



LONG LIVE THE KING

Plight of lions, particularly rare white lions, is in the spotlight at the CITES meeting this week, writes Claire Keeton

CLEOPATRA was very keen on Mandla. So keen that every time the tawny lioness came into oestrus she would leave her pride, swim across a river, dig under a fence and roar for the attention of the white lion who lived on a nearby reserve.

Mandla — at the time the only adult male white lion in the bush in South Africa — had been rescued by lion conservationist Linda Tucker from captivity and released at Timbavati, adjoining the Kruger Park, the only place where these unique lions are born wild.

But then things got complicated. After months of Cleopatra pursuing Mandla, the dominant male in her pride followed her and dug under a second fence to fight his rival. Mandla survived the bloody clash and Cleopatra was put on a contraceptive to stop her courtship.

But years later, when the drug wore off, she once again swam across the river and was back roaring to the white lion pride.

It was then that Tucker, founder of the Global White Lion Protection Trust, arranged to acquire Cleopatra and she was integrated into the white lion pride.

At the time the pride had three young lions sired by Mandla, so Cleopatra had to get another contraceptive implant.

This month, when she came back into oestrus, she finally got the chance to mate with two white lions, the sons of Mandla.

White lions, the species coveted by trophy hunters because they are so rare, have no special protection and went extinct in the wild from 1991 until 2006 when the trust reintroduced its founder pride.

In Africa, lion populations have plunged 43% in the past 20 years to about 20 000 lions, according to a recent report by three conservation NGOs, "Beyond Cecil: Africa's Lions in Crisis".

Protecting lions and banning canned hunting, which is rife in South Africa, are on the agenda at the 17th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, which started in Johannesburg yesterday.

When the Sunday Times visited the Timbavati reserve last week, the white lions pursued Cleopatra and another tawny lioness known as Tswalu, mating three to four times an hour around the clock for a few days.

For the first 48 hours Tswalu and the male Matsieng were inseparable, and Cleopatra hooked up with Zukhara.

When we saw them they had swapped partners and Zukhara, growling at a low pitch, was



WHITE LION FEVER: A male white lion engages in a mating ritual with a tawny lioness wearing a monitoring collar in the Timbavati region, Limpopo

Pictures: KEVIN SUTHERLAND

scentsing and mating with Tswalu. Cleopatra was on the move, with Matsieng padding a hopeful pace behind her.

Lion ecologist Jason Turner, who studies the critically endangered white lion prides, said: "This is unusual behaviour as normally other lions mate only when the dominant male is away. We were surprised to see the males swapped over."

White lions are at the centre of the killing industry in SA. Lion petting and canned hunting work together

The odds are against a tawny lioness giving birth to white cubs after mating with a white male. This can happen though if the tawny female has a white lion genetic marker, which is rare.

Tucker's conservation trust is working to boost the white lion gene pool in habitats where the lions are endemic. The trust has six white lions and four tawny lions in three prides in its Tsau! reserve on the Klaserie River.

Dispelling the myth that white lions — which are not albinos — cannot survive in the wild, Turner published research this year showing that they hunt as effectively as tawny lions.

Tucker said: "We have seen a drastic decline of lions in the wild while their numbers are escalating in captivity. White lions have been

forcibly removed from the endemic habitat where they occur naturally into breeding camps and zoos and they have been hunted.

"White lions are at the centre of the killing industry in South Africa. The lion-petting and canned-hunting industry work together. The same cubs which are hugged by visitors are hunted as trophies when they get too big," she said.

In South Africa there are about 2 500 lions in the wild compared to more than 6 000 in captivity. They are confined in lion-breeding/canned-hunting farms which are found mostly in North West and the Free State, she said.

Blood Lions, a documentary released in December, exposed this multimillion-dollar industry in

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A trade red in tooth and claw ...

CITES, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, is an agreement between 182 countries and the EU that aims to control the billion-dollar international trade in wild animal and plant species so that it does not threaten their survival.

Roughly 35 600 species are protected by the treaty, which has helped to prevent the extinction of many animals and plants.

But some conservationists warn that it does not go far

enough to prevent the overexploitation of endangered species.

The illegal trafficking of wildlife, worth roughly \$20-billion (about R280-billion) a year, is ranked as the fourth-largest organised crime arena in the world after illicit arms trading, counterfeit goods and human trafficking.

Member states attend the Conference of the Parties held every two to three years, where they discuss and vote on the level of protection needed for a species.

Species are listed under three appendices:

- Appendix I includes species threatened with extinction. Trade in these species is permitted only in exceptional circumstances;
- Appendix II includes species not necessarily threatened with extinction, but in which trade must be controlled to ensure their survival; and
- Appendix III lists species named by at least one country that has asked other countries for co-operation in controlling their trade.