



When two lion cubs were found with their teeth in a terrible state and their claws removed, Al Ain Zoo put out a distress call to South African lion dentist Gerhard Steenkamp. [Watch video](#)

SAMMY DALLAL / THE NATIONAL

Al Ain Zoo removes rescued lions' teeth

[Eugene Harnan](#)

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AL AIN // When your lions have toothache, whom do you call?

Al Ain Zoo recently found itself wrestling with this painful question and found the answer in Dr Gerhard Steenkamp, a specialist from South Africa.

A 113kg tawny lion, believed to be less than two years old, and his sister from the same pride were rescued by the Ministry of Water and Environment last month.

The ministry gave the pair to Al Ain Zoo, which quickly realised they were in a bad way. Both had had their claws removed and their upper and lower canines filed down. The pulp of their teeth was exposed, which led to the bone becoming infected.

As no local vet was able to perform the surgery, zoo officials called in Dr Steenkamp from the University of Pretoria.

After an X-ray yesterday morning, Dr Steenkamp went to work on the sedated male, extracting two lower canines and performing root canal work on the two upper canines.

"It's fortunately not that complicated because the teeth are so young," he said. "If they are well formed, the dental wall is so thick you have to cut it out in pieces."

Dr Steenkamp had hoped to avoid removing any teeth, but the lower ones were beyond repair.

Dr Arshad Toosy, the manager of veterinarian operations at the zoo said the lion was monitored closely during surgery for vital factors including heartbeat, respiration and blood oxygen levels.

He was kept sedated with gas and had a tube inserted into his trachea.

"All these things are complicated and anything can happen. It is always risky," Dr Toosy said. Not least of those risks, he said, was of the lion waking up during surgery.

Today, Dr Steenkamp will operate on the female. Her teeth are in better shape, with no infection.

The sad thing, he said, was that either animal needed treating at all.

"I would love to come to the UAE to treat and help animals that were in accidents," Dr Steenkamp said. "But to come here and do this, it is so sad and not what I want to do. People have to stop this."

Dr Toosy said the story was all too familiar.

"We've seen it twice before in lions in Abu Dhabi," he said.

It was impossible to tell whether a vet had done the filing and declawing, or whether the animals' previous owners had done it themselves.

"This animal would fight literally tooth and claw," Dr Toosy said. "The animal had to be at least sedated and that beckons the question, where do they get a hold of the stuff?"

It is unknown how officials found the lions but owners of exotic and dangerous pets were only fooling themselves if they thought they could be tamed, said Dr Steenkamp.

"To declaw and cut the animals' teeth and think you have disarmed it, is an absolute false sense of security," he said. "A lion will kill you. Its bite force is very strong."

Once fully recovered the lions, who have yet to be named, will join the zoo's collection.

"They can not be released into the wild because of their canines, which they use for hunting," said Dr Toosy.

Dr Majid al Qassimi, the assistant veterinarian at the zoo, said that while the lions were able to chew before the operation and both ate well, it was clear they were in pain.

"We have not seen any signs of the number of cases [of exotic pets] going down," said Dr Toosy. "It might be people are becoming more clever and find different ways of getting animals inside [the country]."

Just over two weeks ago, Thai police arrested a 36-year-old Emirati at a Bangkok airport with suitcases allegedly containing four baby leopards, a bear, a monkey and a gibbon. Six more suspects are under investigation in the case.

Thailand is considered a hub in Asia for smuggling exotic wildlife.

eharnan@thenational.ae

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