

BIG GAME CORNER

Photos: Christine Bothma

This male lion has rallied the four lionesses into a tribe and is breeding successfully, with over 13 cubs raised. All lions were bred in captivity and released into an almost 30 000 ha area to roam free.

UNTOLD SUCCESS STORY OF THE WATERBERG LIONS

Conservation

One of the biggest arguments in the huge captive-bred lion (CBL) debacle since the curtains have closed on the year 2015 is that these lions, ultimately bred for the bullet, cannot survive in the wild once relocated. With the tremendous costs involved in releasing lions into an area where they need to catch prey in order to survive, it was nearly impossible to get any kind of data or to do any studies. In addition to this, the majority of the parties involved believe that these lions just will not


survive after having been raised in an enclosed area. Until one outfitter and game rancher decided to do something about it. He got the ball rolling together with a land owner of a huge concession in the Limpopo Province next to the Matlabas River. He donated one male and four female lions for release into the nearly 30 000 ha area. Now the proof would be in the pudding with regard to the argument that captive-bred lions cannot fend for themselves in the wild. STEFAN FOUCHÉ and HENNIE

VAN DER WALT from *GAME & HUNT* magazine were invited to Limpopo Province to experience first-hand what it is all about.


It was late afternoon when we arrived at Tienie and Ananja Bamberger's place between Ellisras (also known as Lephalale) and Vaalwater, home of Warthog Safaris. I was accompanied by Pieter van Zyl, who was then on the Exco of Sapa (South African Predator Association). Around a relaxing campfire that evening, the conversation was a bit

different to the usual. No hunting boots this time, so dressed in shorts, we were discussing what the next day would hold for us. Tienie would accompany us to the property relatively close to his to look for a pride of lions that had been released in 2016. We would locate the lions with the help of tracking devices they were fitted with. Once found, we would approach them on foot to get close enough to take some pictures.

Early the next morning, we were up and on our way to find the pride of captive-bred lions that were released into a huge area with no hunting or survival skills whatsoever. Keep in mind that these lions were bred on a ranch in an enclosure, so they were effectively left to fend for themselves once released. This is one of the favourite arguments of the ♦♦



Tienie Bamberger from Warthog Safaris – ranch owner, professional hunter, outfitter and Sapa member



One of the four released, captive-bred lionesses with her cubs playing in the thick Limpopo bushveld

so-called green movements or anti-hunters: These cats, bred for the hunting industry (just like blesbuck, sable, buffalo, etc), cannot fend for themselves. To release and hunt them – irrespective of the government's criteria regarding the release period, size of the hunting area, etc – is just not fair because these lions will not be able to survive in the wild. According to the greenies, it is cruel as these cats will be unable to catch food to survive.

Well, without trying to sugar-coat the story, let's get to the facts. These lions were bred on a farm more than 800 km from where they were released. The male and females were all mature, not specially bred or prepped for this programme. They were random lions

chosen from a breeding programme and were released without any notice. They were not taught how to catch or eat live prey. They were raised in an enclosed area and depended on humans for food to survive. Tienie knows lions. As owner and fulltime PH of Warthog Safaris, he has hunted many lions over the past decades. He believes that the instinct of a lion is such that it will never lie under a tree and wait to starve, even if it has been raised in captivity. This is the exact reason he and fellow lion breeder, Nico Breedt, donated the cats – to show the world that these magnificent creatures would indeed be able to survive in the wild once relocated.


The importance of this project was not just to prove that captive-bred lions would be able to survive. There was a

much bigger element, namely the fact that captive-bred lions would be able to maintain the wild African lion population, should the need arise. Poaching, tuberculosis and habitat loss are but a few threats facing wild lion populations. This is undoubtedly also the reason for their steady decline, especially outside South Africa's borders where land is not privately owned.

We teamed up with the managers of the property and spent some time in the early-morning sun, chatting with them. We bombarded them with all kinds of questions: how frequently these lions hunted, what kind of prey they prefer, and the run-of-the-mill 'survival'-type of questions. Upon asking one of the most important questions, we were stunned by the answer. "Do you think



***The guys trying to locate the pride of lions for the visiting GAME & HUNT team
Wild Media Productions are busy with a documentary on captive-bred lions, which will be released later in this year.***



One of the cubs born from the captive-bred, adult lions donated by Tienie and Nico to this project

these lions will be able to reproduce?" The answer followed swiftly: "Yes, because they already have." We were so eager to see this that the Q&A session immediately ended and we began searching until we located the lions. The guys took our photographer, Christine Bothma, as close to the cats as was safely possible, where they were relaxing in the shade. They could clearly see the cubs and although the bush was quite thick, she was able to take some pictures for our article. After just a few minutes and a couple of photographs, the team retreated and let the lions go about their business. We counted 13 cubs – what a sight!

Remember, these adult cats were raised separately and yet out there they actually formed their own pride. To be able to breed in a brand-new environment just shows how strong their natural instincts are. This does not just apply to survival but surely has an effect when hunting them as well. When you talk to guys like Tienie and numerous other outfitters that hunt these cats for what they really are, they will tell you exactly that – these are not tame lions. They are so unpredictable, it's unreal. I have first-hand experience of this, and although I have only hunted four lions, I can definitely confirm that hunting them is no walk in the park; every lion behaves differently to the rest. Once released into an open area and instinct kicks in, they are as wild as lions can be – evading the hunter, using their senses and trying their best to evade and outwit any hunter. But confront them and they will stand their ground, defending themselves when necessary.

So this is the untold story of the Waterberg lions – raised in



captivity and then released into the wild, surviving and, best of all, reproducing. A hunting topic can really stir up the emotions and this one is no exception. Nevertheless, one has to see some value in this, taking into consideration the value these lions add to their ever-declining population. And let's be honest, the only way to sustain this industry is with hunters' dollars. If done right and conducting hunts in the correct manner, this is an exciting and sustainable way of having lions around for many more years to come. 🦏



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