

Rescued circus lions take first steps on African veld

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Newly arrived African lions play in an enclosure as lions, that were bred in captivity and held in circuses in South America, are prepared to be released at Emoya Big Cat Sanctuary on May 1, 2016 in Vaalwater, South Africa

Thirty-three lions rescued from circuses in Peru and Colombia set paw on the African veld for the first time Sunday after an epic journey by plane and truck.

The lions roared in unison as they arrived shortly after dawn at their new home on the 5,000 hectare Emoya Big Cat Sanctuary in the north of South Africa, where they will live out their lives.

Among the first out of their crates were brothers Junior and Bumbo from Columbia, who came out cautiously, sniffing the trees and grass and marking their territory.

After ambling up and down the fences of their enclosure, they charged playfully at each other and rolled in the dust.

"I am so grateful to have them here finally, it's a dream come true," said Savannah Heuser, 19, who runs the sanctuary with her mother.

"They have had a long journey but they are surprisingly calm. Some of them were agitated during the trip and they have some minor injuries, but nothing serious."

The lions arrived at Johannesburg's international airport late on Saturday afternoon after flying for more than 15 hours in what is believed to be the biggest airlift of its kind, and were driven through the night to Emoya.

"They have lived a life of absolute hell. They've been beaten and they've been starved," Jan Creamer, the president of Animal Defenders International (ADI), an animal rights charity that organised the flight, told reporters at the airport.



An African lion is seen in a cage as lions, that were born in captivity and held in circuses in South America, arrive at the OR Tambo International Airport on April 30, 2016 in Johannesburg, South Africa

"They've been deprived of everything that makes life worth living for a lion. I believe we have brought them back to paradise, where they belong," she said.

ADI posted a picture on their Facebook page of a Colombian lion shortly after arriving at Emboya.

"Iron enjoys what is clearly a very satisfying rub against a tree, his first ever," the caption reads.

The lion enclosures are set in a clearing among natural bush and veld, each with trees, rocks, a hay bale and water filled troughs.

"The [lion](#) habitats will be steadily expanded over the coming months as the lions become familiar with their new life and are introduced to each other," said ADI.

The lions were bred in captivity and many have broken teeth or other ailments—one is almost blind, another has lost an eye and most had their claws removed—which would make it impossible for them to survive in the wild.

The lions were freed with the assistance of the authorities after the use of wild animals in circuses was outlawed in Peru and Colombia.

Twenty-four lions rescued in Peru then were driven from their temporary rescue centre to Lima airport to be picked up by a cargo plane that had brought another nine over from Colombia before taking off for Africa.

"The lions will be in their natural habitat for the first time in their lives," Creamer said. "They should fit right into that habitat. It's the best environment for them."

They will be fed game meat for their first meal at Emoya, which is already home to six rescued lions and two tigers.

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