

Beyond Big Cats: Public Health Policy Proposals for Small Non-Domestic Felids

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INTRODUCTION

The trade of wildlife and wildlife products concerns not only animal welfare and wildlife conservation efforts, but also complicates public health and safety.

The Big Cat Public Safety Act (BCPSA; Pub. L. 117-243, 136 Stat. 2336, 16 USC §§ 3371-3378) was enacted in 2022 partly to address these concerns.

However, the law does not include small wild felids, such as ocelots (*Leopardus pardalis*), servals (*Leptailurus serval*), and caracals (*Caracal caracal*).

This study will pursue the development of a small cat safety act to promote similar protections as the the BCPSA.

OBJECTIVES

- **Legal review** of BCPSA and related policies
- **Literature review** of the implications of private small felid ownership
- **Analysis of small felid import and export data** from the Law Enforcement Management Information System (LEMIS) of the United States Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS)
- **Apply evidence and data** to draft a policy brief and recommendations

SMALL CATS



BACKGROUND

- **The Captive Wildlife Safety Act (CWSA):**
 - Passed 2003
 - Effective 2007¹
- **CWSA first added "prohibited wildlife species" (§ 3371(h)):**
 - prohibited wildlife species = big cats
 - Outlawed big cat importation, exportation, selling, transportation, receipt, or acquisition¹
- **The BCPSA amended the Code of the Law of the USA (US Code, USC):**
 - Title 16 Conservation
 - chapter 53 Control of Illegally Taken Fish & Wildlife
 - §§ 3371-3378 entire chapter
 - aka § 3371 et seq.²
- **First proposed in 2012:**
 - *Big Cats & Public Safety Protection Act*³
 - *House Rule (H.R.) 263* passed in 2022⁴
- **Netflix series Tiger King (2020-2021)** increased public awareness & interest⁵
- **BCPSA added "breeding, possessed"**
 - Outlawed private ownership
 - Revised exemptions
 - Created mandated registry⁶
- **Support**
 - Protects big cats & public safety^{7,8}
- **Dissent**
 - Undefined & vague terms⁷⁻¹⁰
 - Animal Health & Inspection Service (APHIS) should enforce instead^{7,8,11}

METHODOLOGIES

- **Literature review:**
 - **Researcher-app**: aggregate database
 - Filtered by keywords and subject
 - Read through abstract before reading
 - Only years 2010-2023
 - **Inciteful.xyz**: literature connector
 - input two chosen publications
 - algorithm finds related papers
 - Reviewed **reference sections** as well
- **Legal review:**
 - **Bill review**
 - *Congress.Gov*
 - *GovTrack*
 - **U.S. code**
 - *US.Code.Gov*
 - *Legal Information Institute (LII)*
 - **Federal rulemaking**
 - *Federal Register*
 - *Code of Federal Regulations*
 - Other resources as well
- **LEMIS data:**
 - Downloaded *Excel* sheets from FWS site
 - Processed with *Microsoft Access* and *Microsoft Power Bi*
- **Policy brief:**
 - Consulted guidelines (see References & Resources (R&R))
 - Created with *Canva*

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FIGURES

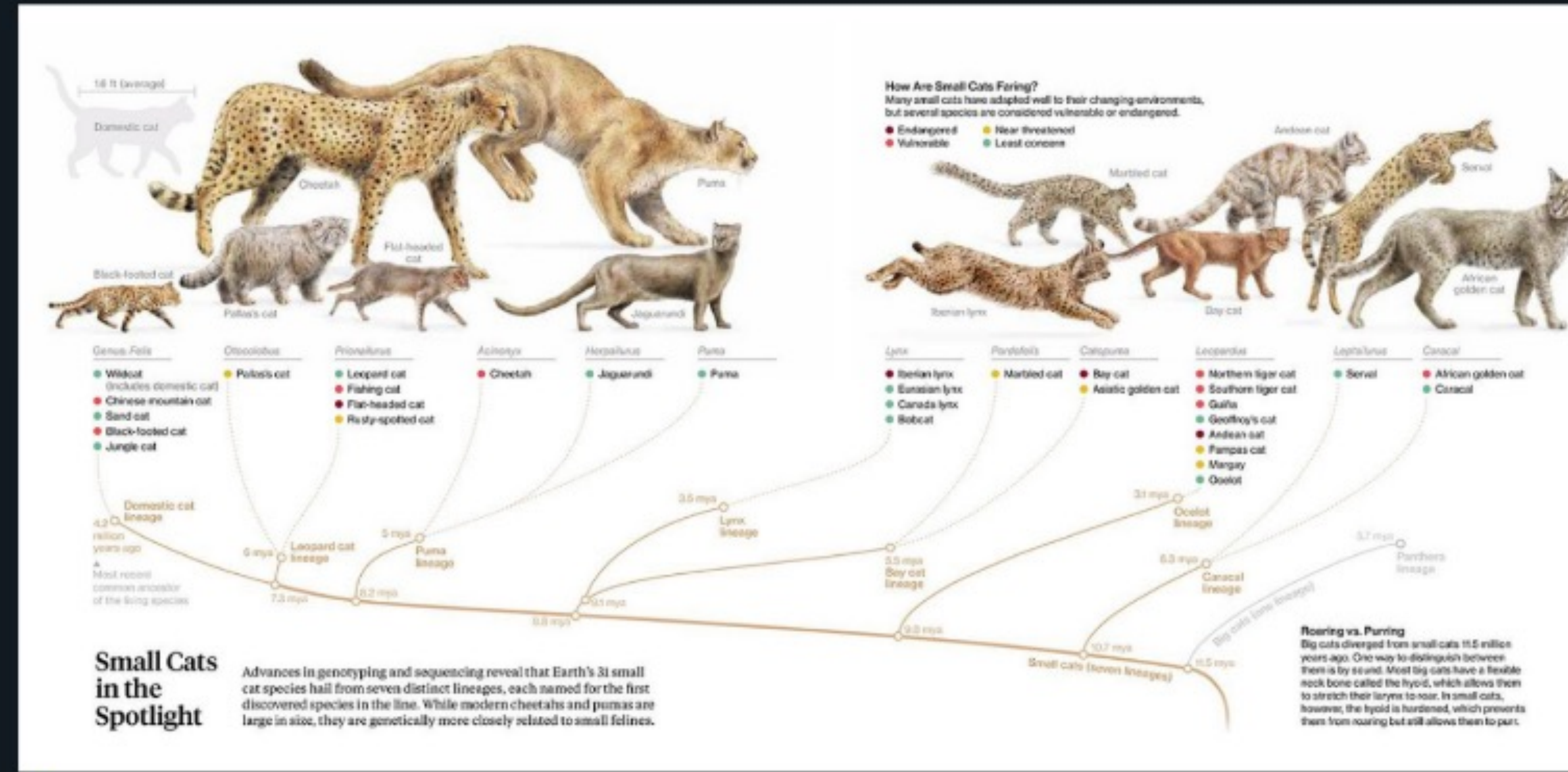


Figure 1. "Big cats" vs. "small cats". Taxonomically, "big cats" only includes only the members of Panthera. Under U.S. law, cheetahs, pumas and clouded leopards are also included in the definition. For our purposes, non-domestic small cats will include all other species of cats, excluding the domestic cat.



Figure 2. Shipping routes of small cats and their products. Generated by inputting listed origin country to the import or export country for each entry. Thickness of the lines indicates approximate shipment density. Note the algorithm only maps to the country, the connections between nodes do not represent precise path or locations of ports. Most small felid and product trade is between U.S. and Canada.

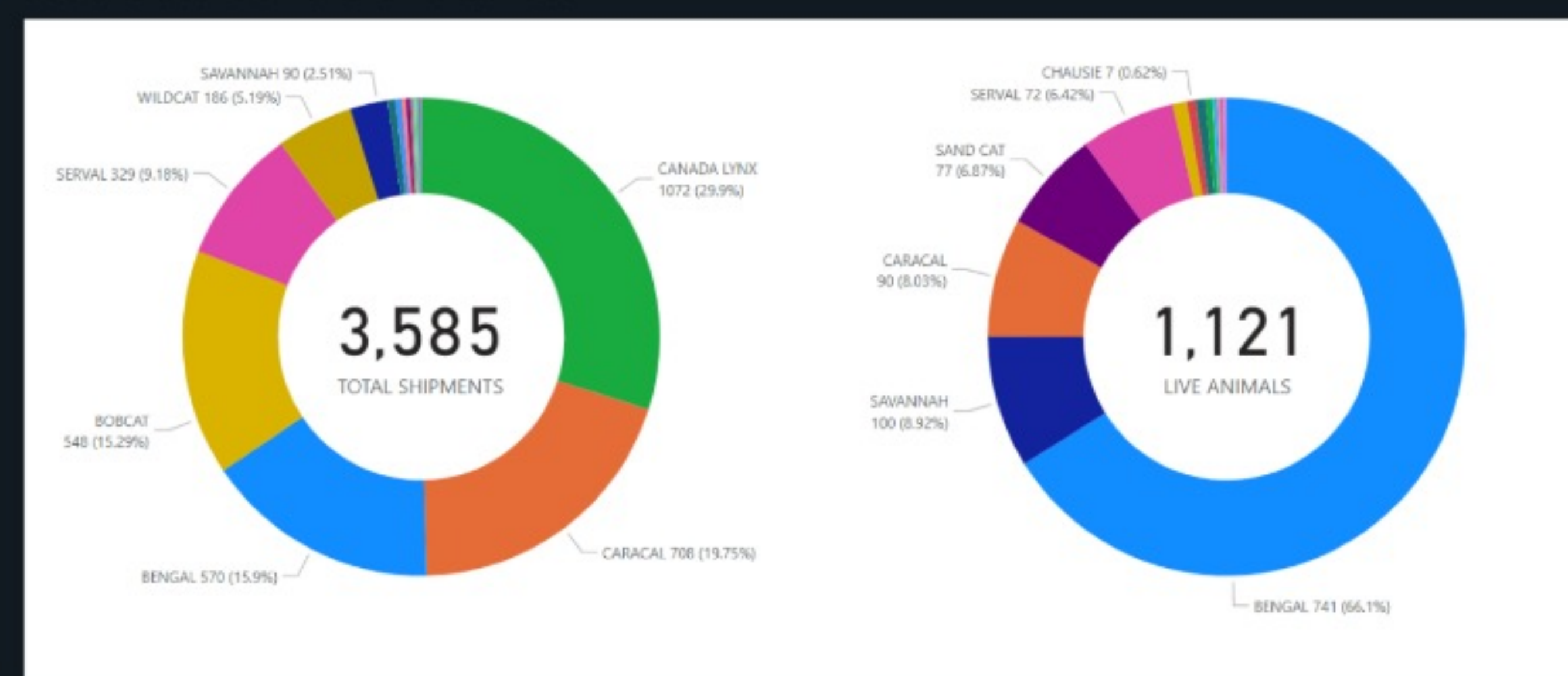


Figure 3. Total shipments vs. total live animals shipped, 2016-2020. (LEFT) Canada lynx are associated with the greatest number of shipments (29%), followed by caracals (19.7%), Bengals (15.9%), and bobcats (15.29%). (RIGHT) In contrast, for total individual live animals shipped, approximately ~75% are hybrids with small wild felids, while ~25% involves pure wild felids. Approximately 48 live wild felids were shipped per year.

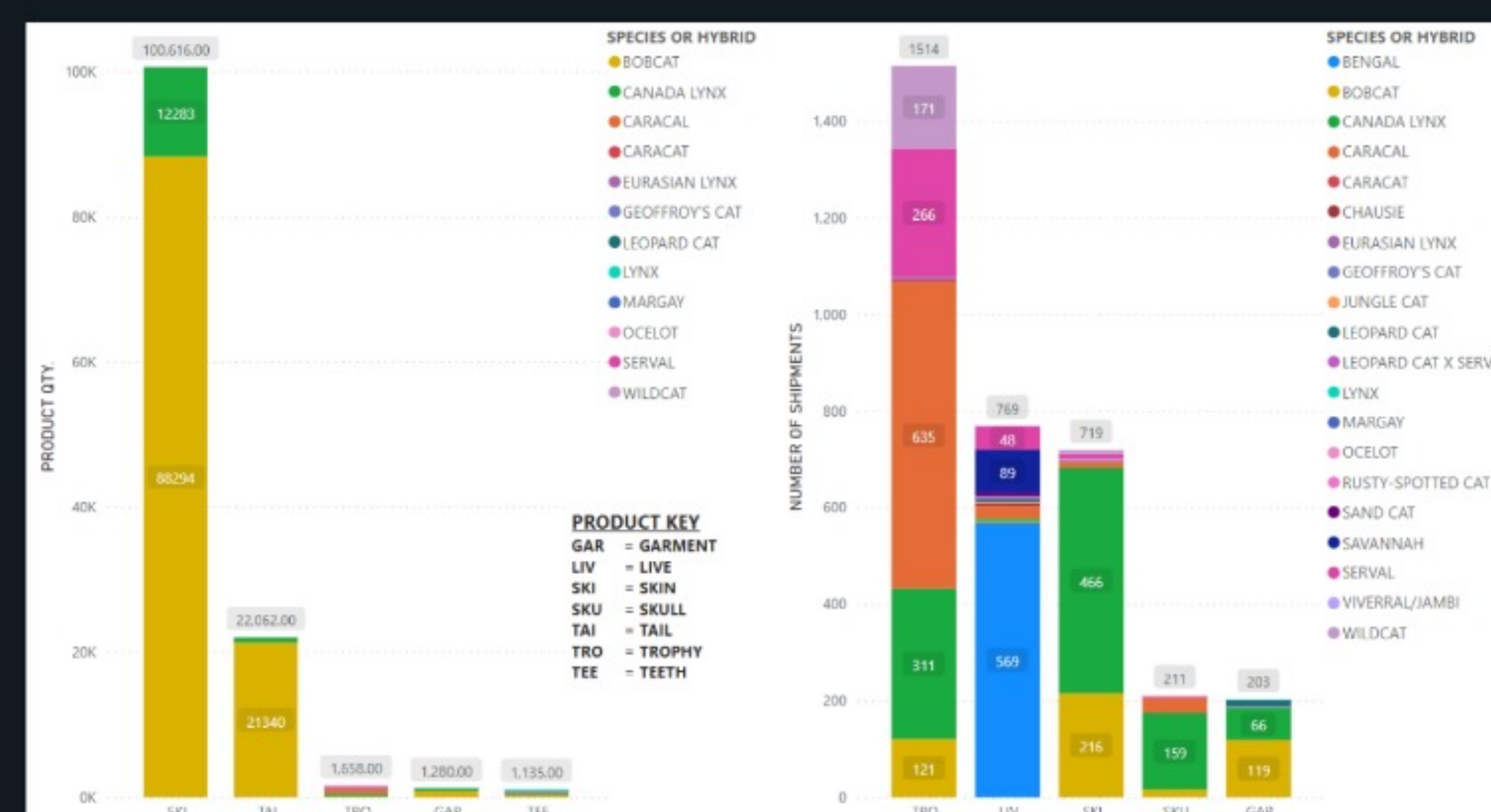


Figure 4. Top 5 small felid products by quantity & shipments. (LEFT) Pelt products account for the most trade, based on product quantity. (RIGHT) Trophies accounted for the most shipments. At least 13 different species of small cats were imported during the period.

DISCUSSION

- **Public health, population health, and animal health concerns:**
 - **Zoonotic disease**
 - Wildlife trade spreads emerging infectious disease¹²⁻¹⁴
 - Cats contract zoonotic diseases, such as H5N1 & COVID-19¹⁵⁻¹⁷
 - **Exotic pet industry**
 - Poor animal welfare
 - Lack of veterinary services¹⁸
 - **Hybrids with domestic cat (*Felis catus*)**
 - Incompatible genetics
 - Increased health issues¹⁹⁻²¹
 - **Wildlife conservation**
 - High trade increases extinction risk
 - Decreased biodiversity increases risk of secondary complications²²
- **Stakeholders' concerns**
 - Vague language leaves law to rulemaking or case law⁷⁻¹⁰
 - FWS has already had to provide interpretations on the law in regard to the registry^{11, 23}
- **LEMIS data**
 - Small wild felids traded worldwide
 - Most trade is legally declared
 - Live animals most traded are for hybridization purposes
 - Lynx and bobcats most traded products
- **Policy brief**
 - Policymakers have limited time & expertise
 - Dislike briefs without recommendations or actions steps²⁴

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Revise the definition of prohibited wildlife species** to cover all wild cats and their hybrids
- **Adopt language similar to CITES guidelines to define a "hybrid" cat** as any cat with a wild ancestor within 4 generations to mitigate undue burden for both owners and regulators²⁵
- **Better define vague language** to help alleviate current concerns by USDA C-license stakeholders and simplify rulemaking for FWS
- **Add language for a registry** similar to big cats, except **require genetic testing** to prevent mischaracterization of hybrid animals
- **Add language to allow sample collection for genetic testing** by certain officials, such as police or FWS personnel, to acquire samples from cats of questionable origins

