



BENEVOLENT BOSS: Taylor Swift, 36

Taylor gives her tour crew £147MILLION in bonuses

TAYLOR Swift's crew broke down in tears as they found out she was giving them a reported \$197million (£147million) in bonuses for their work on the Eras Tour.

The superstar, who turned 36 yesterday, made history after grossing a record \$2billion in ticket sales for her 21-month Eras Tour – which consisted of 149 shows in 21 countries.

As a reward to her team, Taylor is said to have handed out more than \$197million in bonuses to everyone working on the tour.

The Lover singer is a famously benevolent boss and the moment she gives the mammoth cheques to the performers and crew, complete with personal notes, is shown in her new Disney+ docu-series, Taylor Swift: The Eras Tour/The End of an Era.

Those who received a bonus included truck drivers, caterers, sound, lighting, dancers, band, production staff and assistants, riggers, carpenters, choreographers and those in charge of pyrotechnics.

In a scene from the docu-series, one crew member reads aloud a personal note from Taylor revealing their bonus amount – which is bleeped out.

The crew are all seen covering their faces at hearing the amount, with many breaking down in tears.

Two men held after Christmas tree cut down

TWO men have been arrested after a Christmas tree which had stood in a village for more than ten years was cut down.

The tree was felled sometime between 10pm and 11pm on Wednesday in Shotton Colliery, County Durham, just hours after the village's Christmas lights were switched on.

A 26-year-old man has been remanded into custody and is in the process of being charged with criminal damage, the Peterlee Neighbourhood Policing Team said. The second man, 23, has been released under investigation.

Residents are making a sleeve for the tree's base to stand it back up, 'just to tide us over for Christmas', Shotton Residents Association chairman Steve Maitland said.

The secret burning of the bones of 42 lions. And why I'll NEVER stop fighting the monsters who breed them solely to be shot by wealthy tourists

ON WEDNESDAY morning on the outskirts of Johannesburg, under the sort of brilliant blue sky that makes South Africa a magnet for holidaymakers at this time of year, something altogether darker was under way.

Amid great secrecy, in the presence of just a few others, I witnessed a scene that's never occurred here or anywhere else in the world before: the burning of dozens of lion bones.

They were not the bones of normal lions, as anybody visiting South Africa this Christmas might be lucky enough to see on safari. They belonged to captive lions, which are bred to be shot by tourist hunters in enclosures.

That grim practice shames this beautiful country enough, but the burning of the bones was to be a symbolic act to show the world that South Africa is serious in stamping out the multi-million-pound black market trade in lion remains, much of which is illegally sold into the Chinese 'medicine' market. But as we shall see, the event was hobbled by politics and the all-powerful hunting lobby.

The life cycle of captive lions is pathetic and alarming. They are born on farms, many taken from their mothers before they've been

‘A ‘canned hunt’ is like shooting fish in a barrel’

weaned and then sold to petting zoos. When they have grown too large to interact safely with the public, the females are often killed.

The males, which are of greater value as a result of their size and mane, are frequently sold again, this time to hunting facilities. There, they are held in filthy enclosures and hidden from view until gullible tourists turn up. They are willing to pay thousands of dollars to gun down one of the beasts in what is called a 'canned' or 'captive' hunt.

These take place in a confined area, unlike 'fair chase' hunting, when a lion might be pursued cross-country for more than a day – the likes of which cause global condemnation as American big-game hunter and former Miss Nebraska Olivia Nalos Opre can attest. In 2017 she revealed she'd received death threats after slaying three wild lions.

Canned hunting is more like shooting fish in a barrel – not least because the lion has often been drugged beforehand.

Once dead, the lions are usually stripped for their bones and other body parts. These are later smuggled to Asian medicine markets where they can be passed off as highly prized tiger bones, which are used to 'treat' a range of health conditions such as arthritis or even touted as aphrodisiacs.

Incredibly, recent studies suggest there are about 12,000 captive-bred lions held in pens around South Africa. Given its wild lion population now stands



OUTRAGE: Olivia Nalos Opre posing with one of the three lions she shot in 2017 on a wild hunt. Right: Cubs are bred and kept in small pens



EXCLUSIVE: Our report in 2019. Above: The bones of 42 lions were burned in South Africa last week

OPERATION SIMBA
EXPOSED: Farms where lions are bred to be slaughtered
And the Britons revelling in sickening trade

By **LORD ASHCROFT**

PHILANTHROPIST AND CAMPAIGNER



at just 3,000, this means they outnumber them by as many as four to one. It's big business.

This squalid industry sprang up in the 1990s. Together with some of South Africa's most respected conservationists, I have devoted considerable time and resources over the past five years to ending it, with some success.

In 2018, my team of undercover operators exposed how 54 lions were killed in a slaughterhouse in conditions that were haunting. It led to the rescue of Simba, a majestic 11-year-old captive-bred lion hours before he was due to be killed.

My book on the subject, Unfair Game, has been circulated

among most senior politicians and there is a strong appetite among the public for the repugnant practice to cease. And yet it is clear from my recent visit that those who make money from the lion trade are not going down without a fight.

The first time animal bones were burned symbolically in Africa was in 1989, when the then-president of Kenya, Daniel arap Moi, set ablaze 12 tonnes of elephant tusks in a bid to high-light poaching.

The ceremony achieved its aim. Having drawn attention to the elephant's plight – and prevented those tusks being sold – the ivory trade was banned

under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). That trade still exists, regrettably, but the elephant population in Kenya has recovered remarkably well.

The original plan was that the lion-bone burn I was to witness would be something like Kenya's 1989 ivory burning ceremony – an open occasion to raise awareness. South Africa's environment minister, Dion George, was even due to attend, in part to demonstrate how close South Africa had come to bringing an end to lion farming.

But a few weeks ago, George was abruptly sacked in mysterious circumstances and replaced by Willem Aucamp. He, like his predecessor, is a member of Democratic Alliance, a party in the coalition government, but Aucamp has strong family links to the hunting industry.

Those of us who have campaigned to eradicate cap-

tive-bred lions from existence fear that Aucamp's instalment may reverse the hard work that has been done so far. Lions have become a political issue. I am told by those close to the government that South Africa's Department of Environment has been captured by an element of the powerful hunting lobby – a group numbering only 20 or 30 people. They, seemingly, now call the shots.

Last Wednesday, instead of burning the lion bones on an open pyre, as had been planned, I was driven to a pet crematorium to watch their disposal. The event was closed to the public and under armed guard, through fear it might be hijacked by certain breeders or hunters.

I watched the bones of 42 lions weighing almost half a ton being unpacked from boxes and then

loaded on to trolleys. Frankly, it was sickening to see the remains of these animals stuffed into so many plastic bags. Once the bones had been inspected by a local enforcement officer, they were put into a furnace to be incinerated at 1,000C. I was told it would take four hours for them to be reduced to ashes.

A full set of bones from one lion has a black market value of at least 100,000 rand (£4,400). As the heat intensified and the furnace door closed, I stood back and reflected that the one consolation from this depressing scene was that this money would not find its way into the hands of criminal enterprises.

The bones had been bought from a lion-bone trader, Kobus Steyn, who told me he'd purchased them from a lion farmer for 40,000 rand (£1,750) per animal.

He'd hoped to sell them to dealers in Asia for twice that sum. But a change in South Africa's export laws in 2019 rendered such a sale illegal. Realising he was stuck with the bones, Mr Steyn handed over the hoard to the authorities.

He said: 'Morally, I am very glad that they've been burned because these animals should never have been bred in such a way. As a symbol, I know how important it is that the bones are destroyed.'

These are fine words, but

Willem Aucamp's arrival in the government has triggered fears that the export ban preventing their sale may be undone.

As South Africa's leading animal welfare charity NSPCA has pointed out, 'numerous publicly available news reports... have linked Mr Aucamp to activities and events involving the captive wildlife industry'.

Serious questions must be asked of his government, which is beginning to appear craven to the hunting lobby. For how can it justify allowing one of the country's best-loved symbols – the King of the Savannah – to be reduced to a mere commodity bred to be slaughtered? Is it not worried about the effect of this outrage on the tourism industry?

Dr Louise de Waal, director of Blood Lions, which campaigns to end the captive-bred lion industry, says: 'The burn signals an important message not only to

South Africa's commercial captive lion industry but also the new minister, Willem Aucamp, that the animal welfare and conservation sector will continue this fight to close this exploitative and insidious industry.'

Dr de Waal is right. As a general rule, I am not in favour of outlawing things, but when it comes to the breeding and killing of lions, an exception should be made. These animals lead lives that are pretty

‘Those who exploit lions need to be driven out’

much worthless, with minimal joy or freedom. Due to inbreeding, many are ill anyway. They cannot be released into the wild. Allowing them to be subjected to intentional cruelty is unforgivable.

The captive-bred lion industry must be extinguished and we will be judged by future generations for not doing so. I and my fellow campaigners will not give up.

Next year we will be working harder than ever to ensure that those who seek to exploit lions are driven out of business for good.

●*Lord Ashcroft is an international businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. For more on his work, visit lordashcroft.com and for more on his wildlife work, visit lordashcroftwildlife.com. Follow him on X/Facebook: @LordAshcroft*