

Lion bones back in the crossfire after breeders challenge sales ban



The sale of lion bones is heading back to court with a 235-page application by lion breeders demanding that the Environment Department set a CITES export quota for 2025. The subtext is a clash between free trade and animal wellbeing.

In 2019, a Gauteng Division of the High Court judge [found](#) an application by breeders to renew the lion bone export quota to be “unlawful and constitutionally invalid”. He said it failed to consider the welfare of captive lions raised and killed for their bones. Lion breeders have been simmering with anger ever since.

In December last year, 11 members of the SA Predator Association (Sapa) filed a notice with the Gauteng Division of the High Court in Pretoria to contest the ban. The Environment Department counter-filed, saying it will oppose the application. Surprisingly, neither Sapa nor the minister, or his Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE), disclosed the existence of these legal proceedings at the time.

The stage is now set for a challenge which will hinge on whether the right to free trade trumps recent legislation concerning the wellbeing of animals.

In an attempt to make their case, the massive application by breeders reveals the sheer scale of their operations. There’s another case in the works brought by hunters which will superheat the issue further. We’ll come to that in a moment.

In response to the Sapa application, two conservation NGOs, Blood Lions and Humane World for Animals SA, have implored Environment Minister Deon George to “stand firm and resist the demands of

a select few lion farmers who will all financially benefit from such a quota at the expense of lions”.

According to a press release by Ban Animal Trading and the EMS Foundation, “it is common knowledge that the trade in lion bones is a major ethical, legal and administrative embarrassment for South Africa. This rogue industry has strong links to international criminal networks, provides a legal channel for the trafficking of illegal big cat parts and fuels the demise of wild big cat populations. Keeping lion skeleton stockpiles while advocating against the trade sends mixed signals about the acceptability of lion skeletons as a commodity.”

The breeders clearly have an eye on the recent mood shift in legislation, confirmed in court challenges, which is taking a more modern view that when exploiting captive wild animals, their needs and wellbeing must be considered at the level of the individual animal.

The lion farmers counter that the export quota is necessary to exercise their constitutional right to the freedom of trade, occupation and profession. They say there’s a large stockpile of lion bones, bone pieces, bone products, claws, skeletons, skulls and teeth. They gave the minister 15 days from serving the motion to provide all records and documents relied on in refusing to set a quota. The refusal, they said, was a failure of good governance, accountability, openness and transparency. It was “unreasonable”. It’s not known if the minister complied.

The Sapa motion claims that lion bones lose weight over time and can deteriorate, so in a market where bones are sold by weight, sale delays are costly. The applicants claim to be “suffering every day that passes without such an allocation”.

In restricting the trade, however, the department is within its legal rights. Since 2023, amendments to the National Environmental Management: [Biodiversity Act](#) 10 of 2004 permits it to restrict certain trade without a legal obligation to compensate, particularly when such trade leads to grave animal welfare contraventions.



Bones from a blood lion. (Photo: Supplied)

Big operations

Sapa’s supporting documents in filing the motion are revealing.

A male skeleton, the breeders claim, can fetch R65,000 per “set” and female R55,000. Ten of the 11 applicants claim to have 1,530 bone sets between them. At an average of R60,000 a set, their “loss” at being unable to export is about R90-million.

There are between 300 and 350 breeding operations in the country with a total of between 8,000 and 12,000 lions. If we take an average of 10,000 lions with two-thirds being adults, and if all were to end up after hunting as marketable skeletons, the value at an average price of R60,000 a skeleton would be about R435-million.

In an attempt to show the size of the problem, the applicants included as addenda their hunting and stockpile statistics. The 2024/27 hunting permits for Thomas van Vuuren of Woodborough farm in Vryberg lists 201 hunters. The farm Putfontein near Zeerust in North West, owned by Patrick Loots, lists a stockpile of 176 sets of bones dispatched by the same number of hunters (not dated but presumably in 2023) plus 227 in 2024.

The permit for the farm Lushof in the Free State, owned by Martinus de Wet, lists carcasses from 201 hunts. Kalahari Lions in North West, owned by Frederick de Witte Scheepers, lists 86; Olyfhoek Farm in the Free State lists 58; a farm near Vryberg in North West (name indecipherable) lists 94; Sandhurst in the North West 203, owned by D Crouse, possibly named Wilgespruit, near Kroonstad 67; Diepdroeft, owned by HC Gomes, 97 hunt permits applied for; Adrie du Plessis on Tweefontein in Limpopo, 62 lions hunted.

These numbers are for stockpiles only, not hunting. Statistics provided by The Professional Hunters' Association of SA to the Environment Department each year log 2,968 lions killed by international hunters between 2016 and 2023, with 521 being killed in 2023 alone (the latest year for which statistics are available). The cost of a lion hunt offered by [safari operators](#) range from \$7,900 to \$25,000 for a full-maned male and about \$5,900 for a female. You do the maths.



Lion bones. (Photo: Blood Lions)

Minister says no

The Environment Department's position on lion bones seems solid. In support of a 2024 [government notice](#) calling on breeders to voluntarily hand over stockpiles, Minister Deon George was [unambiguous](#). He said it was unacceptable to severely compromise lions which spend their lives lame, underfed and in pain. He said the government needed to stop the practice.

"Nobody believes it is acceptable, only the people who make a lot of money out of it. As a minister, I will not have that, and the practice must end. I encourage everyone who has lion bones and derivatives to

voluntarily surrender them as early as possible.”

The government notice followed a [Task Team report](#) started under the previous Environment minister, Barbara Creecy, which recommended voluntary exit options from the captive lion industry. It included the ending of lion bone stockpiles and derivatives (carcasses, skeletons, skins, teeth, claws and other parts).

It also recommended a programme to acquire and dispose of legal lion bone stockpiles. According to a [press release](#) on the issue, the Environment Department said it would facilitate the collection of legal lion bone stockpiles through a contractual agreement with the legal lion bone owners who volunteered. It can be assumed that the 11 plaintiffs in the latest motion were not among them.

At the time, the NGOs Ban Animal Trading and the EMS Foundation petitioned the minister to:

- Immediately ban the lion and other big cat bone trade for commercial purposes, including from captive sources the ban should include the destruction of all big cat bone stockpiles;
- Bring the criminal aspects of this trade to the attention of other relevant Parliamentary Committees and authorities to ensure that a forensic investigation and financial tracking of the industry is undertaken;
- As a matter of urgency, the Department provides a complete and audited list of all big-cat breeding and keeping facilities nationally, and make this list publicly available; and
- The Department of Environment be instructed to convene stakeholder meetings to discuss the dismantling of the captive big-cat industry, including experts from the fields of animal welfare, sanctuary management and forensics, as well as NGOs.

Challenge on wellbeing

As mentioned above, another [challenge](#) over lions is currently in process. In September 2024, the SA Hunters and Game Conservation Association (SAHGCA) moved to strike down the legislation on treatment of wild animals, essentially employing an 11,453-word document to challenge a single word: ‘wellbeing’.

The complaint hinges on what the SAHGCA claims is the state’s failure to facilitate sufficient public engagement in the crafting of the National Environmental Management Laws Amendment ([Nemla](#)) Act 2 to 2022. It wants certain provisions in the Act declared invalid and unconstitutional or suspended for a year pending more public discussion.

‘Wellbeing’ is defined in the legislation as: “The holistic circumstances and conditions of an animal, which are conducive to its physical, physiological and mental health and quality of life, including the ability to cope with its environment.” Shooting them would be an uncomfortable fit.

The SAHGCA says its objectives are to promote the interests of sport shooters, game farmers, nature conservationists and professional hunters in South Africa, and the definition poses a threat to hunting and raises questions.

The association says the inclusion of ‘wellbeing’ considerations could be used as an excuse to stop sustainable use practices, such as responsible hunting.

The Department of Environment, one of the respondents, says it is still in the process of considering the application and has not made any decision on whether to oppose or not. “As the matter is *sub judice*, the department will not be providing any further comment at this stage.”

Only time will tell if the wellbeing of wild animals will finally be entrenched in law, or if financial interests of a minority of breeding farms and hunting outfits will triumph. There are, however, worrying signs of the latter in [the National Biodiversity Economy Strategy](#), which promotes increased commodification of wild animals. **DM**

