



3 March 2017

This World Wildlife Day, the Endangered Wildlife Trust is asking you to help keep the wild in wildlife.

Start

World Wildlife Day is celebrated annually on 3 March, but with ever-increasing human expansion into previously wild habitats, what chance does our wildlife have to stay wild? The EWT is inviting members of the public to join us in keeping the wild in our wildlife by making ethical choices and respecting nature for what it is.

Keeping wild animals as pets

As much as we all love wild animals, the EWT discourages keeping them as pets. There are serious welfare issues to consider, such as whether you can provide the correct diet, proper exercise, socialisation and as natural as possible way of life for a wild animal. Of equal concern is the threat that the illicit trade in wild animals as pets poses to wild populations. Every year thousands of chameleons, snakes, iguanas and other reptiles are illegally removed from their natural habitats and smuggled between countries all over the world. For instance, Sungazers, a species of lizard found only in South Africa, are under increasing threat due to illegal capture for the pet trade. These special lizards do not breed in captivity, and sadly also fail to thrive if removed and then returned to the wild. Other iconic species which are at risk due to illegal trade are our cranes, which are being taken from the wild and turned into domestic pets in many parts of Africa, including here in South Africa.

The lack of successful and strict regulation of the trade in some wild animals means that South Africa may very well be assisting the decimation of biodiversity in countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Tanzania and Madagascar. The current legal import into South Africa of thousands of African Grey Parrots; chameleons and mammals from the island of Madagascar; Abyssinian Ground Hornbills; Southern Ground Hornbills and Grey Crowned Cranes from East African countries (all wild-caught species) are examples of how poor regulation assists with the decimation of wild populations of animals in other countries.

It is important to bear in mind that wild animals generally do not make suitable pets, and often end up dumped when they become unmanageable, which is a further act of cruelty. In most instances wild animals are incapable of expressing their emotions or discomforts and thus pet owners are blissfully

unaware of the suffering of these animals, particularly the reptiles, amphibians and birds kept in small tanks or cages.

Irresponsible wild animal experiences

In this era of social media, wild animals are also falling prey to the selfie generation, with more and more stories arising of animals being removed from their natural environments so that they can be photographed – often with tragic consequences for the animals. Tourists also desire a one of a kind experience and instead of appreciating the natural wild state of our environment, many look for quick bucket list ticks – petting a lion cub, walking with a cheetah, riding an elephant, swimming with dolphins, or even just guaranteed Big 5 sightings. The EWT encourages responsible tourism and is opposed to wild animal interactions.

Petting zoos and “walking with” experiences are especially popular, particularly with large carnivores such as Lions and Cheetahs. While these experiences may seem remarkable, they are fraught with problems. Cubs are often removed from their mothers for hand-rearing and use in petting zoos. This is unethical and stressful for both the mother and her cubs. Carnivores are generally good mothers and there is no biological need to deliberately and routinely remove cubs from their mothers. Cubs can be handled by numerous people in one day, which is stressful for the cub as it should spend a large part of its day sleeping. It is reported that cubs are sometimes drugged to keep them placid for petting. Especially concerning is the fact that there are links between Lion breeding facilities and canned hunting of Lions. When cubs get too old and boisterous for petting they are removed from the touch programmes and many enter into the supply chain for canned hunting. Other welfare concerns include a lack of regard for social structures and a lack of enrichment for these animals in captive facilities, leading to boredom and stereotypical behaviour.

Other wildlife interactions, such as elephant-back riding and baited shark diving, also raise serious welfare and ethical considerations, as the animals are not engaging in natural behaviour.

What should you do?

Unlike the majority of developed countries and many less developed nations, we are fortunate in South Africa to still have many wild spaces, and to be able to enjoy nature on our doorstep, even in many of our urban centres. Let’s appreciate the wild in wildlife, rather than trying to tame it for our own enjoyment. Make ethical choices when it comes to visiting wildlife facilities and say no to wild animal interactions. Let’s also accept that in most instances wild animals are best appreciated from afar, and choose not to keep them as pets. With a little respect for our natural environment, we can all help to keep the wild in wildlife this World Wildlife Day, and beyond!

End

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