



BORN TO *be* KILLED *ed*

They call it canned hunting.

Animals are bred and raised in captivity until they are mature enough to be killed by trophy hunters. This way a kill can be guaranteed at no danger to the shooter. It is almost like going into your own backyard and shooting Spot, the family dog.

Especially when it comes to lions, canned hunting provides those with the monetary means a guaranteed risk-free opportunity to add the head of the king of the beasts to his or her trophy wall.

Disgusting

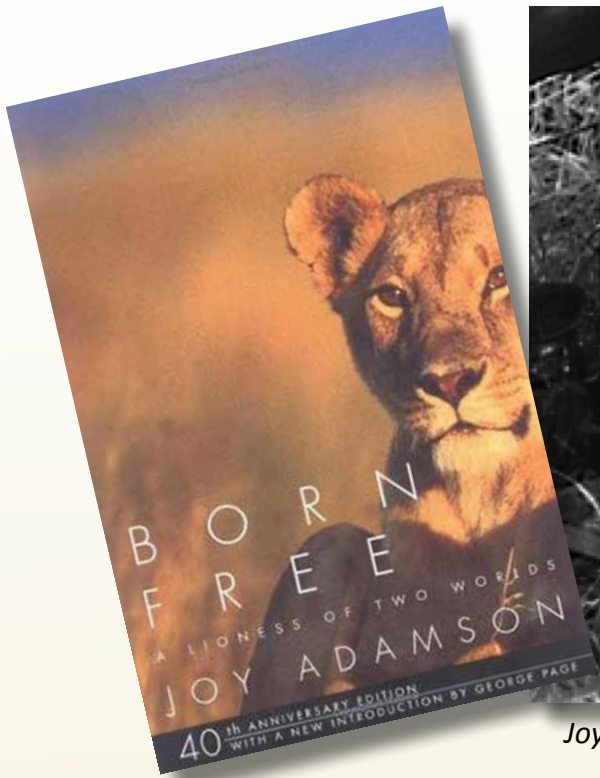
Disgusting. This is the first thought that springs to my mind as a former hunter who nowadays finds much greater pleasure shooting with a camera. *(By the way, I took the picture above in the wild at Duba Plains in Botswana's Okavango Delta. These cubs were lucky enough to grow up fending for themselves in nature without being fenced in to await execution as adults by trophy seekers with fat wallets).*

Don't get me wrong. I am definitely not against hunting *per se*. Growing up in a farming district in the Karoo region of South Africa, I was introduced to my first rifle lesson at the tender age of eight. Hunting was as much a rite of passage as horse riding and rugby.

In the wilds of Africa, kudu, eland, gemsbok, topi and a number of other antelopes are, in my view, fair game as long as there is an abundance of them and the hunt is designed to provide meat, skins and other usable by-product.

My hunting days came to an end quite some time ago when I simply could not pull the trigger with a mature kudu bull in my sight. I fired a shot in the air, sold my rifles and purchased my first good camera. Since then I have shot many miles of film and more recently with the ascent of digital photography I enjoy the luxury of sorting through thousands of images after every safari.

However, those who condemn **all** hunting and hunters, should be reminded that if it weren't for responsible hunters with the foresight to conserve, we would not have had much in the way of national parks and conservancies in Africa or the United States. In the 1880s Paul Kruger, a hunter and president of the Transvaal Republic, set aside a territory larger than Denmark for animal conservation—today's Kruger National Park. Tanzania's Selous Game Reserve, arguably the largest in Africa, is named after the famous hunter, Frederick Selous, who made it happen. Selous' friend and hunting companion in East Africa, President Theodore (Teddy) Roosevelt, established most of the



Joy Adamson with Elsa who made it back to the wild and into stardom

national parks in the United States. Prince Philip, who served as president of the World Wildlife Fund, was an avid hunter in his younger days.

Although this has never appealed to me, I can somehow understand how the hunters of yesteryear without the luxury of scopes and long-range precision rifles found the pursuit of big cats in the wild exciting. Read their accounts and you get it. Their pursuit contained an element of mortal danger that made the adrenaline flow. Especially the hunt of man-eating lions made sense.

This is what hunters refer to as “fair chase” and a far cry from canned hunting.

Abomination

“While ‘canned hunting’ is an overtly derogatory term, it’s hardly dirty enough to properly describe the horrific activity, since the contract execution of captive animals involves no real hunting at all. Zero,” writes outdoorsman David Peterson. “Rather, practitioners of this abomination buy their so-called ‘success’ and ‘trophies’ in advance with ‘No kill, no pay’ contracts.”

“As an ethical hunter, the canned-killing perversion leaves me sick and embarrassed. As an American, it makes me hang my head in shame,” says Peterson.

Also Jim Posewitz, hunter, retired Montana wildlife biologist, and founder of *Orion: The Hunter’s Institute*, strongly condemns canned hunting. It “is killing and

nothing more. The worst thing it does is to trivialize the value of wild animals. A fenced shoot is just the sale of a fabricated image to people who have neither the skill nor the inclination to obtain the real thing. It’s a threat not only to real hunting, but to our whole concept of wildlife conservation.”

“To be fair, not all canned killers are perverts; many are merely pathetic, self-deluded losers and pretenders,” says Peterson.

Leader Breeder

My country of birth, South Africa, that has been and still is a leader in wildlife conservation, unfortunately has now also become a leader in the business of canned lion hunting. It is lucrative. There is no shortage of clients from abroad who are willing to pay between \$20,000 and \$40,000 for a single lion trophy.

At latest count there are in South Africa 160 farms that breed big cats—lions, leopards, cheetah and even non-indigenous tigers—to be put up for execution at high ransom. An estimated 5,000 lions are held in captivity on these farms, far exceeding the number roaming free in the country’s game reserves and national parks.

According to *National Geographic* explorer Dereck Joubert there were close to a half a million lions in Africa only fifty years ago. Today there are between 16,000 and 23,000. Yet, unlike the far more abundant



Melissa Bachman with lion trophy—a picture that led to an avalanche of abuse and protest signatures

elephants, lions have no protection under international wildlife accords.

Counter arguments

In their own defense owners of canned hunting farms claim that they are in fact bolstering the lion population by breeding the animals and assigning only some of them for slaughter. Not unlike cattle farming, they argue, where the meat is utilized after the trophy hunters made their kill—either as food for the locals or simply as a carcass for dogs to feast on. The skin has a market too, they point out.

Sometimes lion bones find their way to the Far East as a convenient substitute for the bones of tigers in potions or “tiger wine” to boost vitality and virility. (Trade in tiger parts is banned as the animal was declared a threatened species while lions have yet to be placed on the list).

According to lion breeders, the same critics who condemn them have no objection against the large-scale slaughter of farm-bred live-stock for their meat and skins. And where, they ask, is the outcry against canned shoots of antelope that are also bred for profit on hunting farms?

Demeans

All of these arguments skirt the main issue. In the words of Jim Posewitz it “is just the sale of a fabricated image to people who have neither the skill nor the

inclination to obtain the real thing.” It demeans not only these majestic cats but hunting and hunters as well. It is nothing more than a license to kill creatures reared in captivity, cuddled and nurtured to trust humans—not nearly as dangerous as their wild counterparts.

Writes Kevin Richardson in a guest editorial on *National Geographic’s* website: “To think that lions were once revered by people around the world and thought of as ‘The King of Beasts’—represented on coats of arms, adorning family crests and crowns of kings, present in statue form in almost every city around the world and represented as the national animal in no less than 13 countries—are now being farmed like battery chickens for slaughter. Excepting in this instance, it’s not even for food but as a trophy that is a result of nothing other than a sick form of self gratification or indulgence and greed.”

A growing number of lion breeding farms have discovered that there is extra money to be made by offering paying visitors the opportunity to cuddle the cubs and walk with young lions before they reach maturity. It has been claimed that some of these cubs are destined to be reintroduced to the wild to boost the dwindling population out there.

Since the sixties when Joy Adamson’s cub Elsa mesmerized the world with her return to the wild in a widely acclaimed book, *Born Free*, that resulted in a block-buster movie, there has been little success in reintroducing pet lions to the wild. It is much more likely that most of these cubs who start out walking with humans end up as trophies to symbolize the “bravery” of the very humans that they once befriended and trusted.

Avalanche of Abuse

Recently, an American TV personality, Melissa Bachman, who describes herself as the “ultimate huntress” was engulfed by an avalanche of abuse for posting a picture of herself with a lion shot at a farm in South Africa. Thousands signed a petition to ban her from ever returning to South Africa.

While she unwittingly served to bring this unfortunate practice to the fore, it is unlikely that banning her from future “hunts” is going to make much of a difference. There are plenty of other aspiring “big game hunters” with plenty of money, itching to make their dream come true without risk to life or limb—and 160 farms ready to facilitate.

Unless we can shame these clients into resisting the temptation to participate in canned killing, it will continue. Sounds familiar? In an effort to stop poaching we are also trying to convince consumers of rhino horn in the Far East that they are misguided in their belief that it cures everything from cancer to ingrown toenails.

To date the success of diminishing the demand for rhino horn, or for that matter ivory tusks, has been minimal. But it is worth making every effort to shrink the demand either by education or regulation.

It should be noted that South Africa is not the only country that offers canned hunting. It is also available elsewhere in the world, including the United States. At present canned hunting is either banned or restricted in only twenty of fifty states. In 2007 a bill in the New York State Legislature to ban canned hunting of certain "exotic" animals was defeated by legislative inaction.

I am proudly displaying a lion on the logo of my safari operation in deference to the king of beasts. Hopefully my logo will never go the way of the dodo.



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Above, I am holding a cub bred in captivity and on the right is one of many pictures taken by me of a cub in the wild. I do not know what happened to the cub in captivity. Neither do I know what the fate was of the one in the wild. But I am certain that he did not face a "hunter" with a precision rifle in an enclosure, ending up as an expensive trophy on a wall.



Picture: Les de Villiers