

Canned lion hunting: South Africa's dirty little secret

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Aucklanders march to highlight the plight of the lion last Saturday. Photo: Amy Fleming

Last Saturday in Auckland, New Zealanders joined thousands of other protesters across the world in the first ever Global March for Lions, to highlight the plight of lions caught up in the 'canned' hunting industry.

Canned hunting is where the animals are enclosed, may have been reared for the hunt (so are almost tame) and may even have been drugged to make them easier to shoot.

According to the Big Life Foundation, an organisation working to establish a holistic conservation model in the Amboseli-Tsavo region of Africa, 75 per cent of Africa's lions have been wiped out in just the past twenty years.

LionAid, a charity organisation working to protect and conserve endangered lions worldwide, reports that many nations have already lost their lions, and Nigeria, Kenya and Uganda predict local extinctions in the next ten years.

The NGO Campaign Against Canned Hunting (CACH) reports that there are fewer than 4000 lions left in the 'wild' in South Africa, but more than 8000 exist in captivity where they are "bred for the bullet or the arrow". Chris Mercer, a conservationist and the founder of CACH, most recently put the number of 'wild' lions in South Africa at a mere 2734.

The message of the Global March for Lions is simple, Auckland march organiser Shona Lyon said. "We are asking the South African government to ban canned hunting. And we seek action," she said.

"Lions need to be included on the Endangered Species list, where they rightly belong. The export of lion bones to China must stop, and the import of lion trophies to the United States and European Union needs to be prohibited."

Causes of the lion's dramatic decline include habitat loss, and human and livestock conflict resulting in retaliation killings, and LionAid reports that trophy hunting is a "highly significant and immediately preventable source of additive mortality".

The fact is that the vast majority of lions are not roaming wild across their pridelands but exist in the 160 farms, legally breeding big cats in South Africa, established over the last 15 years. These captive bred lions are hand-reared and at only a few weeks old their grubby brown fur slips through the fingers of international tourists who pay a modest fee for a cuddle.

As the lions get past the petting stage, at approximately three years of age, they are selected for release into a larger enclosure for one express purpose - to be killed by a trophy hunter for large sums of money. Male lions donning a substantial mane are the most sought-after trophies and up to 1.5 million Rand (NZ\$164,580) can be paid for a white lion.

According to Chris Mercer of CACH and Paul Hart, the founder of Drakenstein Lion Sanctuary in Cape Town, South Africa, canned hunting means mental and physical constraints unfairly prevent the lion from escaping the hunter.

According to Mercer, the majority of lions in South Africa today exist in these farms, often touted as lion sanctuaries. There is "unspeakable cruelty" in the canned hunting and captive breeding process, he said, and one of the most popular ways to kill a lion is by arrow. "This is not a quick death."

Some 2592 lion trophies were exported from South Africa to the United States and a further 1206 to EU member states from 2007 to 2012.

Once the trophy head is taken, it's the turn of the skeleton. Karl Ammann, a conservationist and wildlife photographer, reported last year that imports of lion bones from South Africa to Asia are sold as "tiger bone" to be turned into tiger wine for China or tiger bone cake for Vietnam.

"We are talking about several hundred skeletons being exported and imported on an annual basis and during our investigations we were told of a three tonne shipment about to arrive," he said.

"Thousands of volunteers come from overseas, naively believing that they are contributing to conservation of the species, when in fact all they are doing is enhancing the profits of the canned hunting industry," Mercer said.

His campaign against canned hunting continues, with the Global March for Lions held at 55 cities across the world last Saturday.

More info:

<http://www.cannedlion.org/>

<http://www.lionaid.org>

<https://biglife.org>

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