

Abu Dhabi: A young lion's escape from pain

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The lion cub lies anaesthetised on the operating table at Abu Dhabi Wildlife Centre, her pink tongue lolling out of her mouth. For now, at least, she feels no pain.

Working on the animal is Gerhard Steenkamp, a veterinary surgeon who specialises in dental work at the University of Pretoria and who has flown to Abu Dhabi from South Africa to do what he can to help the mutilated cub.

This animal, he concludes, must have been living in almost constant pain for some time. It is just the latest victim of an illegal trade in exotic pets that, despite stiff penalties, remains popular in the UAE.

Wildlife officials acting on a tip from a neighbour rescued the cub from the garage of a villa in Khalidiya. The animal's canine teeth had been crudely sawn off or ground down, exposing nerve endings and leaving it in great pain. Its front claws had also been removed.

"This case is just horrible," says Mr Steenkamp, as he inserts a long needle into the gum above the remains of a tooth he is about to remove. When he has finished with the lion, he says, the pain will be over.

Last week Abdulrab al Hameri, assistant director of the Convention on the Illegal Trade of Endangered Species (CITES) in the UAE, and Ronel Smuts, manager of Abu Dhabi Wildlife Centre, went to the villa after the neighbour's tip-off.

"I am not a vet, so I cannot comment on the physical condition of the lion, but it did not look happy," says Mr al Hameri. He says the man keeping the lion is still being investigated. The cub's captors amateurishly removed all four of its canine teeth.

Mr Steenkamp suspects this was done either with a saw, or by grinding the teeth all the way down to the bone, leaving the nerves exposed. The animal could not have been able to eat properly afterwards.

"I mean, you know how much a toothache hurts," he says.

"In this case, a polyp formed around the nerve, so it would always be rubbing against the nerve. It must have been so painful. I've seen adult lions with fractured teeth before, but this is just awful. This was done by humans."

As a result of its ordeal, the cub would not survive in the wild, says Ms Smuts, manager of the centre. They think it is about six months old, but no one can be certain.

The animal was found penned up a few days ago in a villa within metres of Spinney's grocery store in Khalidiya, after a woman living in a nearby villa called to say she had seen a lion cub tied up in a neighbour's garage.

"She was on a very short chain, tied to a pole in the garage. She couldn't even reach any water," says Ms Smuts. "They had no paperwork for the lion, it's not microchipped, it has no ID. They tried to tell us the lion belonged to someone else but we looked into it and that wasn't true. It took us six hours to negotiate before we could take the lion away."

Working alongside Mr Steenkamp was Martin Crafford, a veterinarian at the wildlife centre who monitored the lion's vital signs and administered the anaesthetic.

In addition to the damage to its teeth, the animal lost the claws on her front paws.

Lions' claws do not grow back, he says, and cutting them would have caused great pain as they contain sensitive nerves.

The claws on the hind legs were not removed, he says, "but look, this is scarring on this pad, and we can't do anything for that". He holds up one of the unconscious lion's paws; on the underside, a mass of scar tissue has formed. "Her paws aren't causing her pain any more, but when all this happened it would have been extremely painful."

Ms Smuts came to Abu Dhabi 13 years ago, shortly after which she helped a friend set up a veterinary clinic. Since then she has worked for Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed, helping to rescue wild animals.

"We kept on finding animals that came here illegally, so we decided to build a rescue centre and an orphanage. I'm so grateful for the support of the Sheikh."

The wildlife centre operated out of Sheikh Mansour's home until last year, when a new facility was built in Al Wathba, just outside Abu Dhabi city. Work remains to be done, but in the past year progress has been made, and all the animals were moved in just over six months ago. An education centre will shortly be built on the premises.

"Conservation is about kids, so the educational centre would be for them," Ms Smuts says. "If they came here, saw the animals, played with them, then they would really care about them. And that would last the rest of their lives, hopefully. Even if I could only reach two or three of them, I would be happy."

Since 2002, says Mr al Hameri, an average of two or three people a year have been charged with violating the CITES convention. But officials say prosecutions have been aided by the introduction of a federal law that same year which prohibits the import, export and trade of endangered and wild animals. "Before the law, we couldn't call it smuggling," he says. "After the law there was lots of seizing of the illegal animals and those numbers started to decrease each year."

Ms Smuts, who has rescued animals in the UAE for almost 13 years, recognises that following through on the law may be difficult.

"If you have a law, OK, but you need to be able to enforce it. People still think they can get away with this."

Mr al Hameri acknowledges the difficulties in enforcement, despite training courses for police, customs agents and staff of the Environment Agency.

"I always say, public awareness is the key player in this issue. Now that there's a law, the smugglers have got smarter. We need to protect the animals and we need to educate the public, the traders and the buyers."

Today, more than 100 wild animals call Abu Dhabi Wildlife Centre home, many of them finding their way there by a route similar to that endured by the cub. Lions, tigers, cheetahs – all have been captured in the wild, transported in crates to Saudi Arabia and into the UAE across unmanned borders.

Fines exist – anyone bringing a CITES-protected animal into the country without proper papers faces a fine between Dh10,000 (US\$2,720) and Dh50,000 (US\$13,600) and up to six months in prison – but the problem continues. Recently, CITES carried out a training programme for officials, but customs officers and police struggle to enforce the law, says Ms Smuts, and

demand for exotic animals as pets continues.

Though CITES never issues permits to individuals for dangerous or endangered animals, reports suggest a white lion cub, for example, can fetch as much as Dh450,000, which is a big incentive for traders to break the law.

Ms Smuts is compiling a report on this most recent case, which she will submit to CITES. It will include a medical report and details of the condition of the lion and its surroundings when it was rescued. The authorities will then decide on a punishment for the lion's former captor.

"We need stiffer penalties, and we need to be able to enforce the laws," Ms Smuts says. "But I'm investigating this. It's cruel, it's unethical. I'm going to stop this."

About five minutes before the last stitch is sewn, the lion is given a drug to help bring her round from the anaesthetic.

"Let's see, there's nine sutures per tooth, that's 36 altogether," says Mr Steenkamp.

"That's a lot. When she wakes up, she's going to be groggy but she won't be in any pain."

The vet and two assistants carry the sleeping lion to the recovery room, where they place her on a blanket, stand back and wait for her to wake. It takes some time.

Eventually, she opens one eye, straining to lift her head for a few seconds before slumping back down and lying still for a few more minutes.

"The lion is going to stay with us," says Ms Smuts. "It will take her a few days to recover, then we'll get her vaccinated and eventually she'll be integrated with the rest of the lions. I have one male who doesn't have a female."

As the anaesthetic continues to wear off, the lion makes a laborious effort to stand, wobbling at first and taking only a few steps before rolling back on to the ground. It will be a few more minutes before she is wide awake, the vet says – and anyone who wants to pet the animal should probably do so now.

It is a slow and uncertain start but, though she has no way of knowing it, the cub has already taken the first steps to a new and better life.

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