

This
ain't
no

petting ZOO

When it comes volunteering at an animal-welfare organisation, it seems the road to hell is paved with good intentions and ignorance. **Iga Motylska** looks at the good and the bad of voluntourism in South Africa.



A sure way to get hundreds of likes on your Facebook profile or countless matches on Tinder is to post pics of yourself with animals – tame or wild. You can even skip the Tinder intro, because nobody is going to read it when you're cuddling a lion cub or, better yet, something more exotic like a baby tiger.

It seems seemingly domesticated wild animals garner the most likes, whether you're taking a selfie, stroking

their coat or walking synchronously with a lion's gait.

Each year, thousands of volunteers stream in from around the world to join South African volunteers in giving their time and skills to help conservation efforts. Give them the choice and many will come off the plane and go straight to cuddling those little lion cubs they saw advertised in the brochures and online.

It seems that, in many cases, the road to animal exploitation is paved with

good intentions – and ignorance. Just ask anyone in legitimate conservation who's educating people about the many captive-breeding programmes that masquerade as animal sanctuaries or rehab centres, while fuelling canned-hunting excursions and the illegal trade of wildlife parts.

Many people who genuinely want to contribute towards conservation efforts (and pay a hefty sum to do so) are often unaware that one begets the other. ➔



NO SCRATCHING, PLEASE

'A true sanctuary does not offer interactions (cub petting or walking with big cats), does not breed with any big cats, and does not sell or trade their animals,' says Panthera Africa co-founder Lizaene Cornwall, who also started out as a volunteer. 'If the facility is ethical, they will function according to these rules.'

Predatory cats are under the biggest threat of exploitation in South Africa when it comes to volunteering and petting parks that allow for animal interactions.



QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD ASK A VOLUNTEER PROGRAMME

- Do you breed animals and why?
- Do you allow public interactions with wild animals?
- Do you hunt on your property?
- What do you do with the surplus of animals?
- Do you sell/trade your animals?
- How is the money I pay to volunteer allocated?

I'll admit that years ago, I used to cart off my pleading international friends for a visit at a commercial petting park before I understood that those lion cubs only have a six-month shelf life. Once they become too big, they are replaced with new litters of cubs (like a factory farm, in a sense).

More often than not, these lions are sent to a retirement enclosure to live out the next 20 years of their lives, if they are lucky. Otherwise, they're sent into captive-breeding programmes or sold to zoos.

BRED FOR THE BULLET

These 'humanised' lions lose their natural fear of people, which makes them ideal candidates to be sold to commercial game reserves for canned lion hunting, whereby they are either tranquilised, confined and fenced into a small space so they cannot escape, or lured with food so the hunter can take aim.

This has given rise to the term 'bred for the bullet', which some argue protects wild populations of lions (their numbers are around half in comparison to captive populations) from being shot.

Once the trophy hunter has what he came for, the game reserve owners often also sell the bones to a third party, who will then sell it to the traditional Chinese medicine market to make tiger wine, which is believed to cure various ills.

'Volunteers don't know what's happening behind the scenes,' says Lizaene. 'The stories they're told are untrue. Breeding in captivity has no conservation value, as these animals cannot be released into the wild. They're told the facility breeds to ensure a gene pool for the species, so they don't become extinct, or to help endangered species survive. Most of the gene pool in captivity is compromised, as a lot of these facilities have no studbooks or records, and because they breed siblings or family members with each other.'

REALITY CHECK

If your heart's in the right place, be aware that many seemingly above-board volunteer organisations register as nonprofit organisations or add a heart-yanking title such as 'sanctuary' or 'rehab centre' to their names. Use the internet and social media to do research, and get opinions from others who've volunteered at the organisation you're eyeing. ➔



'Volunteering with us is not always what people have in mind for the African experience,' explains Jana Swart of the Jane Goodall Institute Chimpanzee Eden, which cares for 33 chimpanzees rescued from the illegal bush-meat trade, circuses or being kept as pets. 'It involves no physical interaction with the chimpanzees; not even the staff enter their enclosures, as they are wild and dangerous animals.'

In reality, volunteering at a retirement sanctuary, where the animals have been saved from mistreatment, often involves scrubbing smelly enclosures, preparing food, and general DIY – the kind of stuff you never see on promotional brochures.

WILD BUT WARY

So what kind of questions should you ask of a wildlife volunteer programme if you're serious about getting poop under your nails in the name of animal conservation?

When it comes to so-called rehab centres – as some animals, like birds, are able to be released back into the wild unlike human-imprinted lions – the National Council of SPCAs advises: 'For rehabilitation facilities, the main question will be – are the animals released? If the rehabs are holding permanent animals they're not true rehabs, as the permanent animals are often held back for volunteer programmes. Most facilities with captive wildlife who offer hand rearing and direct interaction is a commercial endeavour.'

Twenty-five-year-old Nina Danes, a master's graduate in wildlife conservation from the UK who spent six weeks volunteering with Wildlife Act, advises: 'Look at what they're doing, and make sure you're actually doing conservation work. Wildlife Act even sent us a reminder saying, "This is hard work, not Disneyland!"' ■

MAKE SURE YOU CHOOSE THE BEST VOLUNTEERING ORGANISATIONS

The best information on ethical volunteering option can be found on the Volunteers in Africa Beware and Bloodlions Facebook pages, or on cannedlion.org, otherwise check out these options:

Panthera Africa – Stanford, Western Cape, pantherafrica.co.za

Drakenstein Lion Park – Cape Town, Western Cape, lionrescue.org.za

SANCCOB Conservation of Coastal Birds – Cape Town, Western Cape, sanccob.co.za

Jukani Wildlife Sanctuary – Plettenberg Bay, Western Cape, jukani.co.za

Emoya Big Cat Sanctuary – Vaalwater, Limpopo, emoya.co.za

Lionsrock – Bethlehem, Free State, lionsrock.org

Shamwari Game Reserve – Port Elizabeth, Eastern Cape, shamwari.com

Kevin Richardson Sanctuary – Johannesburg, Gauteng, lionwhisperer.co.za

Birds of Prey and Rehabilitation Centre – Dullstroom, Mpumalanga, birdsofprey.co.za

Jane Goodall Institute

Chimp Eden – Nelspruit, Mpumalanga, chimpeden.com

Wildlife ACT – Mkhuze, KwaZulu-Natal, wildlifeact.com

Thula Thula Rhino Orphanage – Zululand, KwaZulu-Natal, thulathula.com