

EIGHT

The Lion Farmer

Mandy and I were having dinner in a restaurant one night with some people we knew and others we'd met for the first time.

A woman I'd just been introduced to said to me from across the table, "I know you work with lions and I think it's wrong to keep them in captivity."

I could have got upset that someone I'd just met felt entitled to make such a sweeping statement, but I'm used to it. "What about cows?"

"Excuse me?" she said.

"Do you think it's wrong to keep cows enclosed on a farm? They're descended, way back, from wild animals that were domesticated."

She raised her nose a little and took on a look of understanding where I was coming from, mixed with superiority. "I'm a vegetarian and I don't agree with keeping animals for meat."

"That's a very nice leather strap you have on your watch," I said to her, then lifted the tablecloth and took a peek underneath. "And you have nice leather shoes, as well. I bet you have leather seats in

your car. Do you think it's wrong to farm cows for meat, but right to kill them for their skins?"

"That's irrelevant," she said, as people do when they think about things in a very closed-minded way. "Cows are kept for consumption, and even though I don't like it I can understand it, but lions aren't kept for consumption, they're kept to be shot by trophy hunters."

Certainly, no one is going to shoot any of my lions for sport, but I wanted to keep playing devil's advocate—at least until the main course arrived. "Okay," I continued, "if people ate lions would that make it okay to keep them?"

"No, they're predators."

"Why not? People farm crocodiles for their meat and their leather. If that's okay, why couldn't you farm a lion if you ate the meat and used its skin? That's consumption. Wouldn't that make it all right?"

"No."

"Oh," I said, leaning back in the chair, "so it's okay to keep and kill cows and crocodiles for meat and leather, but not lions. Is a cow worth less than a lion?"

She couldn't answer me. It's an argument that goes around and around in circles and one in which people have very set opinions, which don't always hold up to close scrutiny. People always like to categorize things and other people and this process usually involves a line they won't cross. Consciously or unconsciously, the woman in the restaurant had drawn a line between meat and leather. She thought it wrong to kill an animal for its meat, but okay to execute it for its skin. Odd. Following on from her logic, people who kept cows were all right, but people like me, who kept lions, were horrible. For the record I don't think it would be okay to farm lions for meat and skins as by products of the canned hunting industry, but I do think it's important for people to be challenged every now and again on their thinking processes. Even vegetarians who consume milk products are horrified to find out the welfare issues surrounding dairy farming and are even more horrified to discover that dairy

cows no longer producing milk around the age of five or so are slaughtered for meat.

When I thought about it, I realized that like everyone else in the world, I had my lines when it came to lions back then; however, my thinking changed as times changed, wild lion populations' numbers dropped, lions were being bred and slaughtered for the lion-bone trade, and rhinos were being poached at over three a day.

Like many other people in South Africa and subsequently around the world, I was shocked when our local *Carte Blanche* television current affairs program showed visuals of a lioness in a cage being shot during a canned hunt. I was working at the lion park at the time, developing my close bond with Tau and Napoleon. In the case in point, the lioness had been lured closer to the hunter by placing one of her cubs in a neighboring cage.

I cannot understand why someone would pick up a gun and shoot a lion simply because the animal has a big black mane. Nor can I understand why someone would shoot a magnificent kudu bull just because the antelope has a nice pair of long curly horns.

As someone who keeps lions and knows a thing or two about them, I started thinking about lion hunting, in the wild and on farms where the so-called canned hunts take place. This is an emotional issue, especially in Africa, but outside it as well. I'm not the sort of person who listens to conventional wisdom and takes the views of others as gospel. I never have been and so I decided the best way for me to make an informed judgment about lion hunting, and farms where lions were bred to be shot, was to go and see one of these places for myself.

I contacted the owner of a hunting lodge where they bred lions and he agreed to show me around. I won't say where in South Africa it was, but it was far enough from my home for me to justify flying myself there in a light aircraft.

I love flying, and I fly the way I interact with my lions. When there is someone else in the aircraft—just like when there are visitors watching me with my lions—I keep it toned down and conservative. I don't show off for people in front of my lions, or push their limits, and I take the same approach when I'm piloting an airplane. When I'm alone, however, it's a different story. When I'm flying solo, I'm never unsafe and I don't break the law, but I do enjoy myself. It was good to be airborne again, and the sun streamed into the cockpit as I passed over open plains of golden grass and the neat geometric circles and rectangles of cultivated fields. As my course took me farther into the heart of the country, the farmland gave way to more rugged country, hills and valleys covered in the gray-greens and khakis of the bush. Away from the tarred highways, graded dirt roads ran like red arteries back into the heart of Africa.

I checked the GPS and found the remote airstrip. Banking, I did a low-level pass over the airstrip to make sure there was no game grazing on the close-cropped grass.

The farmer who had agreed to host me was waiting for me, leaning against the warm side of his dusty Land Cruiser pickup, his eyes shaded by the brim of his bush hat, arms folded. I climbed down from the plane, took off my sunglasses and walked over. He was a young guy—younger than he'd sounded on the phone—but like most farmers I've met, his face and arms and legs were tanned from a life outdoors in the sun. His handshake was firm.

I threw my bag in the back of the Cruiser and as he drove me to the farm I asked Dirk, as I'll call him, how long he had been running the hunting farm.

"All my life. I was born to be a *leeu boer*," Dirk said, using the Afrikaans term for lion farmer, as he navigated along the corrugated road. "My father farmed lions and so did my grandfather. My father bought this farm many years ago. This is the only place I have ever lived."

“Why lions?” I asked him.

He shrugged and looked at me. “Why not? Like the man down the road on the next property breeds cows, my family breeds lions. We don’t see them like your Tau and Napoleon. For us the lions are commodities, not pets.

“Are you a hunter?” Dirk asked me.

“I like fly-fishing,” I said.

“Do you eat what you catch, or do you have the fish stuffed and mounted?”

“I mostly catch and release,” I said honestly, “and besides, the big ones taste like crap.” He smiled. “Hunting’s not for me, but I can understand why some people want to do it. A lot of people tell me it’s not right for me to go into the enclosures with my lions and that I’m domesticating them. They also say I’m creating the demand for people to want to rush out and get a pet lion.”

“I thought that since you love the lions so much you must be one of those bunny huggers that think they know everything,” Dirk said, as we neared the farm buildings.

“I’m not a hunter and I’m not a bunny hugger,” I assured him. “I’m probably somewhere in the middle.”

“What we do is not illegal, you know? This four-by-four *bakkie* that we’re driving in was paid for by lion farming and lion hunting. I pay my taxes like every other honest person.”

Dirk stopped near a high electrified fence, got out, and unlocked the gate, which he slid open. I got out and closed it behind the Land Cruiser as he drove through. Once inside the perimeter fence, we walked to the cages and I saw his lions.

At first I was horrified, and then I became angry. In cage after cage there were lions and lions and lions—more than I had ever seen in one place. I can’t remember how many there were—scores or maybe hundreds. They were mostly males, and varying ages, as this was obviously where the money was for trophies. I saw tiny cubs still

squeaking and squawking; youngsters that reminded me of Tau and Napoleon when I'd first met them; and two- and three-year-olds that did nothing to hide their anger and resentment as we walked past them. The biggest males, with dark manes, would be the next to die. The females were breeders, pure and simple, no different to hens on an egg farm. They also hold value for those wanting a cheaper trophy. Nowadays they have value in the lion-bone trade. What a life these poor cats must lead, I thought to myself.

We left the cages and drove back to the farmhouse. On the drive I thought about what I'd seen. I am an observer, and I had taken note of the conditions in the cages. The lions were well fed and watered and their cages were kept clean. I suppose the lion farmer kept things clean and orderly for the same reason I do—to keep my lions healthy and prevent the spread of flies. The adult males were in good health, and I imagined that a rich professional hunter from overseas would not want to shoot a mangy lion with his ribs showing, any more than a film or documentary-maker would want to see one of my lions in less than top condition,

As we drove through the gate to Dirk's home, I realized that if I had been looking at pigs or cows or chickens or goats instead of lions, I wouldn't have found anything wrong with this farm. These lions were not "free range" but neither were they being mistreated. Once I stopped thinking about how Tau and Napoleon would feel if they were penned in like Dirk's lions, with no enrichment or stimulation, and started thinking in the same way as I might judge domestic animals, my anger abated.

I wondered if Dirk might ever be persuaded to take up some other form of farming, but then I saw his two small sons playing in the garden. Each had a toy rifle and they were playing at shooting big game, stalking imaginary lions and leopards and buffalo.

"I've organized for you to go on a hunt, Kev. Are you still keen?" Dirk asked.

"Sure." I didn't know if I would have the nerve to watch a lion

being shot, but Dirk's client, a wealthy American businessman, would also be hunting other game on the farm.

That afternoon I climbed into the Land Cruiser and was introduced to Dirk's client. I looked around for a rifle, but didn't see one. "What are you going to shoot with?" The American drew a .44 Magnum pistol from a hand-tooled leather holster and proudly held it up for my inspection, its nickel-plated barrel glinting in the afternoon sun.

We left the farm and drove out into the bush. Dirk slowed the four-by-four and pointed off to the left. "Sable," he said quietly.

"Where?" the American asked.

While Dirk gave an indication of where it was I looked at the majestic creature. The sable is one of the most beautiful antelope on the planet. The males have a jet-black coat with white markings on their face and are quite striking, while the females are a rich red-brown. What makes the sable—the males in particular—so attractive to trophy hunters are their long curved horns. A sable can kill a lion with a backward thrust of his head, piercing his attacker with the sharp points.

"How much for that boy, Dirk?"

Dirk quoted a hefty figure in U.S. dollars and the deal was sealed.

Dirk drove closer, which surprised me, as I thought the hunter would want to get out of the vehicle and stalk the antelope on foot. Instead, we drove right up to the sable, which seemed accustomed to the sight of the vehicle. It had had a better life than the lions, roaming about in the bush of Dirk's farm, but its time was about to come.

The hunter—and I now use the term loosely—leaned back in his seat in the open rear of the vehicle, drew his pistol, took aim, and fired. *Blam, blam, blam, blam.*

He fired four shots into the black skin and although he hit the

sable with at least one, it wasn't dead. The sable started to run, though it was clearly in agony, thrashing about as it tried to escape the sudden terrible pain. Dirk took up his rifle, took aim through the telescopic sights, and squeezed the trigger. Mercifully, the sable dropped to the ground. Dirk, at least, knew what he was doing.

We drove to where it had fallen and the hunter lowered himself awkwardly to the ground, setting foot in the African dust for the first time that day. He waddled over to the sable, knelt by it, and lifted its head, posing for photographs as he proudly displayed his latest trophy.

As I watched this spectacle, I thought to myself, "You, sir, are not a hunter. You are a wanker."

After that little display, I decided to give the lion "hunt" a miss, although Dirk explained to me how it was going to work.

This wasn't your archetypal canned hunt that you may have seen on YouTube, as Dirk was not the sort of farmer who would let the hunter shoot one of his lions through the wire of its cage. By lion farmer standards he had acted ethically, releasing a large male lion into an area of a thousand hectares, forty-eight hours before the hunt was due to take place. These were the regulations in force at the time.

While this sounds like the lion might have a sporting chance, it doesn't work that way. If you release a lion that has lived in a small cage all its life into what is in effect just a larger enclosure, it is going to panic. He will run to the fence and once he reaches it he will keep running along the fence line. I suspect this is the reason why the media has been able to get film of lions being shot through fences. Whether the cage is four meters by four, or a thousand hectares, the lion will probably still be on the fence when it gets shot. The other thing that the lions do is "home." Lions have an incredible homing instinct and once fully recovered from the drugs (hence the

forty-eight-hour period), they will sometimes make their way back to where they came from. In other cases, farmers put a carcass deeper inside the enclosure and once they know the lion has found it, and started feeding, they drive or walk their client to where the action is happening, and say something like: “Check . . . this lion has made a kill! That shows you how wild it is. Let’s kill it now while it’s feeding!”

The same, I’m afraid, is true for a truly wild lion that has grown up in a finite area, such as a private game reserve. If the lion has been identified by the owners as suitable for hunting it is tracked and, figuratively, marked with an X. The reserve’s owners will know where to find it, and when the hunter arrives from overseas that lion doesn’t stand a sporting chance of escaping its fate. One must realize that lion hunts cost a lot of money and if the hunter doesn’t get his trophy, the farmer or landowner may not get paid, so it’s in everyone’s interest (except the lion’s) that the cat is marked, tracked, and offered for slaughter.

One of the many problems I have with lion farmers releasing a caged lion into a larger area is that the lion might not be killed with the first or even second shot. This then becomes an animal-welfare issue. The quickest and most humane way of killing an animal with a bullet, to my way of thinking, is a brain shot. However, lion hunters don’t want to shoot their quarry in the head because it ruins the trophy. Instead, they aim for the heart-lung area, which is also an efficient way to kill the animal, but is a difficult target to hit. Sometimes they need two or three shots to end it quickly. If the hunter makes a mess of the shot, then the wounded lion could easily hide himself inside the thousand-hectare enclosure and lie, in pain, for a couple of days until someone eventually finds him and finishes him off.

If I were a captive lion, bred on a lion farm to be killed, I think I would actually rather face my maker—or a rich American hunter—inside a four-meter by four-meter cage. At least it would be hard

for him to miss at that range and, besides, no matter the size of the enclosure, the lion doesn't stand a chance anyway.

After the media and public outcry over canned hunting, the environmental affairs minister in South Africa implemented more stringent measures to try to regulate the industry with a two-year rewilding period; however, the South African Predator Breeders Association took the minister to court and although initially lost the case, appealed and eventually won on the grounds that since captive lion breeding (and thereby their trophy hunting) was a "closed system" that had nothing to do with conservation, the minister had no jurisdiction. Lions in captivity were like farm animals, and therefore they did not need to be "rewilded," as they were never wild in the first place.

Lion farming and hunting is big business. A trophy hunter will pay about \$35,000 for a lion, so if a farmer only runs five hunts a year, he is still making serious money. The lion farm I visited probably employed about forty African people. When the minister announced the two-year rewilding principle, there was an outcry from African farmers who were breeding donkeys as food for the lion farms. A whole industry was under threat.

The debate about lion hunting is related to the management of lion populations on private game reserves. In many parts of South Africa, wealthy individuals are buying up former farmland and rehabilitating it as private nature reserves. Even if the owners of a game farm are opposed to hunting, the reality of managing animal numbers eventually confronts them. In an enclosed reserve there is only enough room for a finite number of animals. The people who have a problem with lion hunting rarely seem to have an issue with the culling of species such as impala or kudu or wildebeest. However, as the debate about elephant culling stirs the passionate emotions of environmentalists, so too does the issue of lion hunting. What happens, for example, on a private game reserve where too many lion

cubs are surviving to adulthood? Even a landowner who is opposed to hunting may be faced with the reality that it is far easier to shoot some of their lions—or have someone pay them for the privilege—than to go through the complicated processes of administering contraceptives to wild lions or darting and selling them to other reserves as live animals. Besides, there are few reserves that would purchase these lions, other than for hunting.

If you asked seven different people in South Africa to define “canned” hunting, you would get seven different answers. Some people say it comes down to the size of the enclosure, but whether it’s four, ten, or twenty square meters, or two hundred, fifteen hundred, or two thousand hectares, a finite space is a finite space. Other people will tell you that a lion is not canned if it is allowed to feed off wild prey. My reply to that is that if a farmer is buying wildebeest or allowing them to breed to provide food for his lions (and probably culling a few wildebeest when there are too many), then that lion is farmed and, by extension, canned if it is offered to hunters. My definition of canned hunting is simply a lion that is purpose-bred and/or is constrained either psychologically and/or physically and/or has no chance of evading the hunter.

Previously my thinking was that if the practice were humane and well regulated, then one could present an argument for it; however, we know that many lions live miserable lives in captivity in inadequate conditions in unnatural social groups with, sometimes, up to forty male lions in a camp. We also know that the captive-bred lion industry is now negatively impacting wild lion populations, whereby lions are being smuggled across porous borders of countries like Botswana to mitigate captivity gene depression. Furthermore lions are now being bred specifically to supply the lion-bone trade to Asia. Again, this raises welfare issues, as now the farmer doesn’t even care about the health and welfare of the lion because it’s all about the bones. This opens up a new market for sub-adults and females that wasn’t there in 2009.

There is another issue that I have with canned hunting that I think anyone with a pet will understand: lions that are hand-raised by human beings and then shot as trophies later in life. My dog, Valentino, is a beautiful example of a Staffordshire terrier, but if one day hunters decided they wanted to hunt Staffies as trophy animals, there is no way I would accept any amount of money, no matter how large, to let someone shoot him. Why? Because I raised him from a pup and he has become part of the family. I couldn't live with myself if I allowed someone to hunt and kill him. That would be taking blood money.

It is the same with Tau and Napoleon. I had offers for their heads. Tau is getting old now and in a year or two he'll most likely die of age-related illnesses, as Napoleon did in 2014. But that doesn't mean that I could or would suddenly decide to make money out of selling Tau to be slaughtered, although many tell me he's going to die soon anyway and I could get \$15,000 or more for him. Napoleon was a part of my family and Tau still is. I am a part of his. I have shared things with those two lions that I haven't shared with people. I've ridden with them in the back of a truck most of the way from Johannesburg to Cape Town just to make sure they were all right.

Previously I mentioned that in South Africa we have around two hundred registered lion-breeding facilities. One of the real issues that hasn't ever been dealt with is that despite it being legal to shoot captive-bred lions or "canned" lions in South Africa, it shouldn't be legal to be able to continue hoodwinking the paying public as to what happens to the lion cubs they pet once they get too old. They should be told the truth and then given the opportunity to decide whether or not to go ahead and pet the cub. If they then choose to do so, it's their choice and they have to reconcile their inner conflicts, if they actually even have any, because I've found from experience that there are many people around the world who don't care about the ultimate destiny of the cub but rather about their own

self-indulgent agenda and getting that selfie with a lion cub ticked off their bucket list.

When it comes to hunting lions in the wild, some people may be surprised to learn that I had no problem with this concept in theory; however, especially these days, in practice, it's simply not a sustainable activity, as the number of old ousted male lions that have long surpassed their usefulness are simply very few and far between, and the money that is meant to go back into conservation from these hunts doesn't.

Truly professional and ethical hunting outfitters and concession holders would be expected to have long-term projects in place that involve monitoring prides of lions in the wild. Using identification charts, they should track the fortunes of individual lions and know their ages and positions in the pride. For example, when one or two pride males are ousted by younger lions, then these animals' days alive in the wild would be numbered. Shooting these lions, who are near the end of their lives, would not impact the viability of the prides in the area. At the same time, they would provide much more of a challenge to a hunter and, unlike in a canned hunt, there is no guarantee they would be taken, so each animal has a sporting chance. This is an example of sustainable hunting.

Sadly, though, there are many more unsustainable examples of the ways in which lions are hunted in the wild that are both unethical and upset the natural order. One of the most obvious examples of this is the shooting of dominant males that have not yet been ousted from the pride. When a pride's dominant male has been hunted and killed, a younger male might then be able to take over the pride without a challenge. Given half the chance, he will kill cubs sired by the original pride male that may have had a chance to grow to adulthood, if the original male had died a natural death. As

I've already mentioned, the unethical hunting of dominant males can also allow an unchallenged male cub to grow to adulthood, take over his own pride, and mate with the other females in his family.

The simple truth is that man's greed has taken over and "sustainable" trophy hunting is a thing of the past. Botswana has realized this and banned all forms of trophy hunting in its protected areas. Here's an example of a government being proud of its natural heritage and realizing that its animals are worth more to the country in the long term alive than dead. Tanzania, on the other hand, continues to believe that their trophy hunting industry is sustaining their lion populations and that without it, lions would be doomed. Recent reports based on scientific evidence suggest that lions are declining at an unsustainable rate in East Africa and that the numbers aren't what they are made to seem. It makes sense that those involved would like to keep lion take off quotas as high as possible for as long as possible and only when there are no more lions left to hunt will they stop. Unfortunately, the fish rots from the head and the corruption at a high level is rife. So although in theory sustainable trophy hunting can make sense, like most things nowadays, in practice it doesn't work.

Flying home from Dirk's farm, by myself, I had time to think about what I had seen and what I had learned. In turn, it made me think a little bit more deeply about my own spiritual beliefs and how they related to the animals I knew and worked with every day.

As a teenager I had been an altar boy for a while in the Anglican Church. Mom wanted me to be one and I told her I would as long as she let me drive the Mini. She agreed, so it wasn't a bad deal, but I let my religion slip until Lisa and her family persuaded me to start going back to church. Even then I was doing it to impress her, in part. In my life I've always known, in my heart, the difference between right and wrong and sometimes, when I was younger, I chose

wrong. These days, however, I still have my faith, and Mandy and I go to church most weeks, for the right reasons, and not because I'm trying to impress someone or get something in return.

The evening before I left Dirk and his family invited me to have dinner with them. Before we started eating, we all joined hands and bowed our heads. "Thank you, Lord, for everything we have on this farm and thank you for the food we are about to eat. Amen," said Dirk. For a moment I thought to myself, "This is so wrong. How can these people be slaughtering lions and yet maintain their Christian faith?" In the peaceful solitude of the airplane's cockpit I realized that if I had sat down to dinner with a cattle farming or sheep farming family, I would have had no such reservations and I was embarrassed to have been such a hypocrite and so wrong in using my faith to judge them. Some of these farmers are third-generation lion farmers and their kids, who will in all probability take over, will be the fourth. Simply put, they see no wrong in what they are doing and certainly didn't appear to be as bad as other places I've heard, seen, and read about. At the end of the day trying to get these farmers to reform will be near impossible, just as it will be as unlikely that lion tourist facilities will change their ways. The way to see the end of these types of practices is to kill the demand and in the case of tourists means awareness and education with regards to cub petting so that the paying public doesn't support these places that perpetually breed. This would most certainly have an impact as there would no longer be the need by most of these places to breed.

On the hunting side, there's unfortunately a much-longer road ahead and until such time as legislation is challenged and there's a realization that captive-bred lions don't take any significant pressure off wild lion populations and in fact contribute to their decline, then lions will continue to be hunted at a rate of almost three per day in South Africa, sometimes in horrific ways, and the captive-bred lion population will just continue to grow. Still, there have been murmurs from even within the professional hunting industry of late

that the ethics and morals on which so many hunters pride themselves on are in question and that the captive breeding of lions places these associations in a very uncomfortable situation, with growing pressure mounting from outside.

I pray about things in my life and for guidance about what I do with my animals. If it is the will of God, I hope to continue doing what I do for a very long time. I find that having spiritual beliefs helps with my decision-making—being able to know or make a judgment on what is right or wrong—and with my personal ethics. My “faith” in terms of how I live with my animals and how I work with them is the same as my faith in the church. I am not an evangelist, and I do not seek to force my methods of working with animals on to other lion keepers any more than I would try and convert someone to Christianity. I’m more than happy to help someone on the right path, whether it be in life, faith, or animal-keeping, if they are minded to ask for my help, but I also try not to be someone who will sit in judgment on others.