

domestic hell

Humans have been domesticating animals for almost as long as they have been in existence, and they are still doing it. But, asks **Ian Michler**, why? There is no justifiable need to breed, for example, a lion that is white. And certainly no need if the only purpose is to provide a sought-after trophy.



IAN MICHLER

IN MANY WAYS, DOMESTIC ANIMALS are unfortunate creatures. Almost everything they do is for the benefit of another life form. They exist primarily so that we humans can eat them, but they also carry us, clothe us, fetch balls for us, purr for us – they even win races for us. And have you noticed that many of them have such peculiar physical features? Just look at Chinese crested dogs, featherless chickens, pot-bellied pigs and even ordinary bulldogs.

Of course, they look and behave as they do because that's how they have been bred. It began when the survival of humans was inextricably tied to the natural world and now, centuries later, the continuous process of cross-breeding and in-breeding for human-selected traits has reduced many domestic species to caricatures. There are whole industries out there that are dedicated to wheedling all the elements of wildness out of them, with the result that we now control every aspect of their biology and being. Our complete domination over animals we regard as pets fosters the sentimental love we have for them.

Our relationship with wild animals is entirely different. For many people it's even more significant than that with pets, based as it is on an appreciation for their natural attributes and innate behaviour. And that's also why wild animals have become integrated into our culture, our mythology, our psyche and our poetry in a way that their domesticated counterparts could never be. Wild animals display an authenticity that neither we nor our domestic cohorts possess. They can run, soar or swim away at any moment. They are free, untamed, and for that reason we admire and love them with sheer

wonderment. And yes, some of them also look rather peculiar, but their forms are distinctive rather than silly and serve to confirm that natural selection rather than human tinkering shapes their wildness.

But then there are people who love wild animals so much that they 'feel the need to kill them'. I kid you not; some within the hunting fraternity explain that this is why they shoot an animal for the prize of a mounted trophy. There

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are even those who claim to get a 'special feeling' when pulling the trigger.

Trying to understand what lies behind these sentiments is for another discussion. The fact that this fraternity exists has led to southern Africa having a burgeoning industry that has begun the domestication process of many wild species. There is a growing band of farmers and businesspeople across the region who believe it is acceptable to manipulate the breeding of lions, wildebeest, sable, springbok, blesbok and rhinos, among other species – and there are authorities that allow this to take place.

Practices such as this raise a host of issues, but three substantive ones stand out. Firstly, there is no longer any justifiable reason to domesticate wild species; people continue to do so only because others are willing to pay substantial sums of money to hunt and kill the animals.

The human compulsion to domesticate wild creatures is taken to an extreme by imposing on this stuffed baboon trappings that are totally foreign to it.

Secondly, controlling the breeding of wild species goes against biodiversity conservation principles as embraced by the Convention of Biological Diversity (www.cbd.int) – and every country in the region is a signatory to this convention. On this basis alone, it is inexcusable that genetic manipulation is allowed.

Thirdly – and this is the greatest farce of all – the hunting industry that practises in-breeding and cross-breeding is the very same one that has staked its reputation on selling Africa as 'the dark continent', where dangerous and wild animals roam. It's a sick charade, in which breeders and hunters undermine the very essence of what they claim is integral to their business. Do these people – politicians and administrators included – feel no shame for the fraud and deceit they are involved in?

And, the despicable dishonesty aside, is no thought given to the long-term implications? It is not inconceivable that after a few generations of manipulated breeding (in lions it could take as little as a decade), animals will start to show first behavioural changes and then distinct morphological transformations. **AG**

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