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‘Voluntary Surrender’ – A Guise to Cover Up State Failure in Wildlife Conservation

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WRSA Media Release: 20 November 2024

The South African Government’s latest moves to shut down the commercial lion industry, veiled as a conservation effort, have sparked outrage. Media statements, in two separate gazettes, by the Department of Forestry, Fisheries, and the Environment (DFFE) on November 15, 2024, called for the “voluntary surrender” of African lion (*Panthera Leo*) bones and announced a draft notice to prohibit new captive lion breeding facilities. While marketed as a progressive step, the reality reveals a staggering cover-up of governmental failures in wildlife conservation and administration.

Dr. Dion George, Minister of the DFFE, appeared on SABC News on November 16, 2024, claiming, “There are sufficient lions in the wild. For example, if you look at the Kruger National Park, we do not have a shortage of lions. It is untrue that the lions held in captivity are somehow saving the species.” This statement, though presented as fact, blatantly ignores the ongoing crisis in South Africa’s wild lion populations.

For over two decades, Bovine Tuberculosis (TB) has contaminated the Kruger National Park’s lion populations. It is estimated that by 1999, more than 80% of the park’s lions were infected. This slow, agonising epidemic continues to haunt Kruger’s lions to this day, with little to no meaningful intervention by the state. Minister George’s own admission during the interview – “South Africa struggles with implementation” – is an indictment of the state’s chronic failures to protect wildlife.



Photo: From a photo documentary, “The Dying of the Light: Bovine TB in Kruger Lions”. Photographer: Will Goodlet

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Equally false is George’s assertion that captive-bred lions cannot be rewilded due to “different genetic makeup.” Decades of research, including Dr. Paul Booyens’ groundbreaking PhD thesis, “*The Introduction of Captive-Bred African Lions to a Private Wildlife Reserve in Limpopo Province*,” has proven otherwise. Rewilding captive, **disease-free** lions is not only possible but essential for the species’ long-term survival. Prof. HO de Waal at the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences, further elaborates on Dr. Booyens’ research in an article on “*Predators and Rewilding*,” published in the inaugural WRSA 2024 Journal (pg. 16-23) as well as in the “Rewilding” publication, Vol 2, Issue 1, 2024 (pg.12-20)

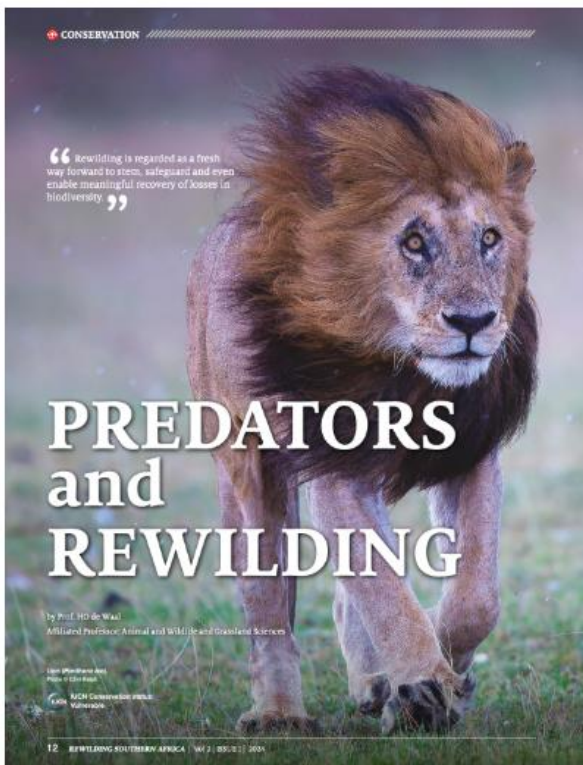


Photo: (Left) Excerpt from “Predators and Rewilding” in the “Rewilding Southern Africa” Publication, Vol 2, Issue 1, 2024. (Right) Cover of “Rewilding Southern Africa” Publication, Vol 2, Issue 1, 2024

“Rewilding captive, disease-free lions is not only possible but essential for the species’ long-term survival.”

A Flawed Narrative on Captive Lions

The Minister painted a grim picture of captive lions, claiming they are “severely compromised, lame, and in pain.” The sentiment was echoed in a news article by Donn Pinnock in the Daily Maverick, ‘*Bones of Contention*.’ While some facilities have faced rightful scrutiny, Minister George’s sweeping condemnation disregards the efforts of ethical breeders. Organisations like

the South African Predator Association (SAPA) uphold strict welfare standards to ensure lions are well cared for under expert custodianship.

The NSPCA called for the enforcement of policies and guidelines by the government to ensure a minimum standard of welfare for lions in captivity. 6 August 2019, a judgement was ruled in favour of the NSPCA by the High Court of South Africa, which stated that, “Reading NEMBA as a whole together with the Biodiversity Plan **there is little doubt that lions in captivity are part of the biodiversity sector** that at the very least there is a duty to manage the sector.” Despite this, no such measures were implemented by the Minister at the time, leaving the welfare of captive lions unregulated and vulnerable to exploitation.

The Biodiversity Management Plan (BMP) for African Lions, gazetted in 2015, aimed to “enhance the conservation status of managed wild lions” and “assess the management of the captive lion industry.” Yet, these objectives remain unfulfilled. Managed wild lions continue to be euthanized by the hundreds, and no standardised welfare policies for captive lions have been enacted.

Adding to the hypocrisy, the CITES Trade Database reveals that South Africa’s Management Authority reported the import of 580 live captive-bred lions from across the globe to RSA from the year 2000. These lions were brought in by NGOs under the guise of conservation but have instead become little more than emotional “tourism traps,” perpetuating exploitation while failing to contribute meaningfully to species conservation.

By contrast, the government’s own mismanagement of state reserves speaks volumes. Madikwe Game Reserve, once a thriving park, has been decimated by overpopulation and neglect. An unchecked elephant population has transformed the reserve into a desert-like wasteland, erasing critical biodiversity. In November 2024 alone, over 45 elephants died from starvation and dehydration – grim evidence of the state’s failure to manage its wildlife responsibly. This State failure will certainly be challenged as one elephant dies every day under their ‘watchful care.’



Photo: 12 November 2024. Taken at Madikwe Reserve. Photographer: Ryan Sean Davey

The Role of Private Ranchers

While the government flounders, private wildlife ranchers have emerged as unsung heroes of conservation. Their self-funded anti-poaching initiatives have reduced poaching incidents on private reserves, even as poaching surges in Kruger and other state-managed parks. These ranchers have proven that sustainable use practices can bolster both wildlife populations and local economies.

Yet, instead of collaborating with these experts, the government continues to sideline them. The High-Level Panel and Ministerial Task Team, established in 2020, promised a comprehensive Implementation Plan addressing both lion conservation and stakeholder livelihoods. Four years and a budget expansion of tens of millions of rands later, the only concrete outcome is the vague promise of a plan following a 120-day surrender period. What will happen to the surrendered lion bones and derivatives? No clear answers have been provided. These pressing questions are often omitted in the media.

In response to Minister George's claim that "a lot of consultation has been done," Wildlife Ranching South Africa (WRSA) filed a Promotion of Access to Information Act (PAIA) application seeking clarity on the activities and findings of the Ministerial Task Team. To date, no information has been provided in response to this request. As a result, the WRSA has escalated the matter by lodging a formal complaint with the National Information Regulator.

It is deeply troubling that the Ministerial Task Team Report, despite its release, fails to disclose critical details, such as the number of stakeholders willing to voluntarily exit the lion industry. This lack of transparency raises serious questions about the legitimacy of the consultation process and whether the voices of those directly impacted are being considered at all.

The Fate of over 8,000 Captive Lions

What becomes of the 8,000 lions currently in captivity? The government's plan – sterilisation and eventual euthanasia – marks a death sentence for these animals. Lions bred and cared for to preserve their genetic legacy will be reduced to casualties of a poorly conceived policy.

Alternatively, will they be left to suffer slow, agonising deaths, riddled with disease, or in overcrowded state reserves like Kruger and Madikwe, where the government has repeatedly failed to ensure basic welfare conditions? The state's track record suggests this is a grim possibility.

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The Consequences of Closing the Lion Industry

The shuttering of the commercial lion industry will devastate lion populations, rural livelihoods, and South Africa's conservation legacy. According to the Confederation of Employers in South Africa (COFESA), as reported in 'Maroela Media', the closure of the commercial lion industry is set to result in the loss of 14,000 specialised jobs. In a country already grappling with rampant crime and corruption driven by high unemployment, this decision defies logic and exacerbates an already dire socio-economic crisis. Without expert ranchers to steward their survival, lions could join the ranks of endangered species within a generation. These ranchers, driven out by

uninformed policies and propaganda, will leave the industry – and the country – taking with them decades of conservation expertise.

South Africa is on the brink of a species crisis. While the government hides behind hollow rhetoric, the very hands that could restore the lion population are being shackled and stripped of their rights.

A Call for Accountability

It is time for the government to abandon its antagonistic stance towards the private wildlife industry. Conservation cannot be achieved through one-sided decisions that ignore the realities on the ground. Collaboration with ethical lion breeders and ranchers is essential for protecting South Africa's lions and their habitats.

The state has failed its wild lions. Will it fail the captive ones too?

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