

FAQ : Colin's Horseback Africa's Lion Awareness Program

Why are we doing this program?

Colin's wildlife tour is an education and community-based program created to raise awareness of the plight of lions and to campaign for their survival.

It is a fact that the free roaming lion population world-wide has been in a steep decline. In the early 1900's it stood at 100 000, and by 1950 it was down to 400 000. Presently the lion count in Africa stands at around 20 000, which is thankfully due to the contribution of lion breeders too.

As one can see, this represents a dramatic decline of lions in the last two decades. In many areas in Africa, lions have become extinct and their survival in the wild is classified as "critical".

The most important causes for the decline are the following:

- illness,
- shrinking of habitat, which often translates to human conflict,
- isolated prides, which inbreed and then eventually die out,
- Poaching of wild lions.

(Take note that the decline is NOT due to trophy hunting of captive-bred lions!!)

The situation of free-roaming lions in South Africa is also alarming. The estimated count of 2700 "free-roaming lions" occur in the Kruger National Park together with the surrounding game reserves. Even although there are smaller populations in other areas, they are not regarded as self-sustaining, as these populations have to be managed very carefully by adding lions or taking lions away from time to time essentially to prevent in-breeding. The lions in the Kruger National Park are also a cause for concern as they are largely infected with Tuberculosis.

According to Dr. Dewald Keet the state veterinary surgeon for the Kruger Park, this disease is a major threat to the species, especially when one considers that a very large percentage of the population have also been tested to be FIV (Feline Immunodeficiency Virus) positive. This results in a lowered immune response and increases the threat of the lions contracting Tuberculosis. According to this renowned veterinary surgeon, up to 78% of lions in the Southern areas of the Park are infected with this disease, but because the illness is spreading very slowly, people are under the misconception that the situation has been stabilized. The fact is that at least 25 lions die every year as a result of TB.

The disease also has a profound effect on the social behaviour of the pride. Infected males within the pride are weakened, and this leads to a fast replacement of males within the pride. These new males kill all the babies from the previous male, and the numbers within the pride decline. With the vicious fighting that takes place blood transmission of the FIV virus is significantly increased – in fact almost guaranteed. These two factors alone have a disastrous effect on the pride, as the entire pride can be wiped out in a very short time. Dr. Keet reckons that it may even be too late to save the existing "free-roaming" lions of the Kruger Park.

Against this background, one needs to encourage a new view upon the breeding of lions within South Africa to counter the emotional internet rantings of “armchair activists” from all over the globe. Uncontrolled internet protocols allow any uneducated, uninformed and often emotionally unstable “animal lover” to maliciously accuse legitimate scientifically based breeding programs of being “canned hunters”.

Canned Lion Hunting, by the way, is a term given to an unethical practice where hunters drug lions and then shoot them on the spot. This is severely frowned upon by Horseback Africa.

Now to get back to the so called “animal lovers” who campaign against anybody who breeds lions ethically, or provides lion programs, these so-called “conservationists” have no idea as to what sustainable utilization is all about. They publicise outrageous, dishonest and libellous outpourings based on not a thread of evidence and flood the internet with this, often hidden behind anonymous cover and temporary IP addresses. To compound the problem there are also a whole host of opportunists who have jumped on the “FUNDING” bandwagon. Respond to their posting and very soon (after receiving a tranche of gruesome images collected from all over the world over the last 20 years depicting lions that were hunted) you will be presented with the ever present “DONATE NOW” button. As they say - every day a sucker is born, but this is understandable as they use very clever and convincing arguments and techniques.

In South Africa there has been a new revolution in the survival of this species. Poaching of free-roaming lions in South Africa has declined, as ethical hunting is restricted to specific private game reserves allocated for this purpose, which is an advantageous progress in favour of wild lions! As in the case of the rhinos, a new future has arisen in South Africa since the breeding of these animals in captivity. Today there are more lions within breeding facilities, than there are communally within any national or provincial game reserves together. There are approximately 7000 lions within around 260 captive breeding facilities in South Africa to date.

One of the greatest guarantees for the survival of lions in South Africa today is the conservation efforts of lion breeders who gain financially from this and therefore make sure that the species survives. There are around 200 individuals and associations who have permits to keep and breed lions on South Africa. The other permit-holders, like ourselves, keep lions, rhinos, elephants and other species purely for personal, aesthetic reasons and eco-tourism awareness programs.

Hand-reared cubs from Colin’s wildlife education tour become crusaders for the species. Colin’s wildlife education tour is also linked with other lion programs so that jointly we can make a difference to the survival of the king of the African bush. It is also very important that we concentrate on genetic diversity.

Colin’s wildlife education tour is continually evolving and taking on new challenges to improve the program.

The founder Dr. Colin MacRae and his family launched the walking-with-lions program in 1998 on just 12.4 hectares of land. In the year 2002 the new game reserve was established on 300 hectares.

1. Why do you remove cubs from their mothers at three weeks old?

There are several reasons for this practice, the principal one being that in the natural setting on average only one lion out of every ten born reach their first birthday. When babies are removed from their mothers and hand-raised 95 percent survive.

Removing cubs from their mother does cause the mother to re-enter her oestrus cycle sooner than if the cubs are left with the mother. This natural phenomenon occurs in the wild when males take over a pride and kill all the offspring present. This stimulates the females to go into oestrus and then start producing cubs from the new male as soon as possible. Due to our ability to control the movement of the females and male we are able to provide the female with an adequate rest before she is allowed to mate again – a luxury the females in a wild pride do not have. When she comes back into season (oestrus) in the wild she has no choice – she gets mated. What the lay people do not know is that towards the final stage of a female's lactating period in the wild she already comes into oestrus and gets mated. For a while she not only feeding her young, but then has to provide resources for the developing foetuses. Our female have the luxury of a rest and recovery period.

2. Why do you have to do a wildlife education tour?

There are two main reasons:

This is an awareness program for people. Our aim is to educate the general public and to facilitate the increased respect for lions and other animals as a whole. This is done within a controlled program where people have the chance to touch and feel and to learn. Creating a multisensory learning environment, in which you stimulate one or more senses, is essential for human health and development. This approach to education can improve concentration, enhance memory, and foster a deeper understanding of the subject matter – in this case LIONS. It is alarming as to how many people know so little about conservation issues. Colin's wildlife education tour is there to make people aware of our threatened animals on the planet. Guests are given the opportunity to observe the lion's natural behaviour like stalking, territorial marking and the occasional attempt at hunting a wild bird.

The second reason for walking with lions is for the sake of the lions! The lions get the chance to experience the natural surroundings of the African Bush. They get the chance to explore their surroundings and build up their courage. Importantly they go for a walk before they get fed. Lions are "condition response animals" and the walking experience teaches them not to lay under one tree and wait for the food to come to them (as happens in a zoo setting) but they get raised to associate walking with the reward of receiving food. Lions, as with any other cat, have a natural hunting instinct. A domestic cat does not need to be taught to catch a mouse! A lion's instinct is 100 times stronger than that of a domestic cat. One reason for the limited success of previous predator release programs is that the animals were given no pre-release conditioning/training. By giving the lions a chance to spend time in the bush we also build their confidence, allowing them to mark out territories and give them the opportunity to practice and perfect their natural hunting ability. As a result of this

practice we have seen the lions becoming adept hunters, without human assistance. One of the year-old lions released in Zambia within days took down an adult impala!

3. What are your views on trophy hunting?

When we first started the program many years ago, we were totally against the hunting of lions because it was not done ethically. There was a relatively small group of people who practised what is now known as “canned lion” hunting. Since then this practice has been declared illegal under the TOPS regulations and the government has ensured that specific measures must be in place for the hunting of lions.

Although we do not propagate hunting in general, Colin’s program does not criticize ethical trophy hunting. When any animal species is protected on a game reserve, they multiply and if left, will over-utilise the available resources to their own detriment, and to that of other animals. There has to be unemotional scientific control of the numbers of animals on any game reserve. The removal of these animals via ethical hunting is a proven method of providing funds for further conservation projects. This is termed “sustainable utilization” and fully endorsed by the International Union of Biological Sciences (IUBS).

Both Colin and Theony enjoy a good steak in a restaurant. We are not vegetarians. Cows, sheep, pigs, and chickens are bred for slaughter. Wild animals such as kudus, warthogs, lions and elephants are also raised in large game reserves to be harvested. As long as it is done ethically and sustainably, where the animal is treated fairly, then we do not see a problem with it. In addition the venison from this utilization is free of growth stimulants, routine antibiotics and stress hormones associated with traditional meat. Venison is highly sought after worldwide by health conscious people.

4. What is the CITES view on Lion Trophy Hunting?

CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) is an international agreement between participating governments. The aim is to ensure that international trade of wild animals and plants do not threaten the survival of that species.

Lions (*Panthera leo*) are presently listed on CITES appendix II.

At the CITES conference held at Entebbe in 2016, the following was published:

A carefully crafted consensus on the topic of trophy hunting was also agreed in Entebbe, with all lion Range States present accepting that trophy hunting of lions, if well managed, is a good conservation tool that should not be jeopardized by CITES or CMS. In the communiqué, the 28 Range States “Highlight the benefits that trophy hunting, where it is based on scientifically established quotas, taking into account the social position, age and sex of an animal, have, in some countries, contributed to the conservation of lion populations”.

5. Will captive breeding save Africa’s “king of the jungle”?

Definitely it will contribute towards it. It is now a well-known fact that large portions of the lion population all the way across the African continent are facing many more life threatening factors than they ever have in the past.

It is also a well-documented fact that endangered species, like the American Condor, would have been extinct were it not for various captive Condor breeding programs around the world.

The saving of even one species from the brink of extinction trumps any negative aspect you could point out against captive breeding programs. These projects and well run zoos save a multitude of insect, reptile, fish and mammals species from extinction and should be highly applauded for their sterling and passionate work. Unfortunately the internet has a whole army of ill-informed, stupid, emotionally charged load mouthed activist trumpeting animal rights from the comfort of their sofa.

6. What specifically has Horseback Africa's Program achieved?

With the far-reaching knowledge and evolutionary biological insight Colin realised that it was essential to have a small number of captive bred lions with a very broad gene pool (Genetic Diversity Index) to re-populate wildlife areas should a "bad case" scenario occur. Look at it as a type of conservation insurance policy.

An initial genetic study of the few breeding animals of Horseback Africa revealed a Genetic Diversity Index (heterozygosity) of 0.6364, nearly the same as for the whole Kruger Park lion population. Recent 2020 genetic study by the Veterinary Genetics Laboratory – Dr Cindy Harper documented that the Horseback Africa lions had a comparable Heterozygosity Index to the Kruger National Park control study group, 24 captive bred lion populations and 18 managed small game reserve populations. It is however highly significant that the Horseback Africa index is clearly the **highest** (at 0.68) of all of these! The results revealed that there is absolutely **no** inbreeding in the Horseback Africa lion population.

According to a scientific study published in the Journal of Heredity 2014 105 (6) that documented the microsatellite markers of populations of wild, managed wild and captive lion populations.: *"Some captive lion samples were included in this study and a number of unique alleles were found in this population. This suggests that there may be some genetic diversity in the captive populations that has been lost from the wild populations. This warrants further research into captive populations in South Africa to determine if unique diversity has been preserved in these captive populations and could be restored to the wild populations at a later date."*

The 2020 genetic test reveal very exciting results. Toby, the Horseback Africa pedigree founder pride male, documented as being the most handsome lions in Southern Africa, was discovered to have a unique allele at one of the testing sites that has never been found to date. This directly confirms the value of our breeding program. With his full black mane extending over his chest to the start of his stomach, he has all the desired phenotypic characters of a typical African lion. Colin takes Pride (excuse the pun) in these exciting results.

7. “Our evidence proves that captive breeding of large predators is an industry responsible for encouraging, supporting and enabling the abuse of wildlife”. What is your response to this comment?

This is a generalization that is offensive to awareness programs like ours that are concerned about the future and sincere well-being of large predators in Africa.

Because lions fall into the category of “endangered species”, the hunting of this species is strictly controlled by CITES. This occurs on farms where lions have been present for many years, are reproducing successfully and their numbers have to be controlled for sound habitat and environmental management reasons. As in any industry, there are always players who flaunt legislation and ethical guidelines that are in place and illegally allow hunting of drugged lions in confined areas. Activists and journalist discover these charlatans and then portray the idea that this “canned hunting” automatically takes place wherever lion breeding occurs.

8. “Captive breeding provides prey for the canned hunting industry, and also for the local and international wildlife trade.” Comments?

Colin’s Horseback Africa strongly disapproves of any form of “canned hunting” and keenly disassociates itself from this highly unethical practice. This practice is decisively against the law in South Africa (Threatened or Protected Species Regulations promulgated in 2017, which is part of the National Environmental Management: Biodiversity Act (NEMBA)).

If anyone has evidence of this practice occurring, they should immediately report it to the relevant Nature Conservation authority. Failing recourse to this legal avenue, an accusation levelled at any person, farmer or facility of “canned hunting” falls directly into the legal sphere of speculation and is naturally highly damaging to the reputation and standing of that legally operating entity. This in turn lays the accusing person or legal entity open to litigation for libel and damages suffered due to false and unsubstantiated accusation. The reportable Johannesburg High Court judgement (case no. 13349/2019) of Trevor Manuel vs EFF (Malema) clearly substantiates this principle.

Sustainable ethical lion trophy hunting however, has been accepted and even propagated by CITES to ensure the conservation of lions – and this must not be confused with “Canned Hunting”.

9. Where are your lions released?

Our lions are made available to approved conservation or eco-tourism wildlife parks, accredited animal facilities, game relocation companies, reserves and any other permitted establishments all over the African Continent. Any sale or relocation of lions is strictly controlled by permits issued by Department of Nature Conservation. The receiving institution or reserve also has to have the relevant permits in place before the authorities issue the permit. In the case of donated animals we require written commitment that the new owners are conservationists and that effective measures are in place to prevent poaching. There are presently some 26 countries in Africa that historically had lions but now do not have a single free-roaming lion. A study by Dunstan *et al.* compared captive bred lions and wild relocated prides and came to the conclusion that there was no significant difference between the two, proving scientifically that captive bred lions can be successfully released into wildlife areas.

10. There is no conservation need to hand-rear and walk lions with tourists – other than to raise money to look after these animals – which, once you have finished exploiting them for lion walking (before they reach the age of 2 years old), are condemned to live out the rest of their lives in captivity. Comment please.

This could not be further from the truth for Colin's Awareness program. Yes, the lions are hand raised and walked with tourists, to raise awareness of the situation that lions have been placed in by the interference of humans over the last century. Colin's awareness program gains revenue from these tours so that our education and awareness program may stay in existence. Unfortunately there are very few people in this world who are able to change a bad situation to a good one without some kind of financial backing. Our lions do not spend their lives in captivity other than the small breeding group.

11. Which well-known organization will endorse your program?

Our lions are fully permitted and our facility regulated and inspected by the Gauteng Nature Conservation Authority. We would welcome contact with any other organization interested in supporting an operation which stands for promoting and preserving a truly magnificent animal based on scientific principles e.g. CITES, IUCN etc..

12. Is this not just financial exploitation of lions?

If it pays, it stays. Whatever you do in life takes money to keep it going. This is our passion. We are going about reaching our goal by providing a product, the funds from which can be used wisely to sustain wildlife. We are sharing our love for lions with others who are more than willing to pay for an enriching experience – learning more about these magnificent animals. We are creating a way to survive off of our passion and love for the African Lion. Some organizations find it more “profitable” to beg for donations from the general public. The general public is then get nothing back in return for their donations – not even the truth about how their donations are being used! Often careful audits of these organizations reveal that 80% of every donated dollar gets absorbed in the fundraising effort itself and does not reach the designated assignment at all. They hire exorbitant office space in capital cities, employ family members at astronomical rates, fly first class all over the world, travel around in the latest model Range Rovers and stay in 5 + Star lodges. Many of the internet “loudmouths” find it easier to criticize from the comfort of an easy chair behind their computer (cyber space) than actually getting involved in conservation efforts in the real world.

13. One cannot release captive bred lions because they are tame, and then they will just walk up to people after their release and then they get shot. What is your comment on this?

Just to correct the misbelief – there is no such thing as a “tame” lions– only ones that have temporarily accepted their human companions as being superior to them in the social hierarchy. Once released in the wild, these lions would just as quickly test

humans as a source of food, as any wild lion would. The study of Dunston *et al* scientifically demonstrated that captive lions successfully adapt to wildlife situations.

14. Captive-bred lions cannot be released into the wild.

This is a fallacy. New studies have proved that captive-bred lions CAN be released successfully into the wild. See work published by Dr. Paul Booyens. He is co-author of the book Released: Captive Bred to Truly Wild. The You Tube presentation is here <https://youtu.be/SjC7CG6gmBY>

14. “Walking with lions” is a purely commercial enterprise. The purported conservation value of a captive breeding and release program for lions has not been demonstrated. Comment.

Correction, in the case of Colin’s, Walking-with-Lions, this is a means to an end, that end being the awareness program shared with tourists and locals alike. If you would like to suggest a better way to raise awareness, you are more than welcome. These encounters we offer to the public creates a fondness and passion for lions and nature.

15. Hand rearing of lion cubs will ensure that these animals are imprinted on humans, and that they will thereafter lack natural avoidance behaviours. Is this not so?

The statement that lions imprint on humans is typical of the activist league’s lack of biological knowledge. There is no evidence at all that lions “imprint” on their human caregivers. The research of Konrad Lorenz highlighted that imprinting was basically restricted to precocial birds (those who could walk immediately after hatching). Our experience of more than two decades of raising lion cubs revealed that lions do recognise their human companions but this is in no way imprinting. Once released, where there is no more physical contact between man and beast they revert to their normal lion instinctual behaviour.

I personally would never risk my life walking up to a lion that I had raised and that had been released in a game reserve.

16. Do you teach hand-reared cubs to hunt as sub-adults?

No, they are natural hunters. A lion that has been in a small cage in a zoo for his whole life, being fed without having to do anything, may have a problem upon release. His natural instincts would not easily kick in. In our case, the walks stimulate the lions natural instincts.

17. Being raised in captivity, are they not totally dependent on humans for food?

Not in the least. When released in parks where there is sufficient natural food, their hunting instincts very rapidly come to the fore. Have you ever seen the movie Madagascar – where the lion suddenly realises his best friend the zebra would make

a delicious meal? Even in our enclosures every now and again snakes, porcupines and even the very alert baboons get taken by our “tame” lions.

18. Therefore to answer the question: Where do your lions go when they are too old to walk with?

Over the years, we have released lions both within the borders of South Africa as well as in other African countries. A couple of years ago, a group of 7 lions were released in Zambia successfully. Sometimes lions are swapped with other breeders so as to form new prides with a diverse genetic pool. If you live in the Pretoria, area, you could have seen our lions in the Rietvlei Game Reserve. Sadly these lions have now been poached for their head, paws and bones! We also provided a mate for a lone male lion at the Pretoria Zoo, who has since then also had a litter of her own. We also provide lions for previously disadvantaged BEE game reserve farmers who have been sponsored by the government to start their own reserves.

Be proactive, be aware, be kind - to both human and animal.