

Southern African Feline Focus (SAFF)

Quarterly Briefing



Richard Peirce

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Welcome

Welcome to the third issue of SAFF (Southern African Feline Focus).

In Roman times lions ranged throughout the African continent, across the Middle East and throughout Asia to India, and even into southeastern Europe. The Romans hunted lions for sport and transported large numbers of animals to amphitheatres throughout their empire for various entertainment purposes. Perhaps not very entertaining if one was a gladiator or a Christian! This period of the widespread catching of lions resulted in local extinctions or large reductions in numbers in the affected areas.

Modern man has done a great job of emulating the Romans. Lion populations are thought to have declined by up to 75% in the last 50 years, from about ninety thousand in the early 1970s to between twenty and twenty-five thousand today. The Southern African Feline Focus reflects continuing pressure and decline. So far in our first two Briefings we have listed 41 events/news items. Of these many items could not be neatly classified as being positive or negative, but of those that could 12 could be considered positive for southern Africa's cats, and 18 negative. SAFF acknowledges that in some cases classifying these events can be a matter of opinion, nevertheless by any measure the negatives outweigh the positives which illustrates that in terms of big cat conservation we haven't come far since Roman times.

To access the information sources referred to readers should click on the [orange headlines](#) for each entry.

January 16th 2026: [POACHING FOR LION BODY PARTS COULD LEAD TO LOCAL EXTINCTIONS](#)

Writing in the Mail and Guardian Sheree Bega reported on research conducted by the Endangered Wildlife Trust, the Mammal Research Institute (University of Pretoria), the Wildlife Conservation Research Unit (Oxford University), Panthera and African Parks. The research clearly identified that there is an ever-increasing demand for lion body parts from both within Africa and from Asia. The demand has led to targeted poaching for body parts increasing both in frequency and geographic spread across the continent.

January 19th 2026: **TARGETED LION POACHING**

Citing the same research referred to above Don Pinnock in the Daily Maverick underlines in detail the potentially existential threat to Africa's lion populations from targeted body part poaching.



January 21st 2026: **REGIONAL MAMMAL RED LIST**

The 2025 Mammal Red List of South Africa, Lesotho, and Eswatini categorised leopards, Black-footed cats and cheetahs as vulnerable, with leopard and Black-footed cat populations continuing to follow downward trends.

January 28th 2026: **CUB PETTING CRUELTY IS ALIVE AND WELL!**

That lion and other big cat cub petting is cruel, exploitative, based on deception and serves no useful purpose other to enrich those involved is the opinion of those opposed to this type of tourism 'industry'. Those who hoped that this industry was decreasing will be disappointed to read this interview with Nina Jackel (Lady Freethinker) in the Daily Maverick which makes clear that cub petting is alive and well.



6 February 2026: GARETH PATTERSON DIES AT HOME

This piece from the Knysna-Plet Herald reports the death of Gareth Patterson. SAFF is a fact-based listing of noteworthy events, developments and news. I hope readers will indulge me if I write a few personal lines about Gareth who was a friend:

"I first met Gareth in 2017 when I was researching my book Cuddle Me, Kill Me. Following that first meeting I visited him whenever I was in his area. A student of George Adamson Gareth, together with Tony Fitzjohn, learned from Adamson how to teach once captive lions to live in the wild. Best known for his work with lions Gareth must also be remembered for his exhaustive studies in the Knysna Forest on the remaining Knysna elephant(s). Gareth was a committed conservationist with a deep love of Africa's fauna and flora. In 1991 Roger Cook's British TV programme Making a Killing was the first big media event exposing the lion breeding industry. Gareth's involvement led to credible death threats and this and other stresses seriously impacted his health. Gareth was a gentle, kind, considerate and principled man. Africa and its wild animals are poorer for his loss."
Richard Peirce



February 6th 2026: NEW HUNTING QUOTAS

The new Minister of Forestry, Fisheries & Environmental Affairs, Willie Aucamp, announced his intention to set hunting quotas for elephants, leopards and black rhinos.

Note: See the 21 January Regional Mammal Red List item earlier in this Briefing. Leopards are classified as vulnerable with many populations following downward trends.

February 6th 2026: LIGHT SHONE ON CARACAL BEHAVIOUR

In a recently published research paper Anna Gray of the University of Rhode Island published the results of her research into how caracal behaviour is influenced by artificially lit areas in the Cape Peninsula.

February 7th 2026: LIONS NOW OCCUPY ONLY 6% OF THEIR ORIGINAL RANGE

In an article published in the Ugandan Monitor Trevor Lutalo reports on the collapse of lion range states and the increasing pressures faced by dwindling populations. Lions now only occupy about 6% of their original range on the continent of Africa.

February 9th 2026: NEW GLOBAL CONSERVATION NGO

Former South African Minister of Forestry, Fisheries and Environmental Affairs, Dr Dion George is to head up the Conservation Trust which is a new global NGO with offices in Washington, London, Brussels and Tokyo. The Conservation Trust is a not for profit think tank dedicated to educating policy makers globally about wildlife conservation, conducting policy research, and combating illegal wildlife trade. The organisation will work as a think tank delivering a range of programmes to further conservation around the world.

February 17th 2026: SOUTH AFRICAN CHEETAHS FOR ZOO IN INDIA?

The Times of India reports that the government of the State of Odisha is looking to South Africa to supply cheetahs for Nandankanan Zoo.

February 19th 2026: LION DNA WORLD FIRST - A SUCCESSFUL POACHER PROSECUTION IN ZIMBABWE

Angus Crawford from BBC News Investigations reports that lion DNA has been used successfully to identify and prosecute poachers in Zimbabwe. Two Poachers were convicted for an incident which happened in 2024. Both men received jail sentences in what is believed to be the first successful prosecution of its kind using lion DNA.

February 19th 2026: AUCAMP CLASH WITH PROVINCES?

A parliamentary committee report which moves towards implementing reforms to the captive lion industry was adopted by the National Council of Provinces. This may result in a clash with Willie Aucamp the recently appointed Minister of Forestry, Fisheries and Environmental Affairs.

February 20th 2026: ROAD KILL, ANOTHER LEOPARD

In a post on Facebook the Landmark Leopard and Predator Project reported that a leopard was killed on the 20th February on the Huisriver Pass road.

Editors Note: In the last SAFF Briefing (No. 2) we reported that a leopard had been killed on the R40 near the Oliphants West Gate. This death brought to 6 the number of leopards killed on that stretch of road in less than 2 years.



Image used from Landmark Leopard & Predator Project - South Africa's Facebook page

February 24th 2026: **SUCCESSFULLY REDUCING HUMAN WILDLIFE CONFLICT IN BOTSWANA**

Gloria Dickie writes in Mongabay that an initiative by Communities Living Sustainably Among Wildlife (CLAWS) is being very effective at reducing lions preying on cattle and is thereby reducing human wildlife conflict (HWC). A return to traditional cattle herding practices has reduced livestock predation and the retaliatory poisoning of lions that often resulted in the Okavango Delta



Image taken from Mongabay article: Credit - M. Atkinson, AHEAD

February 25th 2026: **MPUMALANGA PHASES OUT CAPTIVE LION BREEDING**

The Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Agency is phasing out captive lion breeding facilities in the province. No permits will be issued for the establishment of new captive breeding facilities, and for the importation of lions from other provinces.

February 26th 2026: **CAPE LEOPARDS GENETICALLY UNIQUE**

New research indicates that leopards in the Cape Floristic Region (Western Cape, part of the Eastern Cape and Northern Cape) are genetically unique. The research concludes that leopards of the Cape are genetically different from other African leopards. Cape leopards have been isolated from other leopards for a long time and have adapted to that one region.

March 3rd 2026: **DANA BAY CARACAL**

The Dana Bay Conservancy wildlife camera trap initiative started in July 2025 and is proving very successful. This piece in the Mossel Bay Advertiser reports on footage of a female caracal feeding on a Bushbuck kill for 4 successive nights. Several other interesting species have been also caught on camera.

March 4th 2026: **POLOKWANE WILDLIFE TRAFFICKING ARRESTS**

On 4 March police arrested 3 suspects who later appeared before the Polokwane Magistrates Court (PMC) charged with wildlife offences. 32-year-old Aubrey Mokalapa was found in possession of 3 leopard skins and one lion skin. The other 2 suspects faced different charges. All 3 individuals were granted bail of R10,000 each.

March 4th 2026: **LION FAECES STUDY BY WILLIAM AND MARY'S INSTITUTE FOR INTERGRATIVE CONSERVATION**

Heather Broughton (a wildlife scientist and veterinarian) and a group of students study lion faeces as a potential way of monitoring health issues.

March 10th 2026: LION BODY PART TRADE DRIVING INCREASED POACHING

A new study by Dr Samantha Nicholson of the Endangered Wildlife Trust further highlights the deliberate poaching of lions to satisfy the illegal trade in body parts. This ever-increasing threat has the potential to drive local population declines and possibly, in some areas, local extinctions.

March 11th 2026: VOI GAME LODGE 'DIAMOND KING' ARRESTED

Vietnamese national Chu Dang Khoa aka Michael Chu and the 'Diamond King' was arrested in South Africa. Khoa owns the notorious Voi Game Lodge in South Africa's Northwest Province through his Cape Town based trading company DKC Trading Company. His arrest follows the arrest of Ben Tran, and is also linked to the November Changi (Singapore) airport bust, and the December arrest of 2 Nigerians. Both of these previous events are covered in SAFF No. 2 released at the beginning of January.

Michael Chu and Ben Tran have been granted bail of R200,000 each in the Kempton Park Magistrates' Court. They were ordered to hand in their passports to the investigating officer, may not apply for any other travel documents, and must report to the Lyttelton Police Station once a week, according to the National Prosecuting Authority. The case was remanded until 8 June 2026.

March 16th 2026: EMPHATIC RESULTS IN INTERNATIONAL POLL ON LION BREEDING

An international poll produced conclusive results which showed that responders around the world not only supported the idea that bringing an end to captive lion breeding should happen, but they also believed that if the South African government back tracked on its commitment to end the commercial captive lion industry in South Africa further reputational damage would result. 77% believed the government should prioritise ending this industry, 70% said that if it did not happen it would deter them from visiting South Africa, and 69% warned of ongoing reputational damage. The data was released by Blood Lions and World Animal Protection. [Click on this link to read the report.](#)

March 17th 2026: AUCAMP BACK TRACKS, POLICY SHIFT

Recently appointed Environment Minister Willie Aucamp has signalled a shift in South Africa's wildlife policy which would reverse the freeze on trophy exports including lions, elephants, and black and white rhinos.

March 24th 2026: NATIONAL COUNCIL OF PROVINCES APPROVED THE DRAFT NOTICE BANNING CERTAIN ACTIVITY INVOLVING LIONS.

If it comes into effect the new ban will prohibit new facilities but not yet dismantle the existing structure of the captive lion breeding industry. Animal welfare and wildlife conservationists applauded the move but as reported earlier this may trigger a conflict with Minister Willie Aucamp who must gazette the prohibition notice without delay. Doubtless both sides with an interest in captive lion breeding will monitor developments closely.

Seeing Double

