

SEVEN

Managing the Lives of Others

When I visited the zoo as a kid, I worked out that I didn't like zoos. Today, some people would say that the sanctuary my lions reside in is little more than a zoo with large enclosures. Previously I would've disagreed with this analysis; however, having seen many sides to the captive wild-animal industry, I would prefer not to see animals in enclosures. Yes, this would include the animals in my care.

The reality is, though, that no matter how offensive enclosing animals is, we are not going to get rid of it anytime soon, and therefore have an obligation and responsibility to do it right and make sure the environment and conditions are suitable. We need to also challenge the definitions of "wild," "enclosure," and "conditions" to understand how these three concepts are inextricably linked.

In South Africa, the "wild" hardly exists anymore. We have some fantastic national parks—the best in the world, I would say—yet they are finite areas that are either fenced or surrounded by physical features or human development that prevents the animals that live there from straying into the wider world, thus bringing us to questions

about the ethics of enclosing areas and animals, as well as the conditions in those areas.

The Kruger National Park, South Africa's flagship reserve, is huge. It covers an area the size of Israel, and even though it has been extended over the border into Mozambique, forming what is now known as the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park, it is still an enclosure—albeit a big one. As soon as you enclose animals, and deny them traditional migration routes and the ability to roam endlessly, you have an obligation and responsibility to start managing them so that the conditions under which they live allow them to flourish in a manner natural to them. If you have too many animals in a lush part of the park with year-round water and good rainfall, then you may have to lure some of those animals to drier parts of the park by building pumped waterholes. All of a sudden you start changing the natural makeup of an ecosystem.

When you talk about “conditions,” you inevitably come to the issue of domestication. Some people are against the domestication or training of animals. If everyone had always followed that line of thought, then we wouldn't have domestic cats or dogs today, or be farming sheep or cattle, or chickens, or goats, or riding on top of horses. Some people say I shouldn't be interacting with my lions, but unfortunately they don't know the full history and the reasons as to why I do it. Today enrichment is a large part of what I do. I help enrich their lives and they do the same for me. In fact, every lion I've ever worked with has been part of the domestication process to some degree or another in that it was conceived in captivity and born into captivity and is a representative of decades of lions that have been held in captivity.

I don't condone the capturing of wild lions and placing them in captivity. Previously I believed that captive lions should not be prevented from breeding and allowed to die out; however, in recent years I've come to the realization that there simply isn't any rational reason as to why lions should be bred in captivity besides to

supply the “cub petting” industry, which ultimately feeds the “canned hunting” industry.

“Canned hunting” is a term that is thrown around, but no one can actually pin down a definition that everyone agrees on. For me, canned hunting is when a target trophy animal is hunted and has been compromised due to psychological and/or physical parameters, and there are no “fair chase” principles applied. Psychological constraints can mean anything from the animal seeing humans as non-threatening, such as a lion that has been hand-raised and exposed to the cub petting industry, to a lion that is non-human imprinted but has lived its entire life in a tiny enclosure. Physical constraints can mean anything from an animal that has no way of evading the hunter, such as being hunted in an area of finite size, to using bait to lure the animal to a certain place where it is shot. And we’re back to the concept of “enclosure.”

Size is always a controversial topic because even a lion hunted in an area as big as a thousand hectares could be considered canned, in my opinion, as in reality the animal is targeted and realistically doesn’t have a hope of evading the hunter. A lion specifically released into an area to be hunted will ultimately meet its fate because that is why it was bred. This could apply in principle to certain wild lions in smaller reserves.

Let’s take a scenario where a game reserve is no larger than twenty thousand hectares. Ultimately reserves are looking for competitive advantages. Lions are a favorite but need vast tracts of land and adequate prey species numbers to exist.

Now let’s assume we have two prides in the reserve of four individuals in each. That’s eight lions. Let’s also assume that each pride consists of one male and three females. Should each female conceive and raise a litter of four cubs successfully, that’s another twelve lions per pride. So overnight, both prides have grown to sixteen. That’s now thirty-two lions in the reserve. Not all youngsters in a lion pride survive, so we can assume there’s mortality. In lions it can be quite

high, but in this example we will say mortality is 50 percent. In effect the two prides are sitting at ten individuals in each due to mortality. The sex ratio of lion cubs is normally 50/50, so there are three new males and three new females in each pride.

At the age of around three, the young males are getting big and are starting to become a threat to their aging father in the pride. He does not like this, as they could easily send him packing, and therefore sends them on their way whilst he still has a chance and the power to do so. We now have a situation where we have six male lions (three from each pride) roaming around the reserve looking for a pride to take over. They will need to bide their time and get stronger and grow bigger.

Meanwhile, back in the prides we have a problem. The problem is that the pride male is very shortly going to start breeding with his daughters who are becoming sexually mature. In a normal, healthy, functioning ecosystem, the old pride male would normally be ousted before this happened; however, in a system where the size is limited he will remain with his pride for as long as possible.

The other imminent threat is that the three young males that were evicted will simply hang around the fringes of the territory waiting for the day when they are strong enough to mount a challenge on their father. If this should happen, we have a situation where sons are mating with mothers, aunts, and sisters. In order to prevent this from happening, the reserves managers have to make some very difficult decisions.

The options they face are not easy. The reserve could decide to “sell off” their surplus males to other reserves, but this realistically is not an option in South Africa because other reserves don’t want male lions, as they face the exact same problem and nearly all are over-saturated. They could decide to euthanize the surplus males, which would actually cost the park money. They would have to call in a vet and pay for the drugs to humanely destroy the lions. They

would in all likelihood need to pay for the removal of the carcasses once the task has been performed.

Another option is the trophy hunting route, in which the reserve could benefit from the proceeds of the money generated. This is by far the most controversial and the one that gets many a person's back up. Unfortunately, the reality is that none of the above options are ideal and many would prefer to just see the lions left alone. That's in an ideal world, but in a real world this cannot happen, as before long you will have a serious inbreeding and lion population problems, which in turn would have dire consequences on the health of the environment. Ultimately you will be faced with the same problem as above, now on a bigger scale.

The only other option that has been tried and tested is the contraception option, which does work effectively in managing populations but is met with backlash from tourists who pay money to see lion prides functioning naturally with cute little cubs. Another option that slows down breeding but does not stop it completely is partial hysterectomies on lionesses, which cuts the number of cubs by half, but also costs money and requires veterinary intervention.

From the above, one can see that one simply cannot take an element of an ecosystem and look at it in isolation. It's such a complex and dynamic thing, and just by taking lions as an example one can see that managing these game reserves is an incredibly complex job and one certainly will never please everyone.

I'm often asked if a captive lion longs to be roaming free in the wilds of the Serengeti or the Kruger National Park. This is a human perception, and in my opinion the answer is no. A lion knows what it knows. If you take a lion out of a hundred-acre enclosure and put him in a small cage, he may adapt to his new environment, but it

will potentially have a negative impact on him. The same goes for putting a human in jail.

On the other hand, I take my dog, Valentino, for drives and for walks in areas much bigger than the yard around my house and I do the same thing for my lions. Does exposing Valentino or the lions to bigger areas make them long to run wild? From what I can see, the answer to that, too, is no.

Lions exist in captivity for a number of reasons. I used to think that it was primarily for tourism and education. I now know that this is not the case. Education is a potential spin-off as to why lions are being kept. Research is another, but it's not the prime reason.

Lions are kept in captivity mainly for commercial purposes. Tourism fits under this heading. Not everyone who comes to Africa will have the time, the money, or the inclination to go to the bush, but they most likely will want to see a lion. Zoos, too, keep lions as exhibits for educational and tourism reasons. Many zoos are privately run these days and need to turn a profit. Even government zoos nowadays can't just operate on the reliance of government funding and need to operate on business principles.

I used to see no problem with any of the above reasons for keeping lions in captivity, as long as the lions are well cared for and happy. Of course, "happy" and "cared for" are subjective terms. I formed my views on these areas out of my experience first as a visitor, then as someone whose job it was to stimulate and enrich the lives of predators that, no matter your views on the subject, were destined to live their lives in captivity. What I have found is that my so-called unorthodox ways of relating to and working with lions and other predators have helped me come up with some new, different, and sometimes better ways of managing captive animals.

I've noticed over the years that if visitors perceive your animals to be happy, then in their minds they probably are.

Take space, for example. The perception in most people's minds is that an animal in a small enclosure is going to be unhappy, which may or may not be true. For me, if I see an animal pacing up and down the fence of its enclosure, whether his cage is four meters by four meters or twenty-five hectares, then I believe there is potentially something wrong and we need to scratch deeper to uncover the underlying cause.

The reason why I say I used to see no problem with the above reasons for keeping lions in captivity is because that's how I was conditioned to think. As I evolved and matured in my work with lions, I began to see through the lies and deceit on which the whole of the commercial lion-breeding industry is based. It was also a case of not wanting to see through the lies, I suppose. However, something did not sit right with me. In one breath I would say I saw no problem with keeping lions in captivity and in the next I would bleat on at how deplorable canned hunting was. At the time the lions in my care were breeding, and I knew the dilemmas I faced going forward. Every person who breeds lions will and does face the same problems.

Taking cubs away from mothers is not the nub of the issue, but it is something that a lot of people like to hone in on and obviously stirs up the emotions, especially when one tries to anthropomorphize lions. The real issue is not whether a cub is removed at two days old or two months old or even if it's left with its mother until it's three years old. The real issue lies with what happens to these lions once they have run out of usefulness. In reality, these lions in captivity will most likely never remain with their natal pride. The reason cubs are removed from mothers at a young age is to make them more "tourist friendly." If you remove a cub that's a month old from its mother, you are more likely to have problems getting it to feed and already it'll have a wild streak that will make it more difficult to handle and work with further on down the line.

Cubs are rarely rejected. It does happen, especially with first-time mothers, but this is not the norm. They are removed for business reasons.

Parks that house lions need to attract tourists and what better way than to offer cute, cuddly cubs. Again, many people are upset with cubs being interacted with, and like anything in this world, you can get places that only interact their cubs in a limited way and places that let the cubs get petted the entire day, without a break. Depending on how old the cubs are, they truly do need sleep to grow. But again, this is even not the bigger issue and in fact lion cubs even enjoy human interaction. Yes, one can argue that they're better off with their mothers, but even that situation has a sting in the tail.

If a park breeds and the cubs are all left with their mothers, many people think that this is the natural way for things to be. Yet if one thinks of my twenty-thousand-hectare game reserve example, how much more complex is it when it comes to leaving lions to their own devices in captive conditions? Before long you will have male lions fighting over territory and over females, you'll have severe in-breeding, and you'll reach over-population in a matter of a few years. So ultimately, lions will be removed. If you leave them in prides, you are prolonging the inevitable. This is why I say the whole system is fundamentally flawed.

Ultimately, the management of the park is going to realize they need to get rid of surplus lions, and contrary to what you will be told, there simply aren't enough good homes for the two hundred odd breeding facilities' lions in South Africa. So where are all these lions landing? Most will end up being canned hunted, and others will be used for breeding stock or to supply the lion-bone trade demand in the Far East.

So to recap, a lion cub is born and removed from its mother. It is hand-reared and tamed and after around two months becomes old enough and robust enough to be petted by tourists. It's a huge attraction and, in its four-month span as a petted cub, generates a fair whack of income in the form of tourists coming to pet it, photographs being taken with it, and volunteers from around the world paying money to help raise it. At six months it's considered too old

for the majority of tourists to pet and continues on to be a cub used in the “walking with lions” experience. Over here, tourists need to be of a certain age and pay even more money to go walking with the cub, until usually the age of around eighteen months or even two years old, when the lion is then deemed “too dangerous” for safe human interaction. It is at this stage when the owner of the lion must make the decision as to whether he or she should keep it for another two years, until it’s old enough (has a big-enough mane in the case of a male) to sell to a third party who will sell it on to the hunting farm, or simply sell it as is and save on the space, food, and care that would need to be provided over the next two years. Obviously the price would be a lot lower than if it were kept until mature. A mature four- to five-year-old male lion sold to an intermediary can fetch around \$15,000 and then ultimately \$25,000 to \$35,000 when it’s hunted.

As a tourist you will be told that the lion cub you petted will always go to a good home when he’s older, and some will tell you that the lion will be released back into the wild and that they are part of a lion-conservation breeding program.

The tourist will feel good about this answer and gladly part with their money, thinking they are doing good for conservation. The same is true for the overseas volunteer.

Many facilities will tell you that they have sworn affidavits from the buyers that the lions will not be hunted, as if this miraculously absolves them. Others will say that they are microchipped and tracked on a traceable system, therefore guaranteeing that they won’t be hunted. I can’t see how this can even be monitored or prevent a lion from being hunted eventually. The lion will simply slip through the cracks.

Lions are funny creatures. A male lion is happy if he has water, food, and sex. If he’s happy, it’s also highly likely that he will spend most of his time sitting in one spot. One of the white lions I had the

privilege of knowing until his untimely death, Thor, had a twenty-five-hectare enclosure and he used to lie in one spot, day after day, under his favorite tree. When the sun shifted and he started to get hot, he'd get up and move to the shady side of the tree. This is similar behavior to a wild male lion, although they have work to do, patrolling their territory. To simulate this, and to give them some exercise, I rotate the animals between different enclosures. When I move a lion into an enclosure that's been occupied by hyenas, or even other lions, he will spend time running around marking his territory and sniffing about. It's something to keep him interested. Once he's satisfied that he's staked his claim, he'll sit under his tree quite happily.

We also exercise the lions and take them for walks in the open areas of the park. Once, the lions got more exercise than we expected. Three of us, Helga, who I used to call the mother of all cubs; Alex; and I took Thunder and Rain for a walk one day. We left their enclosure and went out in the greater fenced area, where there were wildebeest, zebra, giraffe, impala, and other harmless game.

This was a new initiative and I suppose some of the others at the park were a bit wary. However, I wanted to enrich the lions by showing them new and bigger areas.

Thunder was talking to me and I was answering him back in lion and in human. "Hello, my boy. You're loving this, aren't you?"

Thunder stopped and raised his nose. He started sniffing. I looked in the direction from which the breeze was coming, across the open plain of gently waving golden grass. On the horizon was a small herd of grazing wildebeest. Thunder was staring intently at them.

"Check," I said to Helga and Alex, nodding to the lion and the strange creatures that had caught his interest.

Alex shook his head. "No way. These two will never catch a wildebeest. Look at Thunder, he's overweight and unfit, and those wildebeest will take off before these two get anywhere near them."

I looked back at Thunder and he had gone into stealth mode,

lowering his tawny body into the matching colored grass. He was slinking forward. Who had taught him to behave like this? He'd been raised in captivity and never hunted a single thing in his life, and nor had his mother or father, for that matter. This was innate, instinctive behavior.

"Look at Rain," Helga said.

She seemed to be getting in on the act as well and had speared off in a classic flanking maneuver, or so we thought.

"Zebra," I said, following Rain's path and eyes. "It's got a foal with it." Rain clearly had her sights set on different prey and the foal was, I thought, an easier target.

"Thunder!" I hissed. "What are you doing, boy?" He moved a hundred meters ahead of us, through the grass, then broke cover. Breathless, we watched on as he charged into the group of unsuspecting wildebeests. They, too, had led a very sheltered life, but they scattered as though their lives depended on it—and they did. Thunder carved a path across the veld as he charged. Through the dust cloud thrown up by galloping hooves, we saw Thunder again. He leapt on to the back of a hapless wildebeest and pulled it down. Within seconds he had his jaws clamped hard around its throat as its hooves flailed at the air.

Thunder killed that wildebeest like he had done it every day of his life.

Perhaps emboldened by her mate, Rain charged after the zebra. She closed on the foal, but at the last minute some instinct of its own made the young zebra turn suddenly. Rain tried to follow its track and reached out one massive paw to hook the zebra's hind leg with her claw, but she missed, just. She lost her balance and fell, but was on her feet and crankily shaking the grass and dust from her coat straight after.

The area we were walking in was big—about two hundred hectares—and the wildebeest and zebra were wild (that is, they have not been hand-reared), so they had a fair chance of escaping

Thunder and Rain. I do believe that if we had let Rain try again she would have caught something, but it does not work that way, and that was the end of the experiment of walking lions in the greater park with other game back in those days.

Food is an important part of the management of any animal in captivity. We rely heavily on donations from farmers who have lost large animals through natural causes.

One school of thought in keeping captive lions is that they should be overfed. Some owners believe that a lion with a full belly will be happy and less likely to try and eat someone, or escape. I always believed that this was nonsense, and set out to prove that contentment had little to do with being stuffed with food.

Different people I spoke to had different theories about how much lions ate. The most common blanket statement was that a male lion ate 35 kilograms (77 pounds) of meat per week, and a female between 15 and 20 kilograms.

I have always been an astute observer and a meticulous record-keeper. I find one can never have too much information about the animals in one's care. No one at the park could tell me exactly how much the lions were eating. People were guessing and various numbers kept coming up, but no one knew for sure. This was like a red rag to a bull to me.

I began a strict regime of observation and record-keeping, and I worked out, over the course of a year, that a large male lion, such as Thor the white lion, was eating an average total of about 20 kilograms (44 pounds) per week, usually in two sittings. We were feeding twice a week because it would have been quite a chore to cut and prepare meals for all the lions on a daily basis, and because this mimics the frequency with which a lion would feed in the wild.

Over the next year I began experimenting with Thor's food intake, sometimes increasing it and sometimes decreasing it. What I

was trying to work out was the correct average intake of food that would allow Thor to maintain a healthy, stable, average weight without losing condition and without us noticing detrimental changes in his behavior. It's quite easy to tell when a lion is losing weight and condition, as it shows quite quickly on their hips and ribs, and their hair starts taking on an unhealthy feel and look.

What I found was that Thor needed 17 kilograms (37.4 pounds) of meat per week, which was less than what we had been feeding him and well short of the 35-kilogram (77-pound) minimum portion per week that other people had talked about. I don't think that lions should be kept overweight simply because some people think this makes them less dangerous. No one wants to see a fat lion, but that wasn't my motivation for experimenting with Thor's diet. I wanted a content, healthy lion in top condition, and that's what I got. I hope that this fact, at least, puts an end to the claims that the only reason I can go into my lions' enclosures and interact with them is because they are overfed. I'll also quite happily go in and play with a lion a minute before he is due to receive his regular feeding. They do not see me as food and their contentment has little to do with being stuffed.

My special relationships with my animals mean that managing them on a day-to-day basis is much easier for me than any zookeeper trying to care for his charges anywhere else in the world.

Keeping an enclosure clean is very important, and when it's time for cleaners to come in, I can call my lions and move them all into their night pen. I know from experience that when you try to move a pride of "wild" lions—ones that you can't approach up close—into a cage, one will always resist. Cleaner enclosures mean less flies and potential disease, but if my lions do get a problem with flies, I can put ointment straight on to their ears. Not many other facilities could do that without sedating their lions.

If my lions get worms, I can walk up to them and give them

deworming mixture. Likewise, to prevent ticks I pour the treatment onto their shoulders individually. If I do find a stray tick, I can just pick it off. Deticking lions that are not used to people walking up close to them is difficult. The cats have to be driven into a type of crush and then sprayed, which they hate. If one of my lions needs antibiotics, I can give it to him personally, out of my hand, and make sure he has taken it.

Napoleon and Tau had a fight, as lions do, and Tau gave Napoleon a really nasty gash in the pad on one of his paws. I called the vet and when she came to the enclosure she asked if I could show her the wound, while Napoleon was still conscious. Because of the relationship I had with Napoleon I was able to lead him, hobbling, to the gate, pick up his paw, and show it to the doctor while she stood on the other side of the fence.

“It’s bad, but I can’t stitch it,” the vet said. “It’s not like we can put a bandage on it and say, ‘Hey, Napoleon, be sure to stay off the paw for a few days.’ He’ll chew the bandage off as soon as we put it on him.”

Instead, she asked me if I could dip his paw twice a day in a bucket of water and Hibiscrub, the antibacterial soap that surgeons use to wash their hands before operating. After that, I should put cream on the wound and give him an antibiotic pill.

“Sure. No problem,” I said, wondering if she believed me.

Napoleon was in pain, but he let me do exactly as the doctor ordered, and even I thought, “Wow, this is special.” It got to the stage where he would come hobbling down to the gate when he saw me coming. It must have hurt him each time he put his paw in the bucket, but he knew it was doing him good and that I wasn’t trying to cause him pain. That’s the relationship I had with Napoleon, but I don’t know if Tau would have been as patient a patient.

As I’ve said before, Tau is a different lion. It is not as though I had a better relationship with Napoleon; it was just different. Tau is just a less trusting and more skittish individual than Napoleon was.

Napoleon was relaxed and chilled and very confident. Just like two human brothers can be different, so too can lion brothers be different, one from the other. And, of course, this can cause problems. Tau and Napoleon needed to be microchipped, for identification purposes, and while I could do a lot with those two lions without anesthetic or the need for other people to be around, sticking a big fat needle loaded with a microchip into either of their shoulders would have earned me a bite. In some cases, even with my special lions, there is sometimes no alternative to sedating them so that certain procedures and treatments can be done.

So, I had to get a vet involved. I arranged for Dr. Paul Bartells to come and do the chipping, and to get some DNA samples from the two lions while he was there. Dr. Bartells is a well-respected veterinary surgeon who has compiled a DNA bank of lions across South Africa for research purposes. The plan was for him to take a small tissue sample from each lion's ear while they were under.

Paul prepared a couple of tranquilizer darts and loaded the dart gun. I don't like putting my lions to sleep, but sometimes it has to be done. He took aim at Napoleon from outside the fence of the enclosure, took a breath, and squeezed the trigger. The dart hit him in the rump and he went down like a sack of potatoes. Paul reloaded and fired at Tau. While the dart found its mark, Tau seemed very resilient to the drug. He staggered, walked around a bit, sat down, but then got up again. For some reason the dose just wasn't taking effect.

"I'll give him another shot," said Paul.

I nodded, my concern growing. He fired another dart and said, "That should do it, but let's go start working on Napoleon or else he's going to wake up soon."

I agreed, against my better judgment. Tau was woozy, but he still looked too alert for my liking. He was probably pissed off, as well, as he had just had two darts in his butt. However, as luck would have it, Tau was at the far end of the enclosure and Napoleon had dropped

right by us, near the gate. We decided to go in—Paul, his female assistant, and me.

No sooner had we slid open the gate, kneeled down by Napoleon, and started to work on him than a couple of onlookers outside the enclosure began shouting.

“Look out!” one cried. “Tau’s getting up!”

All three of us turned. Tau had seen us messing with his brother and he was not happy. He charged and we got up and ran for the gate. Tau was about fifty yards from us and we were about five from the gate.

Paul and I bundled his assistant through the gate and she made it to safety. Paul was next at the gate and I was behind him, but Tau was still bounding towards us. Although he had received two doses of tranquilizing drug, Tau covered the distance between us quicker than Paul and I could get through the gate.

Tau reared up and lunged at Paul. Tau had bypassed me, even though I was the closer target, but he locked his jaws around the vet’s arm and all I could hear was a crunch, like someone biting into a crisp, juicy apple.

Tau hooked his claws into Paul’s buttocks and started trying to drag him down and back into the enclosure. At the same time, the doctor’s assistant and the other people outside the enclosure had hold of Paul and were trying to drag him to safety. Poor Paul was at risk of being pulled apart, and I was terrified that Tau was going to tear Paul’s arm off.

I didn’t have pepper spray with me, so I did all I could think of to make Tau release the vet. I reached around Tau’s huge head and jammed two fingers of one hand into the lion’s nostrils. I drove the fingers of my other hand up under Tau’s jaw and pressed hard, blocking his airway.

Tau gasped and that momentary pause, during which he released his bite on Paul’s arm, allowed the people outside to drag the bleeding man to safety. I, however, was still in the enclosure with an enraged,

drugged lion. He didn't know who I was anymore, or what I was doing to him, or why I was doing it. He started coming after me so I ran back inside the enclosure. I must have looked like a rodeo clown being chased by an enraged bull, though I was running at the same pace as an Olympic sprinter doing the one hundred meters. I ran in a complete circuit of the enclosure with Tau bounding after me.

I was heading towards the exit, but blocking my way was a waterhole that must have been about two meters wide. With Tau gaining on me I decided to try and jump the waterhole, but as I left the bank I tripped again and landed face-first in the water.

The funny thing was that as I tripped and fell into the water pond, Tau also stumbled, in perfect synchronicity with me. I guess the drug was finally starting to take effect on his coordination. If he hadn't fallen when he did, then my beloved, stoned lion would have probably munched and clawed me. The difference between Tau and Tsavo was that my boy had a full set of claws. I splashed through the water, thoroughly soaked, and made it back to the gate in quick time while Tau, finally, passed out behind me.

Paul was airlifted to hospital by a medical evacuation helicopter and he received somewhere between a hundred and two hundred stitches to repair his mangled arm. It took him more than a year to recover and to this day he still can't extend his arm out fully. He's quite a guy, though, and certainly hasn't let that stop him. He flies micro-light aircraft, and at the time was the head of the National Zoo's Wildlife Biological Centre, and won the National Science and Technology Forum Award. To this day, though, I think he might be secretly proudest of the fact that, one day, he was mangled by a lion and lived to tell the story.

I saw a saying above a guy's computer one day that said: "Engage brain before putting mouth into gear." I think that's a good philosophy to follow with humans. I've found that it's an even better

philosophy to follow when I look at a lion and think about how he's being treated. Before I make an assumption about a lion or take a step towards him, I try to take all the facts I know into account. For instance, I have seen lions in captivity that appeared to me to be unhappy; however, I don't really know what's in that lion's head as he lives behind the bars of his cage and I don't know the relationship that lion has to its keeper. By the same token, most people don't really understand the relationship I have with my lions and that creates disagreements among us. Both that keeper and I have different relationships with our lions. Maybe I can explain how I think about a lion and, in doing so, give you an idea of how I approach and manage all the big cats I work with.

First off, I don't have the same relationship with all of my lions that I had with Napoleon and I constantly try to keep in mind that all animals are individuals. Tau and Napoleon, for instance, were brothers, but like all brothers they'd fight sometimes and that affected the way that they interacted with me. Like people, we must understand that even animals related through birth can have very different personalities, and we must also remember that they go through different stages in their lives. Just like us, they can have good days and bad days. And, there can be many factors affecting the relationship, such as the way I happened to be getting on with one or more of the pride males at the time, or the way that a mom with a new litter of cubs eyes me.

Second, the amount of time that I know a lion can also affect my relationship with it. For instance, there is a group of lions that I call "acquaintance lions," lions that I don't know as well as my own lions. I will work with them, but I am more careful. Things can change with time, though. An acquaintance lion can become a good friend. Problems that might have existed between us might have just been related to age, for instance.

That brings up a third point: the age of the lion. As Tsavo and others have taught me, relationships with lions can become a bit

sticky between the ages of two and three. Lions that I don't see eye to eye with at this age can become great friends of mine at five. By the same token, animals I've been friendly with at that earlier age don't get on with me as they get older. When lions hit the equivalent of puberty, they change and that can manifest itself in their behavior with lions younger and older than them. Just like I ran wild when I was a young man, so can they, and I keep that in mind when I'm with them. From a management point of view, it's about understanding these changes, and being aware of what else is going on around the animals. For instance, if I moved some sexy young lady lions in next door to Thor, he might not have wanted to know me for a while. It's not rocket science. When I was an adolescent, if a sexy young girl had moved in next door to me, I pretty much would have wanted my mom, say, to keep her distance, if I ever got the chance to talk to with the new neighbor. Some places, though, wouldn't consider their own human experiences to understand a change in a lion's behavior. And that, I think, is a big mistake.

It must be terrible, I think, for lions introduced into a zoo to hear the strange calls of all the other animals around them and not be able to see or interact with others of their species. Think of how you might feel, dropped down in the middle of a country where you didn't speak the language and were all alone. You'd be just like those lions. They're the ones you see pacing up and down in their cages. They're "wild" animals that are being kept in captivity. By wild, I mean they are unable to interact with humans and see them as something either to fear or to hate. They don't know whether to be aggressive or submissive towards their keepers. My lions aren't wild, although they are wild animals. They know me, they know their surroundings, and it makes life easier for all of us.

Part of the problem with a troubled captive lion is that it may have been hand-raised as a cub and exposed to humans when it was little and harmless. I believe that cubs that get this sort of attention

are enriched and contented animals. They play until they get tired and then they fall asleep. In the wild, they get similar attention from the rest of the pride and are allowed to exhaust themselves with play. In captivity, there usually comes a point when the cub is withdrawn from public contact, because it has reached a certain size, and never interacts with a human again on friendly terms for the rest of its life. It's no wonder they seem troubled. I wish it was different. I wish that those people who cared for the cubs would keep up the relationship, even in a different form, when those cubs grew. Staff in zoos and other lion parks come and go, but just as I try to understand my lions as individuals, so have I made a commitment to them that they will be looked after, even if I am not around.

So, was there a way of keeping lions sustainably in captivity without any having to be sold off to a more sinister industry?

Potentially a better model for raising cubs was staring me in the face, but people said it couldn't be done. What if we could have the best of both worlds—cubs being raised by their mother, but me being allowed to go in with them while they were still small and habituate them to humans and form relationships with them? I thought that if Tau or Napoleon could mate with Maditau, one of the female cubs who had been born about six months after my boys, and I could get Maditau to accept me around her babies, then we would solve a number of issues. The cubs would grow up healthy and strong; they would get used to me from the start of their lives; the park would save on hand-raising costs; Maditau would not go into estrus and breed again; and visitors would get to see a whole pride in action.

Further down the track, the male cubs could be separated from the pride once they came of age—and I would have already formed a relationship with them—and the female cubs could stay with the

pride, on the contraceptive pill, so Tau and Napoleon would be unable to mate with them.

In the wild, as already mentioned, the problem of fathers mating with daughters is usually solved by the fact that by the time female cubs are sexually mature, the pride males have been kicked out by new, unrelated males. However, in areas that are over-hunted or heavily poached, dominant males may stay in charge longer, and eventually mate with their daughters, causing problems with in-breeding eventually. Likewise, if the dominant male is killed off too soon by a hunter, then younger males can end up mating with their siblings, mothers, and aunts.

The idea of interacting with cubs while they were still with their mothers sounded good in theory, but would a lioness let me get near her cubs? And, more importantly, would even I be crazy enough to try?

