



Endangered Wildlife Trust Position Statement on Carnivore Touch Programmes

The Endangered Wildlife Trust's (EWT) Mission is to conserve threatened species and ecosystems in southern Africa to the benefit of all people.

This position represents the EWT's view on the practice of using carnivores in touch programmes. Carnivore Touch Programmes are popular tourist attractions that offer a hands-on interaction with carnivores to visitors e.g. petting zoos, walking-with experiences and photographic opportunities. Cheetahs *Acinonyx jubatus* and Lions *Panthera leo* are the most commonly used carnivores in touch programmes, but smaller carnivores like Servals *Leptailurus serval* and Caracals *Caracal caracal* and exotic carnivores like Tigers *Panthera tigris* are often used for petting and visitor interactions.

The EWT does not support the use of carnivores in touch programmes for the following reasons:

ANIMAL WELFARE

- Cubs are removed from their mothers for hand-raising 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 are sometimes removed from their mothers so that the female will come into oestrus again and maximise her breeding potential. This is because a constant supply of cubs is needed to address the demand for cub petting and to make facilities financially viable.
- Cubs can be handled by numerous people in one day. This is stressful for the cub as it should spend large portions of its day sleeping. It is reported that cubs are sometimes drugged to keep them placid for petting.
- 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.
- There are strong links between captive facilities and canned Lion hunting. These have been investigated and exposed on [Carte Blanche](http://carteblanche.dstv.com/player/887384) <http://carteblanche.dstv.com/player/887384>, and the documentary [Blood Lions](http://www.bloodlions.org), www.bloodlions.org.
- There is often no regard for social structures (e.g. Lions occur naturally in prides and Cheetahs are solitary or in small male coalitions), enrichment (e.g. providing stimulation in the environment to allow the animals to mimic natural behaviour and prevent boredom) any form of or welfare issues.
- Young Lions that are too old for petting but too young to sell into the canned hunting industry are often held in bad conditions (e.g. crowded, barren camps, with no enrichment) away from public eye.
- Facilities seldom have effective enrichment or seclusion for the captive animals and they are often bored and exhibit stereotypical behavioural problems due to boredom or stress.



- There are no regulations in South Africa that guide the feeding and diet of captive carnivores to ensure that they have balanced and safe diets. They are often fed inappropriate food types that are cheap or free e.g. euthanized horses or cattle and chickens that die in transit. If no background checks are done of these foods they could have serious health consequences for the carnivores.
- There are seldom any measures in place to prevent the transmission of disease between humans and cubs e.g. sterilisation of hands and shoes. Most visitors to the facilities are in contact with domestic animals that provide the opportunity for disease transmission.

CONSERVATION

- The captive keeping and breeding of large predators do not contribute to carnivore conservation in South Africa. There are nationally- and internationally-recognised conservation plans in place for all large African carnivores and none of them identify captive breeding as a required conservation action.
- Hand raised carnivores are not suitable for release back into the wild. They are not physically fit, are socially inept and do not know how to hunt effectively or how to utilise their habitat. Furthermore, they are habituated to and have lost their fear of humans which would make them dangerous to both staff and visitors in reserves.
- There is currently no area of conservation significance that can support carnivores introduced through captive breeding and reintroduction. All South Africa's large reserves have established populations of wild Lions, Cheetahs, etc. and their numbers need to be managed to prevent over population of the reserve. The conservation challenge is finding sufficient safe space for these wild animals, not sourcing additional captive-bred animals to fill the space.
- Carnivores breed very well in the wild and do not require captive breeding to supplement populations.
- In some cases, wild carnivores are sold into captive facilities, which has a negative impact on the conservation of wild populations and presents ethical and welfare issues associated with captivity.
- There are also links between the captive Lion industry and the international trade in Lion bones.: http://www.traffic.org/species-reports/traffic_species_mammals83.pdf
- The educational value of these facilities is questionable. They give the general public the wrong impression that it is acceptable to hold carnivores in captivity. Their conservation messages are often distorted (e.g. Cheetahs are endangered when they are Vulnerable or the animals are being kept to promote genetic diversity) and the issues considered here are not highlighted. At best these facilities offer 'edutainment' with no real measurable change in behaviour that promotes conservation.

PUBLIC SAFETY

- Captive carnivores do not have an innate fear of humans and often consider humans as potential prey or associate them with food. This makes them dangerous to humans and interactions can result in serious injury or death. Even a small cub can cause serious injury.
- There have been multiple incidents of Lions and Cheetahs seriously mauling or killing visitors at captive facilities. e.g. three incidents have been reported at a KZN facility in the past three months,



a lady was mauled by a Cheetah in an Eastern Cape facility while trying to protect children from the predator in 2012, a young boy taking a short cut through a facility in Gauteng on his bicycle was mauled by a Cheetah in 2015 and a tourist was killed when she was attacked by a Lion through an open car window in Gauteng in 2015.

- Most interactions are done with no means of restraining the carnivore and there is no barrier between the visitor and the carnivore. There are often several animals loose in an enclosure with visitors and too few handlers to prevent an incident from happening or to manage an incident effectively should it happen.
- Children are particularly vulnerable due to their small size.
- The practice of carnivore petting is currently unregulated and there are no minimum standards in place to ensure visitor safety.

TRANSPARENCY

- Captive facilities seldom provide transparency around their business. It is difficult to find out what happens to animals once they are too old for the petting zoo; staff often report that the animals are released into the wild and that they are supporting conservation. These statements are often unsupported and cannot be verified.
- The conservation message about the threats the species face is often distorted. Visitors are told that captive breeding and petting assist with conservation when clearly they do not.
- In some cases, facility owners are not educated in conservation and therefore have uninformed views on how to conserve predators thus genuinely believing that their actions are a benefit to conservation.
- The key driver for most facilities is financial gain and the animals are used solely for financial gain with no measurable conservation benefit.

CONCLUSION

Touch programmes and the captive keeping and breeding of carnivores do not contribute to conservation, present serious ethical and welfare issues are routinely linked to exploitation and canned hunting. Furthermore, visitors to these facilities may be at risk as attacks can lead to serious injury or death. Ecotourism is important for the South African economy and needs to be done in such a manner that it promotes the long-term conservation of our wildlife heritage. The captive keeping of carnivores, and touch programmes, do not contribute to the sustainable, responsible use of our wildlife resources and in most cases are detrimental to conservation. The EWT does not support such facilities and believes that carnivores should be appreciated and viewed in their natural habitat where they contribute to biodiversity conservation as keystone and flagship species where their health and welfare are not compromised.

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