Dark forces are trying all they can to thwart a ban on breeding lions for slaughter. But I won't give up until this rapacious industry is killed off for good

BRED TO BE KILLED: Male lions are prized for their large manes

By **LORD ASHCROFT**

DARK forces are at work in South Africa trying to defend the indefensible. Those behind the brutal captive-bred lion industry have used a succession of stalling tactics to prolong the cruel practice of breeding thousands of lions so they can be slaughtered for their bones or shot in so-called 'canned hunts'.

Those who breed the lions, trade in their bones and operate these 'hunts' – in which the lion has no chance of surviving – have resorted to legal action and political pressure to thwart the will of wildlife experts and conservationists.

More than five years ago, it looked as though campaigners, including myself with the help of The Mail on Sunday, had won our fight to eradicate the industry. It seemed the estimated 350 lion farms keeping between 8,000 and 12,000 captive-bred lions would be shut down.

This was because in May 2021 Barbara Creecy, then South Africa's Environment Minister, released the findings of an investigation run by a government-appointed High Level Panel, which had spent 19 months looking into the captive-bred lion industry.

Her words were unequivocal: 'The Panel recommends that South Africa does not captive breed lions, keep lions in captivity, or use captive lions or their derivatives commercially. I have requested the department to action this accordingly and ensure that the necessary consultation for implementation is conducted.'

The Panel found that the shameful practice posed risks to wild lion conservation, tourism and South Africa's international reputation. Game over, it seemed. So why is it still perfectly legal for a Western tourist to aim a high-calibre bolt-action rifle at a sleeping lion in a secure enclosure for 'sport'? If you doubt a 'huntsman' would target a sleeping beast, I've seen a video that would shock you. Sometimes the lions are even drugged to make them easier to shoot.

> *'For more than five years their government has dragged its heels'*

Yet, for almost five and a half years, the South African government has dragged its heels on any effort to honour its pledge to ban this vile industry. As Fiona Miles, of the Four Paws in South Africa animal welfare organisation, puts it: 'The key message is there remains a significant gap between policy intention and reality. The government has committed to phasing out the captive lion breeding, yet [it] remains legal and the industry remains largely operational.'

Last weekend, however, there was some welcome news when the country's Constitutional Court dismissed an application by the hunting lobby to ride roughshod over its lawful obligation to take the wellbeing of the animals they kill into account. By holding everyone to the National Environmental Management Biodiversity Act, the ruling has landed a major blow to the captive-bred lion industry.

Ian Michler, of Blood Lions, which has campaigned for more than a decade against canned hunting, said: 'This is a necessary and logical outcome. We are back on track now.' I have carried out two undercover investigations and written a book called Unfair Game highlighting the horrors of this vile industry, leading to a series of articles in this paper.

Captive-bred lions suffer from their first day to their last in this abhorrent cradle-to-grave enterprise. Cubs are removed far too early from their mothers so tourists can pay to pet them. Then, once these animals are older many are killed so their bones can be fed into a lucrative Asian market that prizes the supposed power of 'lion bone wine' to make men stronger and more virile.

The alternative gruesome fate for captive-bred lions is to be 'canned hunt' fodder. Males with large manes are particularly revered as their heads make resplendent 'trophies' for the 'hunters' who pay thousands of pounds to take them home. Why anyone would want to kill for pleasure such a majestic animal is beyond me. Despite legal challenges from pro-hunting and breeding groups, the export of lion bones is banned but as the farms remain, it is feared their bones are still being traded illegally.

Other lion farmers have put their operations on 'hold' while they see what the Government does next.

So amid this political cowardice, I refuse to give up my campaign against the industry. Today, I can reveal that I was in South Africa last month working on a four-part documentary, which will conclusively tell the story of lion canning, from my past efforts to the present day. It will also highlight the determined attempts by the repugnant breeders and traders to block the recommendations of the High Level Panel.

The series, which is being produced by Zandland, the award-winning documentary makers, will be released next year. I will present the series, along with a South African journalist, Lerato Mutsila. I interviewed Dion George, South Africa's former Environment Minister. He had committed to shut down the industry, by first preventing the opening of any new captive-bred lion facilities, before he was sacked last November and replaced with Willie Aucamp – a minister criticised for his links to the captive wildlife industry.

As part of the filming, I visited the Lionsrock Big Cat Sanctuary in Free State, which is home to some 100 lions, tigers and leopards who have been rescued from all over the world. These animals are now in good health but they cannot be placed in the wild as they cannot care for themselves. It was uplifting to see there are so many good people who want to care for lions, not just abuse them like the breeders, the bone traders and those who organise 'canned hunts'.

These animals are the lucky ones for, sadly, it is unrealistic to think thousands of lions can be re-homed once the farms are closed. Instead, many will have to be humanely put down. Campaigners hope the new Environment Minister, David Maynier, who was appointed in June, will share the commitment of Dr George to take decisive action in closing farms and giving a clear deadline for the various stages of shut-down.

He and the rest of the South African government cannot hide. I, along with animal welfare groups such as Four Paws, Blood Lions, Voice4Lions and Humane World for Animals South Africa, will never give up our cause until this rapacious industry is killed for good.

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