



## Perspective on Interactions with Captive Carnivores

### PURPOSE OF THIS STATEMENT

The purpose of this statement is to inform stakeholders, partners and members of the public on the EWT's perspective on captive carnivore interactions including cub petting, touching – in any form – of captive carnivores, walking-with initiatives, and any other situation where people are in direct contact with captive carnivores.

### BACKGROUND

Carnivore interactions are popular tourist attractions that offer hands-on interactions with carnivores to visitors and include touching, walking-with and photographic opportunities with captive carnivores. In South Africa, Cheetahs (*Acinonyx jubatus*) and lions (*Panthera leo*) are the most commonly used carnivores in interactions, but smaller carnivores like Servals (*Leptailurus serval*) and Caracals (*Caracal caracal*) and exotic carnivores like tigers (*Panthera tigris*) are also used for petting and visitor interactions.

The Endangered Wildlife Trust:

- PROMOTES the conservation of carnivores in the wild as functioning components of natural systems, and
- RECOGNISES that there is no conservation requirement or recommendation for any captive breeding or keeping of carnivores. Key threats to wild carnivores include conflict-related killing, lack of food and safe habitat, and trade in their body parts. Captive breeding does not address any of these threats and may in fact pose additional threats to wild populations.

The EWT is concerned about the following aspects of the captive carnivore industry related to interactions:

### CONSERVATION

- The captive keeping and breeding of large carnivores does not contribute to carnivore conservation in South Africa. There are nationally- and internationally-recognised conservation plans in place for Cheetahs, Lions, Wild Dogs and Leopards 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 physically unfit, of unknown genetic value, 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 makes them dangerous to both staff and visitors in reserves (see **PUBLIC SAFETY**).
- There is currently no area of conservation relevance that can support carnivores introduced through captive breeding and reintroduction. All of South Africa's large reserves have established populations of wild Lions, Cheetahs and African Wild Dogs and their numbers need to be managed to prevent local overpopulation. The conservation challenge is finding sufficient safe space for these wild animals, and 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 have been caught and sold into captive facilities, which has a negative impact on the conservation of wild populations and presents ethical and welfare issues associated with placing wild animals in captivity.
- 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. For example, Cheetahs are often presented as being Endangered to raise funds for their conservation, when in fact they are listed as Vulnerable. The public is also often told that these animals are being held to "conserve genetic diversity" which is also largely untrue. The facilities are often counterproductive to true conservation as they do not highlight or educate the public about the real threats facing wild carnivores and they seldom encourage the public to support the conservation of existing populations of wild carnivores. At best, these facilities offer 'edutainment' with no real measurable conservation impact.

## **WILDLIFE WELFARE**

- Cubs are removed from their mothers for hand raising and use in petting zoos. This is unethical and stressful for both the mothers and cubs. Carnivores are generally good mothers and there is no biological reason 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 thus maximise her breeding outputs. This is because a constant supply of cubs is needed to address the demand for cub petting and to make facilities profitable.
- Carnivores are often handled by numerous people in one day and for prolonged periods. This is stressful, especially for the cubs who should spend large portions of their day sleeping or playing with their siblings. The natural behaviour of a young cub is therefore drastically altered, leaving no room for the cub to learn normal and natural behaviours. It is reported that cubs are sometimes drugged to keep them placid for petting.

- There are links<sup>1</sup> between lion breeding facilities and shooting of captive lions for trophies, commonly called “canned hunting”. 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.
- South Africa has a legal trade in lion bones from captive-origin lions to the Asia for use in traditional medicine<sup>2</sup>, and lions used in interactions have been known to end up being slaughtered for their bones.
- Most captive carnivore facilities pay little to no attention to the natural social structures of carnivores (e.g. Lions occur naturally in prides and Cheetahs are solitary or found in small male coalitions); or their enrichment (e.g. providing stimulation in the environment to allow the animals to mimic natural behaviour and prevent boredom).
- The welfare of captive carnivores is not well regulated and facilities have been known to compromise on providing adequate veterinary care and facilities that prioritise the welfare of the animals.
- 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. euthanised horses or cattle and chickens that die in transit). This food can result in 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, or between animals). Most visitors to the facilities are in regular contact with domestic animals that provide the opportunity for disease transmission.

## **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.
- The EWT has records that show that at least 37 incidents involving captive carnivores and humans have occurred since 1996, affecting no less than 40 victims (13 adult women, 18 adult men and nine children). Twelve of these incidents were fatal. Lions were responsible for 60% of the attacks and 92% of the fatal attacks were attributed to Lions. With the exception of one tiger incident, Cheetahs were responsible for the remainder of the incidents.
- Most interactions are permitted 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 skilled handlers to prevent an incident from happening or to manage an incident effectively should it happen.

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<sup>1</sup> Carte Blanche <http://carteblanche.dstv.com/player/887384>, and the documentary Blood Lions. [www.bloodlions.org](http://www.bloodlions.org)

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.traffic.org/species-reports/traffic\\_species\\_mammals83.pdf](http://www.traffic.org/species-reports/traffic_species_mammals83.pdf)

- The practice of carnivore petting is currently unregulated and there are no minimum standards in place to ensure visitor or animal 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 interactions; staff often state that the animals are released into the wild and that they are supporting conservation. These statements are unsupported, cannot be verified, and are highly improbable at best.
- The conservation message about the threats to wild carnivores is often distorted. Visitors are told that captive breeding and petting assist with conservation when they do not.
- In many cases, facility owners are not educated in conservation and therefore have uninformed views on how to conserve predators or even properly manage their own animals.
- The key driver for most facilities is financial gain and the animals are used solely for financial gain with no conservation benefit at all.

## **CONCLUSION**

The EWT **does not** support interactions with captive carnivores and:

- ENCOURAGES tourists to not support these facilities and practices;
- PROMOTES tourism that supports the long-term conservation of our wildlife heritage; and
- BELIEVES that carnivores should be wild and free, to play a crucial role in natural ecosystems and be enjoyed as such.

*The EWT bases its positions on the best available information and data available at the time. Our positions and opinions may change as more information and data become available.*