

# Trophies, body parts & live animals dominate global lion trade, data show

- *Lions are the most-traded wildcat in the world, and the only big cat whose commercial trade is permitted under CITES, the international wildlife trade agreement.*
- *Lion body parts, including bones, skins, claws and teeth, trophies and live individuals are traded across the world, both legally and illegally.*
- *South Africa stands out as a hotspot for the trade due to the flourishing captive lion industry, which also supplies body parts and engages in canned hunting.*
- *Unsustainable trade in lion bones and other body parts, including from poached lions, poses a threat to the already declining wild lion populations across the world.*

As apex predators, lions (*Panthera leo*) roam the African savanna, and occasionally [even the rainforests](#), as the only social big cats. A small, isolated population of Asiatic lions (*Panthera leo persica*), an endangered subspecies, is found in the scrublands of the Indian state of Gujarat. Their majestic manes, thunderous roars and regal presence have piqued human fascination since the [Stone Age](#) — so much so that our ancestors drew them on cave walls.

Even to this day, our enchantment with the world's second-largest wildcat doesn't seem to have ebbed, as the felines make up a lion's share of the legal [global wildcat trade](#). While the commercial trade of Asiatic lions, which are listed on Appendix I of CITES, isn't permitted, African lions can be traded legally with permits — both as live individuals and body parts of dead lions.

“The drivers for legal (and illegal) trade are diverse — as are the products,” wildlife trade researcher Vivienne Williams at the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa, told Mongabay in an email, adding that buyers and purposes of trade are also diverse.

For instance, lion bones are in demand in Southeast Asia to substitute tiger bones in many traditional medicine prescriptions. Lion trophy hunting is a significant industry where hunters bring home a part of their kill. Captive-bred live lions are traded for entertainment purposes, circuses and private zoos.

“Culturally and traditionally, lion parts are used and traded domestically, quite extensively across Africa,” Katrina Mole from TRAFFIC Africa told Mongabay. “That’s associated with the lion being a big status symbol ... so a lot of their parts are used by traditional healers for traditional medicine [and] for curios or trinkets.”



*A lion at a breeding centre in an undisclosed location in South Africa in 2005. South Africa is a hotspot of the lion trade, thanks in part to the lion farming industry, which the government is trying to close down after reports of welfare concerns. Image courtesy of International Fund for Animal Welfare via [Wikimedia Commons](#) (CC BY-SA 4.0).*

## What do the numbers say about the trade

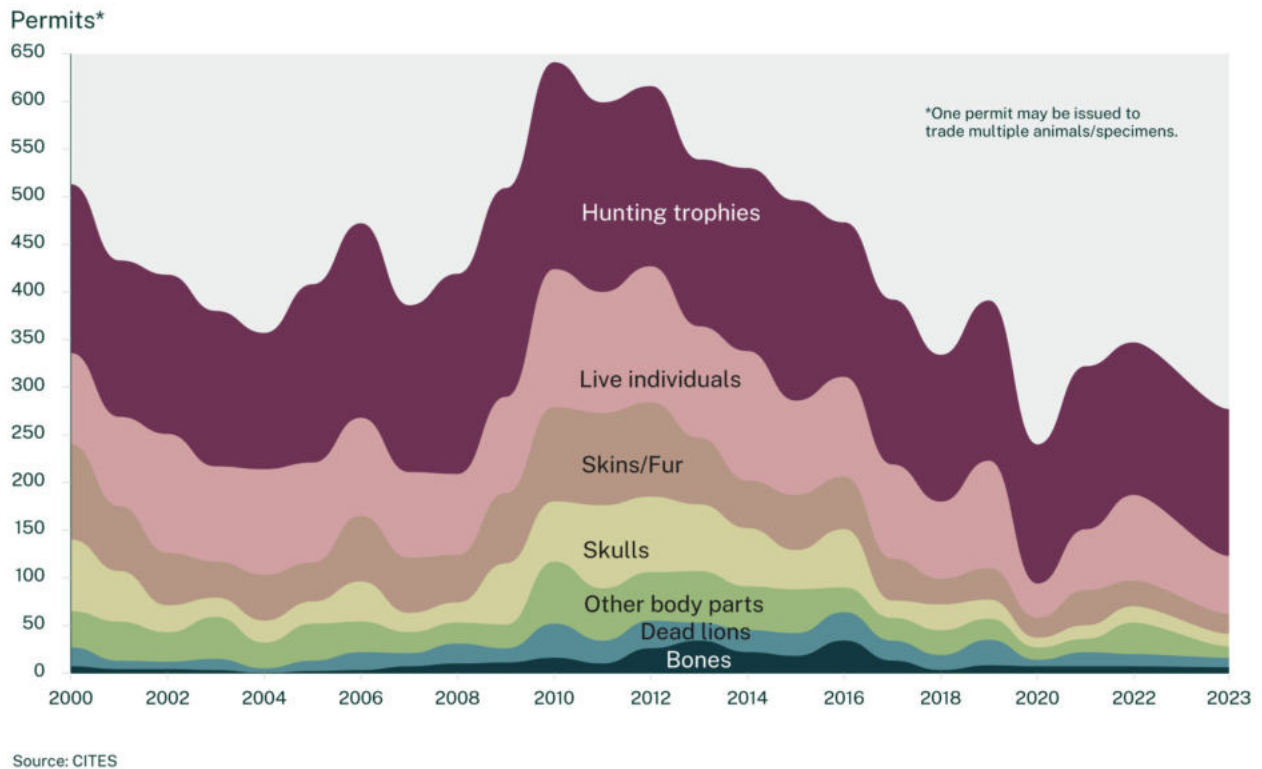
Data from CITES, which records all legal international trade in listed wildlife species, show that 10,494 permits have been issued for African lions in the last 25 years. Hunting trophies, where trophy hunters bring home body parts of their hunt, make up the largest number of permits at 4,280, followed by permits for live lions at 2,426 and skins at 1,158. The number of permits does not translate to the number of individuals traded; each permit may include multiple individuals or their body parts, and multiple permits may contain parts from the same individual.

Hunting trophies rank as the most traded commodity, with 26,718 lion trophies traded between 2000 and 2023, according to [CatByte](#), an online platform that collects data about the legal and illegal trade in big cats. Skeletons come in second, with 12,215 trade reports during the same period, followed by bones at 11,778 reports.

CatByte data also show that 10,827 live lions have been traded between 2000 and 2023, and skins, claws, teeth, skulls and bodies rank among the top 10 most-traded commodities. While most of the trade is legal in these products, there's also illegal trade observed in the bone, claw and teeth trade.

# In the last 25 years, 10,494 international permits have been issued to trade African lions

— as live animals, body parts and derived products.



Number of CITES permits issued for various lion parts and live individuals in the last 25 years.

## Hotspots of trade

Based on the number of permits, CITES database shows that the U.S., the world's largest importer of wildlife, tops the list of lion importers, followed by South Africa and Germany. South Africa stands out as a hotspot for exports, followed by Zimbabwe and Tanzania.

"Lions have been intensively farmed for commercial purposes in South Africa since the 1990s," Angie from World Animal Protection told Mongabay in an email, adding that most lion body parts exports, including trophies, and live individuals come from captive-bred lions.

A 2024 [report](#) by the country's ministerial task team, appointed to propose voluntary exit options for players in the captive lion industry, estimated that 7,838 lions are kept in 342 facilities across South Africa. A 2017 [study](#) estimated that the captive lion industry in South Africa contributed up to 500 million rand ) annually to the country's economy.

According to data from CatByte, South Africa exported the largest number of lion trophies, followed by Tanzania and Zimbabwe, between 2000 and 2023. While almost half (48%) of them went to the U.S., Spain and France ranked second and third among countries that imported the most trophies. However, recent trends between 2016 and 2023 indicate that Hungary and Poland feature on the list of top trophy importers. South Africa also tops the list of exporters of live lions, shipping them mainly to China, Thailand and the UAE in the last 25 years.

A 2021 [report](#) by Mole and her colleague, which looked at lion deaths and trade in Tanzania and Mozambique, found that Mozambique had high levels of poaching incidents, while retaliatory killings were more common in Tanzania. Body parts derived from dead lions in both cases were traded domestically and internationally, with lion claws and teeth being the most-traded commodity globally from the two countries.

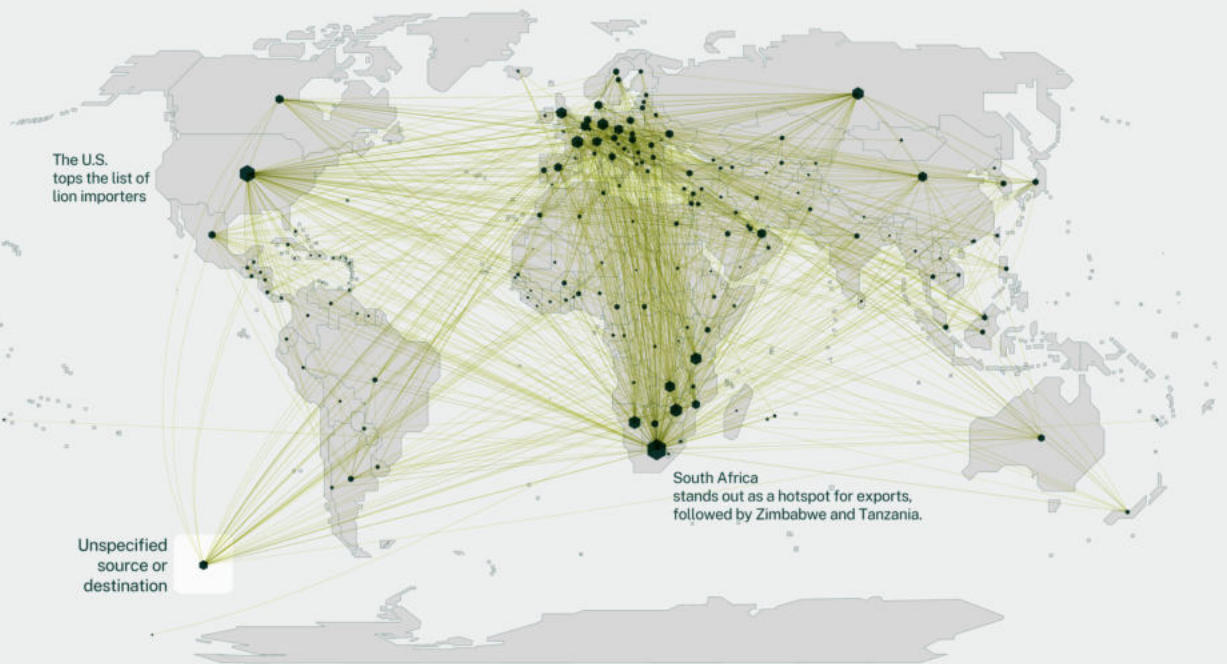
Among countries where African lions do not naturally occur, Vietnam, Lao PDR, China and Thailand stand out as hotspots of trade, according to CatByte data.



# Distribution of African lion trade permits issued between 2000 and 2023



● Relative weight of each country in the global trade.



Source: CITES

*Global hotspots of the international lion trade.*

## Changes in lion trade trends

In the last decade, the lion trade has seen significant changes due to variations in demand and countries trying to shut down imports and exports of lion parts. For instance, CITES data show an increasing trend in the number of permits issued for lion trophies until 2015, after which it has declined. Data from CatByte also support this observation: After a steep increase in the number of traded lion trophies since the early 2010s, the numbers nose-dived after 2015.

“Hunting tourism is a globally declining industry that is becoming less economically viable,” Elwin said, citing negative public perceptions about trophy hunting and declining wildlife populations. “This is particularly apparent since the [killing of Cecil the Lion](#).” Following the incident, countries such as France [banned](#) the import of lion trophies, and many major U.S. airlines [stopped](#) transporting big game trophies, including lion. Elwin said the CITES data reflect these trends: The number of permits for lion trophies exported globally has declined from around 1,400 per year in 2014 and 2015 to 713 in 2022 and 919 in 2023.

The lion bone trade has also seen a remarkable change in trends in the last 25 years. In the early 2000s, South Africa exported bones and skeletons, mainly from captive-bred lions, to Southeast Asia for use in traditional medicine preparations and substitute tiger bone use.

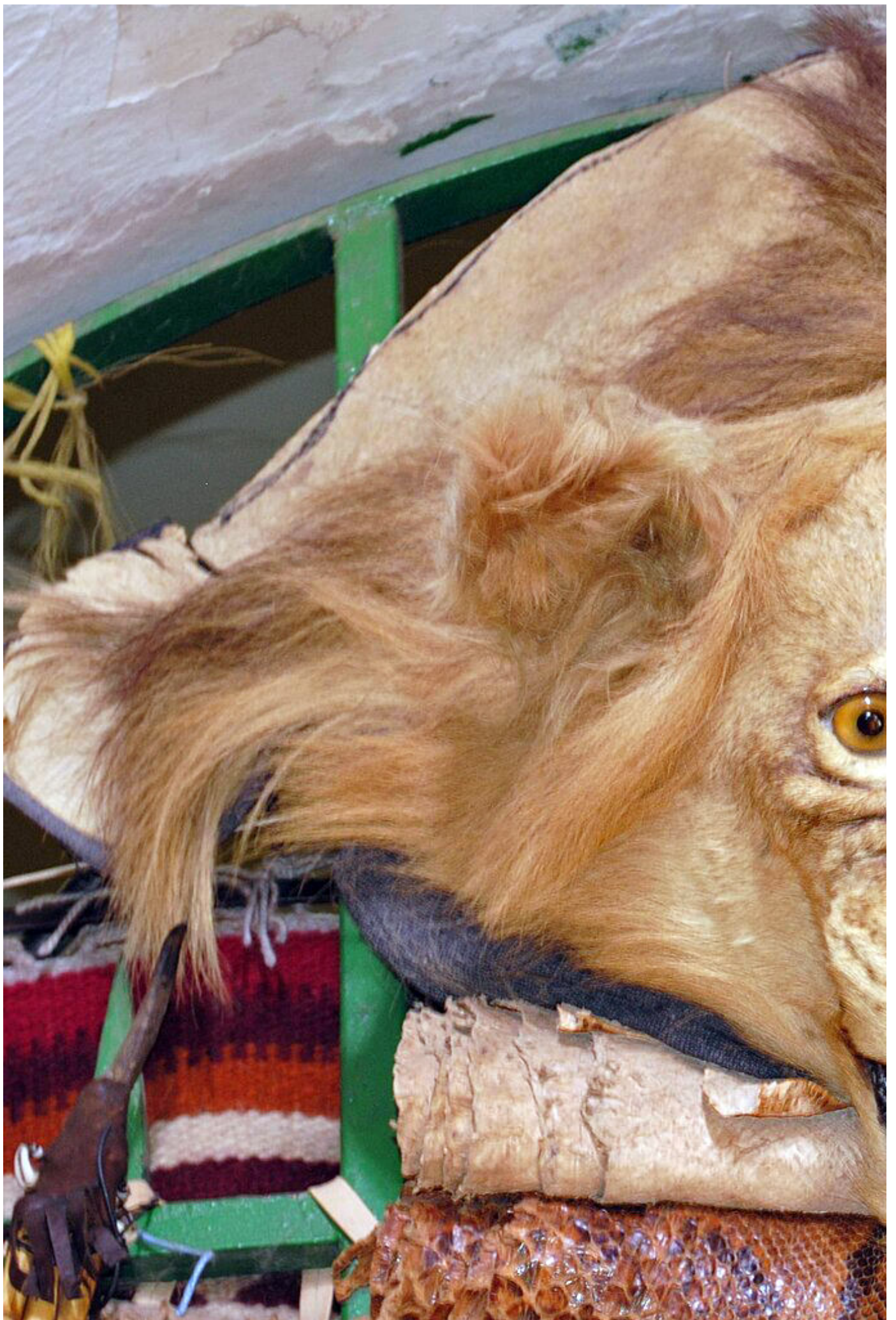
A 2015 TRAFFIC [report](#) found that between 2008 to 2011, South Africa legally exported 1,160 skeletons (about 10.8 metric tons), with 573 of them exported in 2011 alone. Nearly 91% of those exports were destined for Lao PDR.

Following this report and a subsequent [decision](#) at the 2016 CITES CoP, South Africa established annual quotas for bone and skeleton exports in 2017, limiting them to 800 in 2017 and 2018. The next year, courts declared the lion bone export quota [unconstitutional](#), citing welfare concerns, and since 2019, no quotas have been set for export, making any commercial lion bone trade from the country illegal. In March 2025, the South African Predator Association and a few canned lion hunting operators [filed a court application](#) to renew this ruling.

“The main difference between 2015 and 2025 is that legal trade of lion bones from South Africa has been halted since 2019,” Williams said. “Any current international trade is therefore operating outside of the CITES permitting system and would be considered illegal.”

Data from CatByte shows a spike in the illegal trade of lion bones after 2018, presumably due to the ban on legal trade from South Africa, the largest exporter at the time. However, legal and illegal bone trade has now decreased to near-zero levels, according to the data.





## Impact on conservation

African lions are classified as vulnerable according to the IUCN Red List, with their wild populations thought to have [declined](#) by around 43% between 1993 and 2014. Although habitat loss, retaliatory or preemptive killings to protect human life and livestock, and loss of prey are the major threats to wild lions, [poaching](#) and [wildlife trade](#) have emerged as significant threats in recent years.

While most lion bones for trade come from captive-bred lions in South Africa, the trade “could have unintended negative impacts on lion conservation by potentially driving an increase in poaching and trafficking of wild-sourced lions and perpetuating the international market for felid bones and other wildlife products,” Elwin said.

A 2024 [study](#) by Elwin and her colleagues, in which they interviewed workers in lion farms, found that some lion facilities in South Africa have been pressured by organized poaching networks targeting captive lions and tigers for illegal wildlife trade. It also found an increase in the number of tigers and lion-tiger hybrids (ligers) being kept and bred in some farms.

“Commercial captive breeding and trade in body parts of threatened wild carnivores, including

Lions, is an issue of conservation concern,” Elwin said.

**Banner image:** *A male African lion in Serengeti National Park. African lions are the only big cat species whose commercial international trade is permitted. Image by Giles Laurent via [Wikimedia Commons](#) (CC BY-SA 4.0).*

### Citations:

Peet, V. D., Melville, S., Jauntelle, E., & Andrea, S. (2017). The economic significance of lion breeding operations in the South African wildlife industry. *International Journal of Biodiversity and Conservation*, 9(11), 314-322. doi:[10.5897/ijbc2017.1103](#)

Elwin, A., Asfaw, E., & D’Cruze, N. (2024). Under the lion’s paw: Lion farming in South Africa and the illegal international bone trade. *Nature Conservation*, 56, 1-17. doi:[10.3897/natureconservation.56.124555](#)

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