



THE RISK OF CAPTIVE CARNIVORES

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Start

The Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) is growing increasingly concerned about the proliferation of captive facilities holding a range of carnivores in South Africa for the sole purpose of tourism and financial gain. We urge the public to consider a few facts when visiting any of a number of these facilities that hold lions, Cheetah, Leopards, Wild Dogs, hyena and even some exotic (non-native to South Africa) species such as tigers and panthers.

- No captive carnivore facility is breeding carnivores for release into the wild, despite what they may claim. Captive carnivores do not contribute to the conservation of free roaming populations; they are not releasable and they do not form part of any registered conservation or management plan for any carnivore in Africa.
- In many carnivore facilities, petting and bottle feeding of cubs is offered, for a fee. These cubs are often taken away from their mothers to stimulate faster reproduction and provide a constant supply of petting carnivores. Visitors pay to pet the animal and have their photograph taken with it, as well as with their slightly older tame carnivore siblings.
- These carnivores become human imprinted, they do not grow up in a natural social group, and this makes it impossible to release them into a natural habitat for the long-term. This, coupled with the disease risk posed by captive bred animals, as well as their potentially dubious genetic lineage renders them a risk for release to not only themselves, but to other free roaming carnivores.
- Frequently the situation of a 'paying volunteer' is exploited for further financial gain, with volunteers being told that the carnivore mothers are not able to care for their offspring and that once they are old enough, hand-raised carnivores will be returned to the wild.
- "There are approximately 6 000 captive lions in South Africa bred for a variety of economic purposes", as opposed to approximately 2 300 free roaming in reserves and parks. [Draft Biodiversity Management Plan (BMP) for Lions, 2015]. In fact the BMP defines Captive Lions as being "lions [that] are bred exclusively to generate money. Managers actively manipulate all vital rates and demographics."

The EWT's concern relates to the public's understanding of the role and the purpose of captive carnivores and these facilities in carnivore conservation and we urge the public to better understand the role of these facilities as well as the risk that these animals may pose to the public:

- Captive bred carnivores are always more dangerous than their wild counterparts. They lose their fear of humans and tend to associate humans with food providers. Their social structures are heavily interfered with and their natural cycles are often manipulated. A wild carnivore will usually steer away from humans but a captive bred carnivore may not feel the need for such caution.
- A facility breeding carnivores will usually have to sell their offspring; it stands to reason that they cannot always have cubs and youngsters if they do not sell 'excess' animals.
- The captive bred lion hunting industry in South Africa has increased rapidly in recent years and South Africa is increasingly supplying captive bred lion bones for export to Asian markets.
- The Department of Environmental Affairs released figures in December 2013 that stated that "South Africa officially issued permits for the export of nearly (if not more than) 1 300 dead lions from South Africa to China, Lao PDR and Viet Nam from 2011 to 2012 inclusive." BMP, 2015.
- "The so-called 'canned hunting' industry for lions has also increased in recent years and the total value generated from hunting captive lions amounted to about R98 million in 2006/2007." Lion BMP, 2015.
- This raises the question: where do all these lions come from or go to? In South Africa, a thriving canned hunting industry can, in many cases, be linked to an equally thriving industry based on cub petting and commercial captive breeding centres.

Some may argue that there is educational value in allowing people to handle wild animals. However this kind of education provides the incorrect message that wild animals exist for human entertainment, that they can be petted like domestic animals. They also do not learn much about the natural behaviour, social structure or role of free roaming carnivores.

It is important to note that captive breeding is not a conservation recommendation for any carnivore species in South Africa. Carnivores in fact breed extremely well in the right conditions and for almost all our threatened carnivore species, the conservation priorities include reducing human-wildlife conflict, securing suitable habitat, reducing illegal offtake and maintaining balanced, functioning ecosystems. Without these in place, captive breeding leads to an over-supply of non-releasable animals which often end up as trophies. We also question that any funding generated from captive carnivore breeding goes to support the conservation of free roaming carnivores.

The EWT does not allege that any specific facility is breeding carnivores for the lion bone trade or for the practice of 'canned hunting' but we do urge the public that visit these facilities to ask at the very least these critical questions:

- What is the plan for the long-term future of the animals in this facility?
- Where are the cubs' mothers?
- Why are cubs not being raised by their mothers?
- What happens to the facility's cubs when they grow up?
- If they are released into larger wildlife areas, where are these and can the facility provide documentation to prove a viable, ethical and successful release process?
- If the facility is breeding, do they have a management plan that determines responsible husbandry and management of all stock?
- Do any of the 'stock' have the opportunity to live out their natural lives, or are they hunted or bred with again?
- What happens to the facility's surplus animals?
- Can the public inspect the record books of the facility and follow the life cycle of an individual animal?
- If these animals become part of another breeding programme, for what purpose?

The EWT calls for a more active participation from the public in questioning the role of all captive carnivore facilities and the management of the animals in their care. We also call on the tourism sector to recognise the role that they may be playing in supporting some facilities that cannot account for the conservation claims that they make.

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Contact: Kelly Marnewick
Carnivore Conservation Programme Manager
The Endangered Wildlife Trust
Tel: +27 11 372 3600
kellym@ewt.org.za

Yolan Friedmann
CEO
The Endangered Wildlife Trust
Tel: +27 11 372 3600
yolanf@ewt.org.za

and

Lillian Mlambo
Communications Manager
The Endangered Wildlife Trust
Tel: +27 11 372 3600
lillianm@ewt.org.za