

Parliament backs NSPCA demand to end captive lion breeding in SA



Parliamentarians were this week shown horrendous images of captive lion breeding in South Africa.

Emaciated lions, open wounds, pens covered in faeces, no shelter in blazing sun, cubs on rubbish dumps, lacerated paws — the images displayed on the screen were shocking. But Douglas Wolhuter of the National Council of SPCAs (NSPCA) was on a mission to make parliamentarians understand the cruelty involved in captive breeding.

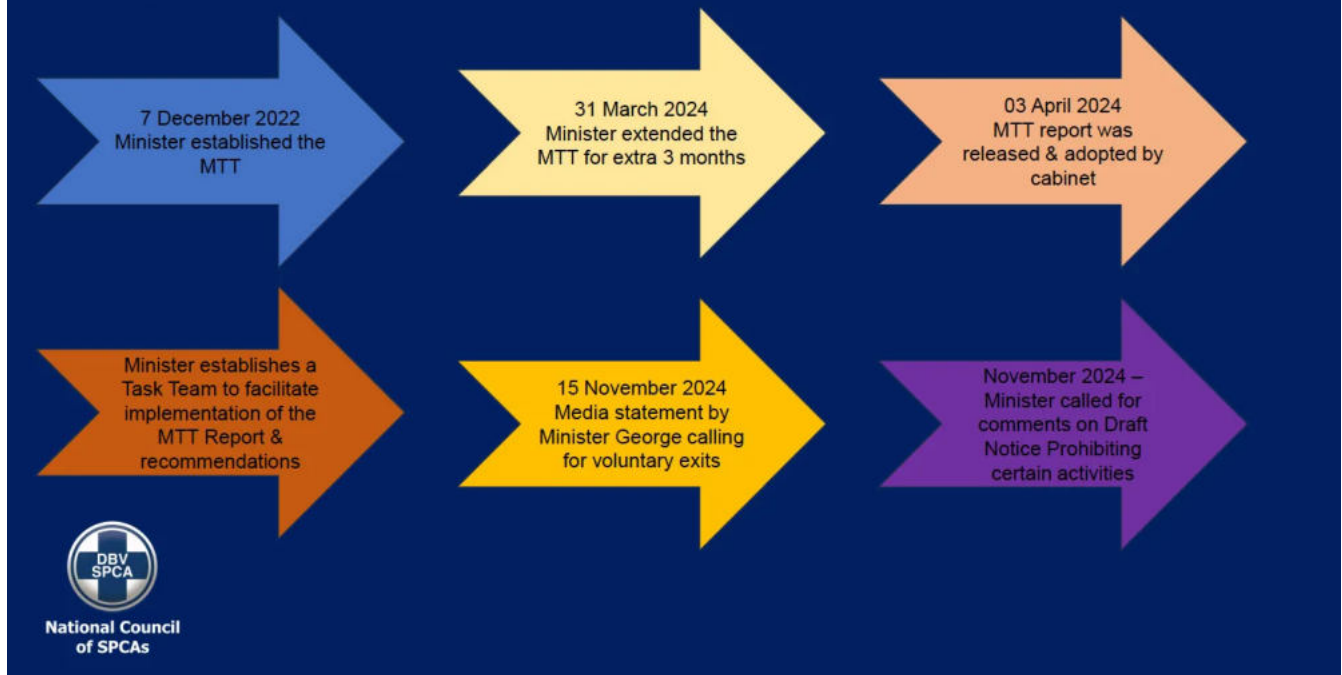
It was both an impassioned plea to shut down lion breeding facilities and harsh criticism of the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE) for failing to implement its own recommendations.

“The weight of [evidence against the captive breeding industry](#),” he said, “has called for its closure, deemed irresponsible, inhumane and an unacceptable practice.”

Despite years of commitments, including the Cabinet’s adoption of a phase-out plan in April 2024, Wolhuter said that conditions had barely changed.

“I go to these places and there are cubs everywhere,” he told Parliament’s Environment Oversight Committee. “Conditions haven’t changed, and the levels of cruelty we find are unspeakable.”

Progress timeline – closure of the lion industry



Process progress. (Source: NSPCA)

Condemned by all parties

Parliamentarians were unanimous in their condemnation of the practice.

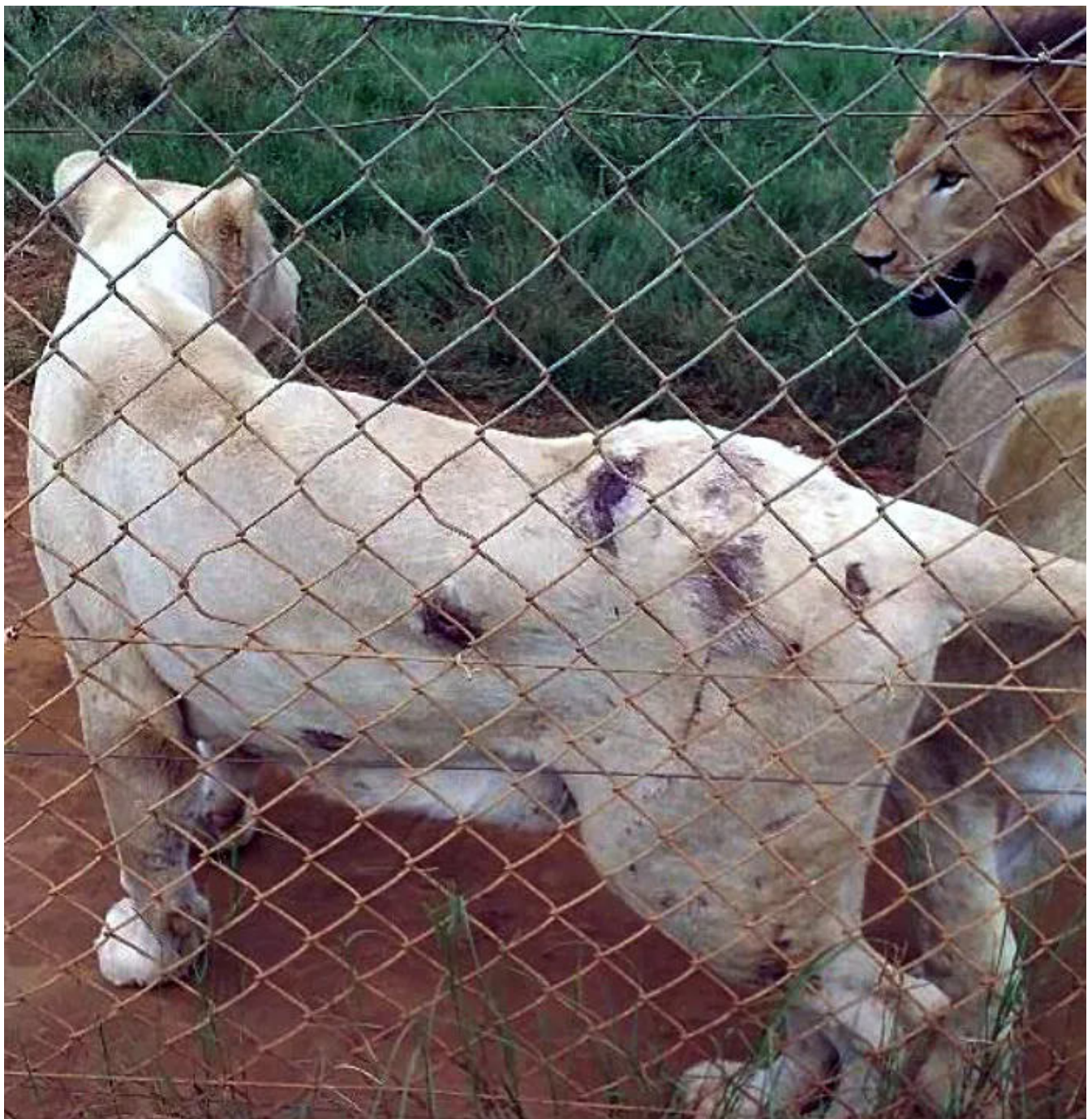
The acting chairperson of the committee, Dr Ronalda Nalumango (ANC), welcomed the NSPCA to the session, calling it a crucial partner enabling the committee to carry out its oversight duties.

“Today marks our first engagement with the NSPCA in the new administration and we are eager to foster a relationship that encourages more regular interaction,” she said. “Our shared goal is to improve animal welfare and strengthen coordination among all relevant government agencies.”

“We must confront this issue head-on,” said Dr Lilian Managa (EFF). “The failure to implement existing legislation is not only undermining the rule of law but is also prolonging the suffering of voiceless creatures entrusted to our care.”

Why were facilities not being closed down or their licences revoked when there were multiple or egregious transgressions? asked Andrew de Blocq (DA). “Who has the authority to do that? I don’t understand why animals haven’t been confiscated from these facilities.”

“Animal welfare enjoys unilateral support across the political parties,” he continued. “We all agree this is a practice that provides very few jobs and contributes negligibly to transformation, but obviously has a huge negative impact on South Africa’s international reputation in terms of ethical hunting, mobility, and even tourism.”



Veterinary care is often lacking at lion breeding facilities. (Photo: NSPCA)

Criticism of lack of progress

The captive lion breeding industry in South Africa has for years drawn international criticism for its ethical breaches, legal irregularities and failure to meet even the most basic standards of animal welfare.

In 2022, a ministerial task team, initiated by the then minister, Barbara Creecy, outlined a clear roadmap to phase out the industry. This included a moratorium on breeding, an end to lion bone stockpiling and a halt to issuing new permits.

But according to Wolhuter, “None of these measures have been adequately implemented.” Instead, he said, facilities continued to breed cubs unchecked, stockpiles of lion bones persisted, and the NSPCA was left to confront mounting cruelty cases with limited resources and little support from the justice system.



The sort of scene tourists petting lion cubs never see. (Photo: NSPCA)

NSPCA inspections obstructed

Wolhuter, the national chief inspector and manager of the NSPCA's Wildlife Protection Unit, explained that the association was a unique entity: an NGO, NPO and statutory body established under its own Act of Parliament. This makes it legally responsible for enforcing the Animals Protection Act — but not without challenges. One of them is that it is not government funded.

The NSPCA, he said, was systematically obstructed when trying to access facilities. “WhatsApp groups in the Free State and Northwest provinces warn facilities when we arrive. Suddenly, no one’s home,” he explained. “Even with warrants, we’re denied entry.”

In 2022 alone, NSPCA inspectors carried out 176 inspections at predator breeding facilities. The violations they uncovered included underweight and malnourished lions, unpotable water, unhygienic enclosures and untreated infections.

Images in Parliament showed lions lying on faeces in their feeding areas, and cubs cowering in a corner infested with ticks and maggots.

Derisory sentences

Despite the shocking conditions and the huge effort put in by NSPCA inspectors, convictions are rare and toothless, with very few in recent years. One lion breeder was fined just R4,000 or a 12-month suspended sentence. Another walked away with a R2,500 fine after being convicted of gross cruelty.

A farmer who was found guilty of neglect and inflicting extreme suffering on sheep and cattle was fined R10,000, but the sentence was suspended for five years. The same outcome — a five-year suspension — was imposed on a Mitchells Plain dog owner sentenced for cruelty. In another case, a woman was fined R6,000 or two months’ imprisonment, suspended for three years.

Suffering in silence

The suffering inflicted on lions in these facilities is extensive and has been well documented by Daily Maverick over the years. (See [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)).

Read more: [Lion bones back in the crossfire after breeders challenge sales ban](#)

Enclosures often lack shelter, proper fencing or environmental enrichment. Carnivores are fed substandard diets — often just chicken carcasses — with no supplements, resulting in serious medical conditions such as metabolic bone disease.

“We continue to see lions suffering from nutritional secondary hyperparathyroidism,” said Wolhuter, referring to a condition caused by calcium and phosphorus imbalance. “Their bones are so weak, they can be cut through with a knife. It’s a slow death sentence.”



Nothing to eat but dead chickens. (Photo: NSPCA)

A failing legal system

Even when charges are laid, justice is painfully slow.

“I’ve had one case going since 2019. We’re now on our 47th court appearance,” Wolhuter told Parliament. The backlog, he said, rendered prosecutions ineffective, and the penalties, capped at R40,000 or a year in prison, were negligible in the context of a lucrative industry that profits from the sale of lion bones and meat, and cub petting experiences.

To date, only a handful of cases have gone to trial. Meanwhile, the NSPCA continues to register dockets and issue warnings, only to return to the same facilities months later to find nothing has changed.

Read more: [Business as usual for captive lion breeding after SA government keeps the door open](#)

One of the key recommendations of the 2024 ministerial task team was a full audit of all captive lion facilities. But Wolhuter said that, to his knowledge, this had not happened, “and if there has been [an audit], the NSPCA has not been included”.

Likewise, the call for a breeding moratorium has gone unheeded. “If there’s a breeding ban, someone forgot to tell the lions,” he said. “Cubs are everywhere. The breeding continues unchecked.”

Tiger breeding

As pressure mounts to end lion breeding, many facilities are pivoting to breeding exotic big cats, especially [tigers](#). “We’re already seeing a shift. Tigers are now being kept in conditions as bad — or worse — than those of lions,” Wolhuter warned.

These animals, often hybrids or of dubious genetic origin, are not protected under South Africa’s Threatened or Protected Species regulations. “There are virtually no laws governing how [tigers are bred, kept, or traded in this country](#),” he said. “They’re being stockpiled like commodities.”

Urgent steps

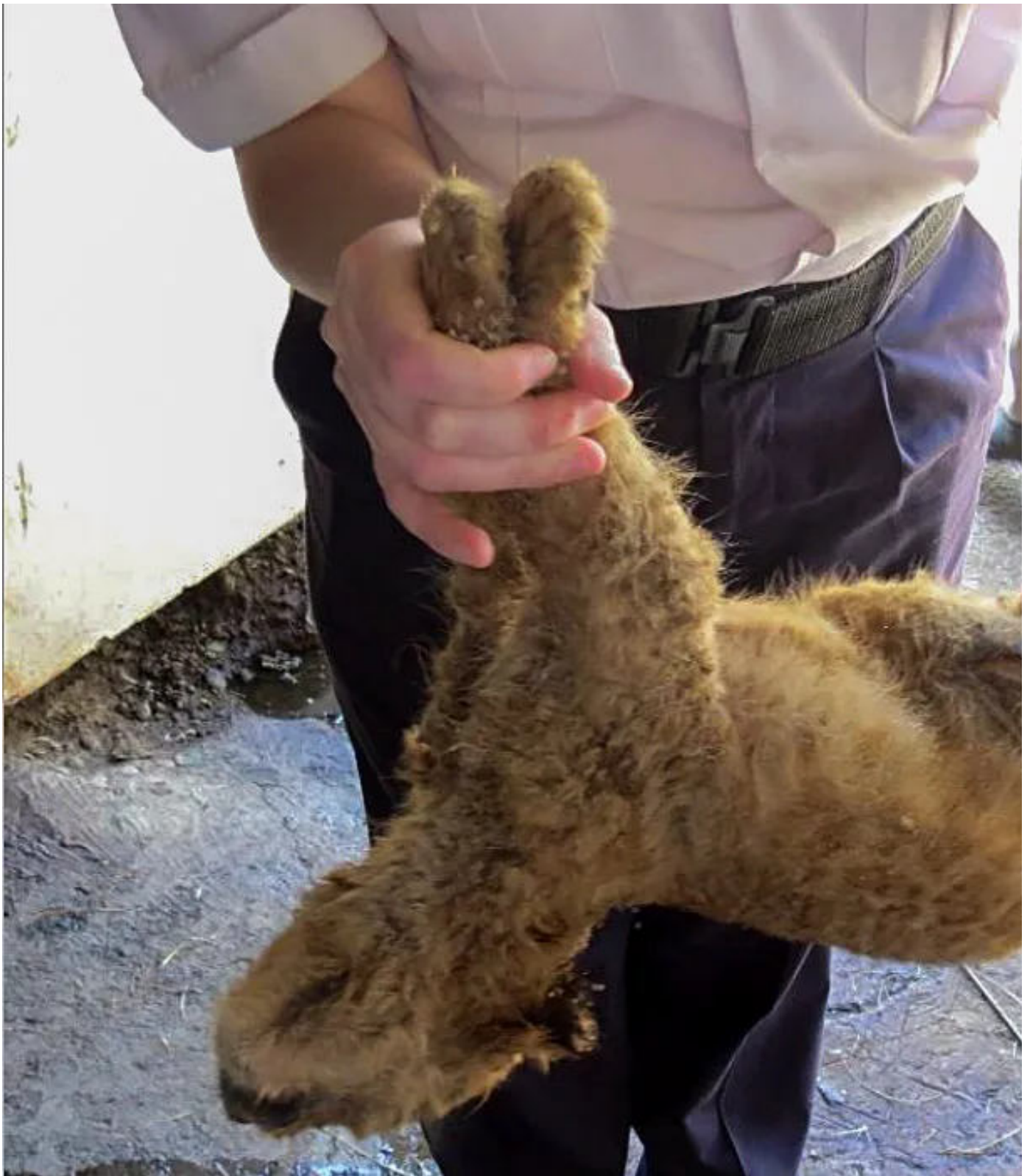
Wolhuter urged Parliament to act swiftly and decisively. “This industry is not just unethical — it’s illegal and it’s happening in plain sight,” he said. “We need to close these facilities. Not next year. Not after another task team. Now.”

The NSPCA is calling for:

- Immediate enforcement of the breeding moratorium;
- A government-funded joint audit of all captive lion and exotic big cat facilities, with the NSPCA involved as a legal requirement;
- Revamped penalties under the Animals Protection Act to reflect the seriousness of violations;
- A task-specific judicial unit to expedite wildlife cruelty cases; and
- A commitment that tigers and other exotics will not become the next victims of a collapsing regulatory framework.

At the heart of this debate is a question of ethics. As Wolhuter reminded Parliament, “Animal conservation cannot exist in isolation from animal wellbeing.” This principle, upheld by multiple Constitutional and High Court judgments, affirms the sentience of animals and the legal obligation to prevent their suffering.

For now, however, that legal obligation remains largely theoretical. “Nothing has changed,” said Wolhuter, showing an image of a discarded lion cub dumped like garbage at the back of a facility. “We saw this two years ago. We see it still today.”



The end of the road for a neglected cub. (Photo: NSPCA)

The NSPCA's criticism of the lack of implementation was excruciatingly apparent in the heart-wrenching images of abused animals.

The time for further discussion, Wolhuter argued, was over. "South Africa's reputation is at stake. Our legal system is being tested. And while we wait, lions suffer." **DM**

