs operate?

- MLAPs may operate on a local, regional, provincial or national basis. Some MLAPs operate across the country and most will offer their services throughout the year.

Do MLAPs charge a fee?

- While some MLAPs are conducted by private individuals on an occasional basis with no fee being involved, most MLAPs are part-time or full-time commercial businesses that charge a fee for their programs. Fees can range from as low as \$10 to access a MLAP event to a \$1000 or more to rent an MLAP service. Fees charged, often depend on the kinds of animals involved, the type of program and the venue location. Some MLAPs conduct dozens, and others even hundreds, of programs annually. A small number of MLAPs are conducted by non-profit or charitable organizations.

What animals do MLAPs use?

- MLAPs use a wide variety of animals including mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates. Some of them specialize in particular kinds of animals, such as birds of prey or reptiles. Examples of animals in MLAPs, include, but are not limited to, lemurs, kinkajous, sloths, porcupines, kangaroos, camels, zebras, servals, Eurasian lynxes, African lion cubs, foxes, parrots, flamingos, owls, hawks, lizards, snakes, tortoises, alligators, frogs, salamanders, spiders, scorpions, cockroaches and crabs, to name just a few.

Do MLAPs allow contact with animals?

- Yes, most MLAPs allow contact with a range of animals. In fact, many promote or feature animal encounters, animal contact sessions, and getting close to or touching animals in their marketing materials. Some MLAPs allow only limited contact with animals, while others allow relatively unfettered opportunities for members of the public to touch, stroke, handle or hold animals. Some MLAPs allow or facilitate contact between potentially dangerous animals and members of the public, including children. For example, one business was known to wrap large constricting snakes around the torsos of young children for picture-taking purposes.

Are there animal welfare concerns associated with MLAPs?

- Yes, there are many animal welfare concerns associated with MLAPs. Concerns are exacerbated when animals are stressed, used in multiple programs in different locations, transported long distances or taken on extended tours. All these conditions and activities can detrimentally impact the welfare of animals.

The reality for most MLAP animals is that from the time they are removed from their home base until the time they return, they may be confined in grossly undersized, extremely minimalist conditions that do little to satisfy their biological, behavioural and social needs. Mammals and birds may be confined and moved in cages and crates, or kennel carriers designed for dogs and cats. Reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates are routinely moved in plastic tubs or containers, often with so little space that they are unable to move normally or turn around. Additionally, animals will be subjected to unusual and often stressful vibrations, sounds, lighting, sights, etc. during transportation and at the venues.

Some exhibit-focused MLAPs will present animals in rudimentary zoo-type displays that are often small, photo (light)-invasive and that don't allow the animals an opportunity to remove themselves from public view. Additionally, there are welfare concerns when animals are removed from their containers, brought out and physically handled in bright, noisy situations in front of the public. Some animals, such as crocodilians and snakes, may also be held stationary or displayed in their container (such as tortoises in plastic containers in a tabletop display) for extended periods so members of the public can touch them.

Are there human safety risks associated with MLAPs?

- Yes, some animals pose a potential threat to human safety due to their size, strength or other physical attributes such as sharp teeth or claws, bite force, venom, speed and/or temperament. MLAPs have been known to feature potentially dangerous animals which, if they were in traditional zoo settings, would be subject to specific hands-off safety protocols, where physical contact is prohibited for both keeper and public. Examples of potentially dangerous animals in MLAPs include, but are not limited to, giant constricting snakes, crocodilians, large lizards, macaws and other large parrots, wild canids, wild felids, non-human primates and camels.

Are there human health concerns associated with MLAPs?

- Yes, while many MLAP operators seem to downplay, dismiss or to be unaware of the potential risks posed to members of the public, most animals carry pathogens that can be transmitted to people and can cause diseases (known as zoonotic diseases or zoonoses). They include, but are not limited to, campylobacteriosis, *E. coli* infection, streptococcosis, salmonellosis, herpes B viral infection and monkeypox infection.

Some animals, such as reptiles, amphibians, birds and young ruminants (such as cattle, sheep or deer) are known to shed more potentially pathogenic organisms than other animals. Public health agencies advise that vulnerable persons do not contact these particular animals or surfaces they have contacted (since those surfaces may have become contaminated). High risk members of the public include, but are not limited to, children aged 5 and under, the elderly, immuno-compromised individuals, anyone that is HIV positive, people who have had recent surgery, and pregnant women.

Are there specific concerns about MLAPs in daycares?

- Yes, public health agencies and experts recommend children aged 5 years or under and other vulnerable, high risk groups, not contact reptiles, amphibians, birds or young ruminants, or the surfaces those animals have touched and which may have become contaminated, because they are particularly susceptible to falling ill from zoonotic diseases.

With any kind of animal, disease mitigation rules and measures should be in place, such as not allowing food consumption in areas where animals are present, providing supervision to make sure children do not put potentially contaminated hands into their mouths or rub their eyes, ensuring that hands are washed according to appropriate protocols, etc. Unfortunately, some MLAPs allow relatively unfettered opportunities for young children to touch exotic animals or the surfaces those animals have contacted with no disease mitigation measures in place.

Are there specific concerns about MLAPs in nursing homes, senior's residences and similar facilities housing the elderly?

- Yes, the elderly are notably more vulnerable to zoonotic diseases. They should not be allowed to contact reptiles, amphibians, birds or young ruminants or the those animals have touched. If other animals are present, disease mitigation measures should be in place. The threat of zoonoses has caused some government agencies to recommend that live exotic animals should not be brought into nursing homes at all.

What do public health bodies and similar kinds of agencies recommend regarding MLAPs?

- Many public health agencies advise that high risk members of society, including children aged 5 and under, those who are pregnant, the elderly and immuno-compromised people, to not come into contact with certain kinds of animals. Others recommend that only domesticated animals with known health histories should be brought into certain kinds of facilities, such as nursing homes. No public health advisories on this subject suggest that there is no risk or that disease mitigation measures are not necessary.

Are MLAPs educational?

- No, there is no substantive body of empirical evidence supporting the claim that MLAPs are educationally beneficial or that there are measurable educational outcomes. In addition, learning outcomes of MLAPs may even be negative for a variety of reasons. For example, an indisputable negative learning outcome is that participants are exposed to animals entirely removed from their natural ecological context or condition, failing to provide optimal, or in most cases even acceptable, welfare; an experience that wrongly normalizes inappropriate human utilization of animals.

Do MLAPs promote the keeping of exotic pets?

- Some MLAPs promote the keeping of some exotic animals as pets or advertise to promote the responsible keeping of certain exotic animals. For example, some reptile focused MLAPs inform members of the public that certain reptiles make good pets. Some businesses who run MLAP events are also known to breed and sell live exotic animals or supplies.

When MLAPs do not directly promote exotic pet keeping, they may be incidentally doing so. There is evidence that the presentation of live exotic animals to an audience, particularly children, even if a 'don't keep exotic animals as pets' message is conveyed, can still result in the misconception that these animals are suitable pets. The visual experience of watching someone hold or play with a cute, cool or interesting exotic animal can override whatever narrative and message is provided.

Are there mobile programs that do not use live exotic animals but that still teach people about animals, conservation and nature?

- Yes, there are all kinds of exciting, innovative programs that focus on animals, nature and conservation. Many of these programs, such as [Scientists in Schools](#) and [Down to Earth Conservation Education](#), have been operating successfully for decades, teaching hundreds of thousands of children about conservation and other topics without using live animals.