

“Horrors of Canned Lion Hunting”

A British TV documentary is about to lift the lid on the sordid 'canned' lion hunting industry in South Africa. Gareth Patterson, who was involved in the investigations, reports

By Gareth Patterson

The bullet slammed into the lioness and she spun in the air, falling against the electric fence behind which she was confined. Standing on the other side of the fence were her three young cubs - she had been separated from them an hour earlier.

Another shot was fired by the overseas hunter. She slumped to the ground in a crumpled heap. Both times, the hunter shot from a vehicle. He then posed with the dead lioness and pulled at her mouth to show her teeth.

Later, in the skinning shed, as the lioness's coat was removed from her body to become a "trophy" for the hunter, milk from her teats mingled with her blood on the ground.

I have documentary evidence of the horror and brutality of this hunt. On May 6, 10-million television viewers in the United Kingdom will see it too, when it is exposed by the investigative programme The Cook Report.

The Cook Report is a hard-hitting documentary series that goes for the jugular of issues. Among the allegations it has investigated is that hunting operators have lured lions out of the Kruger National Park to be shot by high-paying clients.

The programme dealing with hunting on May 6 is the first of a seven-part series. The seventh programme will deal in part with what has transpired since the lion breeding and hunting industry was first exposed. It is my hope that the last programme will report an end to this sordid industry in South Africa.

The findings of The Cook Report investigation were presented for comment this week to representatives of the South African government in London. In documentary and video form, its findings will also be presented to the Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, Pallo Jordan.

Apartheid is dead, but now South Africa urgently needs to evolve its inhumane outlook and policies towards wild animals. International criticism could soon mount against a country which has freed its people, but whose wildlife is still left at the mercy of a utilitarian philosophy of "if it pays, it stays". The colonial conservation culture from which the concepts of "homeland" reserves and "game" reserves evolved is still too entrenched.

For several months, as a consultant for the International Fund for Animal Welfare, I have been looking behind the veil of the lion breeding and hunting industry in

Southern Africa. What I have seen has left me shocked and enraged. The lethal use of wildlife in South Africa is a bloodthirsty, money-hungry blot on the national landscape.

Today in South Africa, an industry exists in which lions in captive conditions are bred for the hunter's gun. The demand to shoot lions is enormous, as is the economic return for providing the client with a lion to shoot. More than 300 lions appear to be caught up in this sordid industry.

I have testimony from witnesses of lions having been bought from a zoo, transported to a Lowveld game farm and then "hunted" in confined areas by high-paying clients; of an elderly German hunter, who was unable to hunt on foot, being driven into an enclosure and shooting his "trophy" from the vehicle; of lions being hunted in confined areas with bows and crossbows; of lions being tranquillised, then removed from the "breeding camps" and taken to where clients are able to shoot them. There is an account of a lioness being shot by a client's son (the boy was cajoled into shooting her) and taking 16 shots to kill her; of a client shooting a male lion 12 times before it died, with not one bullet aimed at the head, presumably so that he did not damage his future trophy; of exotic, non-indigenous species, such as black panthers, being offered for hunting at incredible prices in South Africa.

In Namibia, I was told it is a well-known fact that "trophy hunters" often pay large sums of money to shoot a trapped cheetah or leopard. I was also told that if a hunter wants a leopard really badly, he will pay up to R7 000 to shoot it in a cage, because hunting cheetah and leopard in the wilds in Namibia is regarded as difficult. A reliable source said "big-shot hunters don't have the expertise for it, and most are not fit enough anyway to follow these cats. So they pay the farmer to let them shoot one in a cage".

Returning to lions and South Africa, it seems that if this lion breeding and hunting business is not outlawed, white lion hunts could also be on offer. Lion breeders are simply waiting to build up enough "stock". The commercial price for a white lion is rumoured to be in the region of R300 000.

Some operations have two very separate faces: tourism on one side, the "canned" lion industry on the other. The tourism face is of lodges, game drives, bush walks, and fine cuisine and accommodation. "Orphan" cubs might be seen gambolling around the grounds of the lodge.

But, unseen to the local and international tourists, the same place may be breeding lions to be shot by high-paying clients.

The tourism operation might even advertise its lion-breeding project as being of service to conservation - in that the lions could replace those of wild populations should they become affected by disease. But they won't tell you the real reason why the lions are being bred.

One breeder I spoke to, however, did not try to justify his breeding of lions with pro-conservation arguments. He simply told me he was in the business to make money. He explained that over the past few years, there has been a tremendous growth in the

demand for lions and he is simply capitalising on that demand. He was clearly emotionally detached from the lions and saw them as commodities from which to profit.

There are legal "canned" hunts and illegal ones. The fact that some are legal does not make them right; it's just that the law sanctions such practices.

Laws are in place that allow one to release a lion in, say, a 1 000ha fenced area to be hunted. The absurdity of this is that, because the area is fenced, the lion can not escape. To me, such laws are window-dressing for "fair chase" and legitimise a purely money-making exercise.

And the money is big. Generally, to kill a lion, one must first pay for a full 10-day to 14-day hunt, costing approximately \$5 000 to \$10 000. To hunt and shoot the lion costs an additional \$7 500 to \$10 000. These amounts do not include the cost of the client getting to and from the game farm, the costs of shooting other species, taxidermy, packing and shipping of trophies, the daily tariff of people accompanying the client.

A hunt for a lion alone is generally not offered as the hunting operator does not gain from the accommodation and other fees. But one-off hunts do sometimes occur.

I am aware of one where the client paid R8 000 to R10 000 to shoot a lioness. On another one-off hunt, the operator charged \$9 000 as a deposit to shoot a male lion, with a further \$9 000 payable when the hunt was completed.

The South African Tourism Board (Satour) could easily be seen to be promoting this industry where lions are bred to be shot. It lists such operators, along with others, in its Hunting Directory: South Africa.

Bearing in mind the horror of the "canned lion" industry, imagine my surprise when I saw in the foreword of this directory: "Satour supports practices that enhance the conservation of our country's wildlife."

In a Satour advertisement entitled, "Go for the ultimate trophy and score in South Africa", it is stated: "Where the Big Five ... roam free over magnificent, unspoilt bushland." This is hardly a description of the situation where a lion is bred to be hunted, and is held captive in a fenced area while waiting to be shot, with no chance of escape.

The advertisement ends: "It is always in season in South Africa, where the world's finest hunting is in the bag." Well, the proverbial cat is now out of the bag, and lobbying will intensify until the lion breeding and hunting industry is outlawed.

I believe this industry could potentially threaten our country's tourism potential. What if an international tourism boycott became a reality in reaction to The Cook Report?

The nature conservation authorities and the professional hunting associations are aware of this kind of lion hunting, as are those in the ecotourism industry, and Satour lists the very places involved. Yet, despite the threat this industry poses to tourism, it seems there has been little opposition to it from these quarters.

I have been told that the video of the hunt I described at the beginning of this article was shown months ago to Pallo Jordan. Yet the killing continues.

People seem to have forgotten that trophy hunting is not part of African

environmental culture. Hunting almost purely for sport is part of the culture of Western secularism. African environmentalism has been eroded by recent human history, politics and the entrenched colonial conservation outlook prevalent in South Africa today.

Africa is being raped by outsiders demanding ivory and rhino horn, and by the exotic pet trade, the wild bird trade, the trade in seal penises and other wildlife products. These demands are not coming from Africa, but from the Middle and Far East. Africans and non-Africans who respect authentic African environmentalism must now rally together for the sake of our wild animals. Why, as Africans, are we allowing such hideous crimes to be inflicted upon lions and a myriad other species as a result of the foreign culture of trophy hunting, and the foreign demand for the body parts of our wild animals?

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