

Questions and Answers

Mobile Live Animal Programs (MLAPs) – ONTARIO

What is an MLAP?

- An MLAP (Mobile Live Animal Program) is any kind of program or activity in which live animals are brought to a location for the entertainment or education of the public. MLAPs can include mobile zoos, exhibits, presentations, demonstrations, shows and petting zoos, but do not include circuses, magic shows, pet shows (including dog and cat shows), and agricultural fairs and shows (including horse shows).

Who can start an MLAP?

- There are no laws or regulations in Ontario governing who may own or operate an MLAP, so any person or business can conduct MLAPs.

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

- There are no requirements for education, training or experience for people conducting MLAPs.

What is required to start an MLAP?

- A simple MLAP business can be set up in a few hours with nothing more than a computer, some animals and a vehicle to take them to bookings.

Are MLAPs regulated in Ontario?

- No, there are no regulations for MLAPs in Ontario. That means there are no housing, husbandry or safety standards.

Some zoo association accredited facilities conduct MLAPs. Does the zoo association monitor their MLAP activities?

- No, established members of the zoo association undergo an accreditation inspection once every five years and the inspection focuses on the zoo or home base facility. There is little, if any, regular monitoring of offsite activities at other times.

How many MLAPs are there?

- As of May 2017, approximately 70 MLAPs have been identified in Ontario.

Has the number of MLAPs increased?

- Yes, while there has never been a central registry for MLAPs, it is clear that MLAP numbers have grown dramatically during the past decade. Prior to that time, while MLAPs did exist they were relatively few in number and only a fraction of the number that exist today.

Where do MLAPs operate?

- MLAPs operate throughout Ontario, with the majority of MLAPs occurring in the southern half of the province. Many MLAPs operate on a local basis only, but some offer programs out of province or even country wide.

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 either part-time or full-time businesses that charge a fee for their programs. Fees can range from as low as \$100 to \$1000 or more depending on the kinds of animals involved, the type of program and the venue location. Some MLAPs conduct dozens or even hundreds of programs annually. A few 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, monkeys, kinkajous, sloths, porcupines, kangaroos, camels, zebras, donkeys, ponies, servals, Eurasian lynx, African lions, foxes, parrots, flamingos, owls, hawks, monitor lizards, snakes, tortoises, alligators, frogs, salamanders, spiders, scorpions, cockroaches and crabs, to name just a few.

Do MLAPs allow contact with animals?

- Yes, many MLAPs allow contact with the animals. In fact, getting close to or touching animals is often featured in MLAP 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 have been known to 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 the picture-taking purposes.

Are there animal welfare concerns associated with MLAPs?

- Yes, there are many animal welfare concerns associated with MLAPs. Those concerns are exacerbated when animals are used in multiple programs in different locations, transported long distances or taken on extended tours.

- All animals require space to engage in normal movements and behaviours, appropriate environmental conditions (e.g., temperature, humidity, lighting), privacy and shelter opportunities that allow them to feel safe and secure, watering facilities and species appropriate food, to name just a few requirements that are necessary to ensure good animal welfare. The needs of ectothermic (i.e., cold blooded) and aquatic animals are particularly problematic in mobile situations.
- The reality for many MLAP animals is that from the time they are removed from their home base until the time they return, they are confined in grossly undersized, extremely minimalistic 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 plastic kennel carriers. Reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates may be housed and transported in plastic tubs and containers, unable to move normally or even turn around. Additionally, animals may be subjected to unusual vibrations, sounds, sights, etc. during the transport process and at presentation venues.
- While at presentation venues, some exhibit-focused MLAPs display animals in small, photo-invasive conditions where they have no opportunity to remove themselves from public view. Additionally, there are welfare concerns when animals are removed from their containers, brought out into bright, noisy situations in front of the public, and handled. 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 that members of the public can touch them.
- All of these conditions and activities can detrimentally impact animal welfare.

Are there human safety risks associated with MLAPs?

- Yes, some animals pose a potential threat to human safety due to their size, strength, other physical attributes such as sharp teeth or claws, bite force, venom, speed and temperament. MLAPs have been known to feature potentially dangerous animals which, if they were in traditional zoo settings, would be subject to specific safety protocols and no public contact. Examples of potentially dangerous animals in MLAPs include, but are not limited to, giant constricting snakes, crocodilians, large lizards, wild canids, wild felids, non-human primates and camels.

Are there human health concerns associated with MLAPs?

- Yes, many animals can harbour diseases that are transmissible to humans. They are known as zoonotic diseases or zoonoses. They include, but are not limited to, Campylobacter, E. coli, Streptococcus, Salmonella, Herpes B virus and Monkeypox.
- In their natural state, the range of microorganisms carried by wild animals pose almost no threat to humans. But the artificial conditions of captivity often negatively impact and disrupt the host/microorganism relationship, resulting in a greater likelihood of opportunistic disease and the release of virulent disease organisms into the animal's environment. That is why many public health agencies advise that certain precautions

be taken whenever members of the public are allowed contact with or are otherwise exposed to animals or that more vulnerable, high risk members of society not come into contact with certain animals, such as reptiles, at all.

- Some animals, such as reptiles, amphibians, birds and young ruminants (such as cattle, sheep and deer) are known to shed more potentially pathogenic organisms than other animals, so public health agencies recommend that particularly vulnerable, high risk persons not contact those animals or the surfaces they have touched (since those surfaces may have been contaminated). High risk groups of people include, but are not limited to, children ages 5 and under, the elderly, immuno-compromised individuals, anyone that is HIV positive, people who have had recent surgery, and pregnant women.
- Many MLAP operators seem to downplay, dismiss or be unaware of zoonoses and the potential risks posed to members of the public through contact with animals.

Are there specific concerns about MLAPs in daycares?

- Yes, public health agencies recommend that children aged 5 years and under not be allowed to contact reptiles, amphibians, birds or young ruminants or the surfaces they have touched because those children are particularly vulnerable to zoonoses.
- When other kinds of animals are present, 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 don't put potentially contaminated hands into their mouths or rub their eyes, ensuring that hands are washed according to appropriate protocols, etc.
- Some MLAPs allow relatively unfettered opportunities for young children to touch exotic animals 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 considered a high risk group. They should not be allowed to contact reptiles, amphibians, birds or young ruminants or the surfaces they have touched. If other animals are present around the elderly, disease mitigation measures should be in place. The threat of zoonoses has caused some government agencies to recommend that live exotic animals 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, the elderly and immuno-compromised people, not come into contact with certain kinds of animals. Others recommend that only domesticated animals with known health histories 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?

- There is no substantive body of empirical evidence supporting the claim that MLAPs are educationally beneficial or that they produce measurable educational outcomes. In addition, learning outcomes of MLAPs may even be negative. One potential negative learning outcome from the use of animals in MLAPs is that participants are exposed to animals entirely removed from their natural ecological contexts or, in many cases, they are in conditions that do not provide good welfare; an experience that can normalize assumptions about human dominance and the utilization and exploitation of animals.

Do MLAPs promote the keeping of exotic pets?

- Some MLAPs have promoted the keeping of some exotic animals as pets, such as telling members of the public that certain reptiles make good pets. A few MLAPs have been known to breed and sell live exotics and/or supplies.
- Even when MLAPs don't directly promote exotic pet keeping, they may be doing so anyway. There is evidence that when exotic animals are presented to audiences, particularly children, even if a don't keep exotic animals as pets message is conveyed, they may still come away thinking they would like to have one of those animals. The visual experience of watching someone hold or play with a cute or interesting exotic animal conflicts with and can override whatever narration and messaging is provided.

Are there mobile programs that do not use live exotic animals that teach people about animals, conservation and other similar kinds of issues?

- Yes, there are all kinds of exciting, innovative programs that focus on animals, nature and conservation. Many of them, such as Scientists in Schools and Down to Earth Conservation Education, have been operating successfully for decades, teaching hundreds of thousands of children without using live exotic animals.

Are there MLAPs that only use domesticated companion animals?

- Yes, there are some MLAPs that only utilize companion animals, such as domesticated dogs. For example, The Kindness Club has delivered thousands of presentations to school children and the only live animals involved were domesticated dogs owned by the presenters.