

Lions are still being farmed in South Africa for hunters and tourism. They shouldn't be, say researchers

June 30 2023, by Neil D'Cruze and Jennah Green



Lions at a commercial facility in South Africa. Credit: Bloodlions

A man [was arrested](#) at the OR Tambo International Airport in

Johannesburg, South Africa, on 23 June 2023 with five lion carcasses in his luggage. He was about to board a flight to Vietnam, where the [use of lion bones](#) in traditional medicines is practiced.

The seizure is commendable but highlights South Africa's controversial legal industry of breeding lions in captivity. Wildlife researchers Neil D'Cruze and Jennah Green, who [have studied lion farming](#) in South Africa, share their insights into the industry and explain why it should be shut down.

Why are lions being farmed?

Lions have been intensively farmed for commercial purposes in South Africa since [the 1990s](#).

These [wild animals](#) are exploited as entertainment attractions for tourists, like cub petting and "[walk with lions](#)" experiences. Others are used for "[canned](#)" [trophy hunting](#), where the [lion](#) is hunted in an enclosed space, with no chance of escape.

They are also used for traditional medicine both in [South Africa](#) and [internationally](#), where their [body parts](#), particularly their bones, are exported to Asia. They're used as ingredients in traditional Asian medicine, such as "[wines](#)" and [tonics](#). These would usually contain tiger bone, but lion bones are [being used as a substitute](#).

They're also [sold live](#).

What does the lion farming industry look like?

According [to official records](#) in 2019, around 8,000 lions are being held in over 350 facilities in South Africa. In contrast, the current wild

population in the country is estimated to be about [3,500 lions](#).

Some farms also breed [other big cats](#), including tigers, cheetahs, leopards, jaguars and hybrids.

The exact number of lions and other species on commercial "lion farms" across South Africa, however, is unknown. The industry has [never been fully audited](#) and not all farms are officially registered. In addition, corruption and a lack of proper [record-keeping](#) make it difficult for authorities to manage the industry and ensure facilities comply with the law.

How is the industry regulated?

A major problem is how the lion farming industry is being regulated in South Africa.

At a national level, governance of this industry has fallen under a patchwork of legislation including the [National Environmental Management: Biodiversity Act](#) and regulations around [threatened or protected species](#). With national and provincial concurrence, the regulation of the industry falls to the provincial nature conservation authorities.

But, as there is no centralized national system, transparency and enforcement is difficult. This results in gray areas that cloud the legality of the industry and its associated activities, contributing to [confusion and noncompliance throughout](#).

Likewise, at an international level, [lion bone exports are regulated](#) under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). But the industry has been under scrutiny since 2019, when a [high court in South Africa declared](#) the lion bone export

quota unconstitutional—due in large part to [animal welfare concerns](#).

Consequently, since that time, the CITES export quota [has been deferred](#), resulting in a "zero quota." This means that lion skeletons cannot be legally exported for commercial purposes. And any subsequent exports originating from lion farms are illegal.

Why is this industry a problem?

Lion farming in South Africa is controversial.

The industry has been [estimated by some](#) to contribute up to R500 million (US\$42 million) annually to the South African economy. However, in 2021 a [high level report](#) compiled by relevant experts (including traditional leaders, lion farmers and scientists) highlighted that the industry posed a risk to [public health](#) (because of the potential transmission of [zoonotic disease](#) and [lion attacks](#)), "does not contribute meaningfully to the conservation of wild lions," and was tarnishing the country's reputation with "political and economic risks."

This led to the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment [announcing its intention](#), which cabinet later adopted, to immediately halt the "domestication and exploitation of lions, and to ultimately close all captive lion facilities in South Africa."

But nothing has changed. The captive breeding and canned hunting of lions has continued.

What should be done about the industry?

The minister's public announcement of South Africa's intention to stop lion farming was a defining development regarding this controversial

industry and its future. However, in late 2022, a [ministerial task team](#) was asked to "develop and implement a voluntary exit strategy for captive lion facilities." This was the first time the word "voluntary" had been used in public government communications on this issue. It raised serious questions about whether the government was wavering in its stated intention to end commercial captive lion breeding.

It is highly doubtful whether a voluntary phasing out alone can halt the commercial exploitation of lions and establish a process to close lion farms as recommended in the high level panel report. Instead, it should only be considered as an initial step. [There should be a strategy](#) which includes a mandatory time bound termination of the lion farming industry in its entirety.

Until then, to aid [enforcement agencies](#) and their efforts, lion farms should be required to stop breeding more lions and stop their canned hunting operations.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Lions are still being farmed in South Africa for hunters and tourism. They shouldn't be, say researchers (2023, June 30) retrieved 20 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-06-lions-farmed-south-africa-hunters.html>

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