

South Africa is to shut down captive lion farms—experts warn the plan needs a deadline

April 8 2024, by Neil D'Cruze, Angie Elwin and Jennah Green



South Africa's captive lion trade will be shut down. Credit: Roberto Vieto/World Animal Protection

The South African government has [officially confirmed](#) that captive lion farms will be shut down. A new ministerial task team report just released has cemented the government's intention, [first made public in 2021](#), to put an end to African lions being legally sold and traded live, both internationally and domestically.

It also heralds the end of ["canned" trophy hunting](#), where lions are confined to an enclosed space and hunted down, with no chance of escape.

We are wildlife researchers who [have studied lion farming](#) in South Africa. We believe that this latest development is a [significant milestone](#) in ending this controversial industry and provides some clarity on the next steps.

However, we are concerned that the government has not yet provided any definitive deadlines for closing down the industry. The government is also suggesting that "canned" hunts will be allowed to continue during an undefined phasing out period. We outline why a deadline is urgently required.

Why lion farming is being shut down

The ministerial task team's decision came after [years of objections](#) by conservationists and researchers about the substandard conditions and the unregulated nature of the commercial lion farming industry. Captive lions on farms often [live in filthy](#), overcrowded enclosures and in conditions that fail to meet their basic hygiene, diet and veterinary needs.

The [export of lion bones](#) originating from lion farms has been [illegal](#)

since 2019. This followed a [high court ruling](#) in which the export quota—the maximum number of lion skeletons that could be legally exported—was declared unconstitutional based on animal cruelty concerns.

Illegal and unethical activities associated with the industry were also a factor which led a team of traditional leaders, lion farmers and scientists to conclude in a [high-level panel report released in 2020](#) that captive lion farming was tarnishing the country's reputation. This report added that the trade threatened South Africa's global standing as a leader in the conservation of wildlife and as a country and destination with iconic wild lions.

Since 2022, a task team formed by the minister of forestry, fisheries and the environment has been looking for ways to close captive lion facilities.

A promising decision for lions

We're hopeful about the [new ministerial report](#) because it confirms that in the long run it will be compulsory for lion farms to close down.

The report is also helpful because it details different options. It gives specific advice on how to take care of healthy lions and stop them from breeding during the phasing out period. It also talks about how to humanely euthanise sick or injured lions and safely dispose of their bodies.

The report also outlines how it intends to use private sector funds to buy up lion bone stockpiles before destroying them. This is likely to be good news for many conservationists and animal welfare advocates who were worried that exporting lion bones might increase demand in Asia for illegally obtained lion parts.

Another positive aspect of the report is that it acknowledges the risks of releasing captive bred lions into the wild, like the danger of them attacking people or livestock and spreading diseases to wild lion populations. Instead of releasing them, the [report](#) suggests creating "safe havens" where healthy lions can live out their lives without breeding or interacting with humans, except for veterinary care.

The government must act with urgency

The government has realized that simply hoping lion farmers will stop on their own won't fix the problem. Now, they're saying it's crucial to make it compulsory to stop commercial captive lion breeding in South Africa. This is a big step forward.

However, it's a concern that the government still hasn't set a clear deadline for farmers to stop breeding lions commercially and participating in any lion related trade.

What's especially worrying is that the government supports a "trade out exit" plan. This means that instead of being directly compensated for closing down their farms, the captive lion farmers will still be allowed to sell "canned" hunting and trade domestically in live lions, their skeletons, and other lion products while the industry is being phased out.

Without firm deadlines, it is not clear how long lions will continue to suffer in poor conditions. During the phase out period, legal trade could act as a cover for criminal activities, and these facilities will remain a threat to public health and safety. Urgent action is needed to rectify this.

In the coming years, we'll see how challenging it is for a country to shut down a long standing, mostly unregulated industry like commercial captive [lion](#) breeding. This will be an important example for other countries considering starting or stopping similar industries with wild

animals.

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