

where have all the ethics gone?

It's well known that one of South Africa's treasures is its wildlife, and like any treasure it attracts certain people who feel the need to profit from it. But, asks **Ian Michler**, what makes this country in particular a haven for those who manipulate wild animals for their own ends?



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A FEW MONTHS AGO, THE SOUTH African press carried reports about a dispute between two 'wildlife parks' over the ownership of white tigers, one of which is going blind. It's an ongoing saga, and although at first glance it seems to be nothing more than an absurd catfight, more careful reflection reveals it to be an epitome of a far more sorrowful tale: South Africa's wildlife industry is sinking deeper and deeper into a state of degeneracy. The perception of wild animals as commodities is on the increase – and its growth comes at the expense of conservation, scientific and welfare considerations.

There are a number of aspects to the spat that emphasise this. Firstly, tigers – white or otherwise – do not occur naturally anywhere near Africa. Secondly, the two parties have no claims to be involved in the conservation of tigers or any other predator. And thirdly, it concerns animals of a rare morph that are unlikely to survive in the wild; indeed, the blindness is apparently a genetic disorder caused by repeated inbreeding. Inevitably, there are also links to the trophy hunting industry and breeding and petting facilities, as well as wildlife traders.

A summary of the evidence points to the two parks being engaged in some of the objectionable wildlife practices for which South Africa is becoming renowned. And instead of curbing them, the authorities seem either unable or unwilling to act.

How and why has this country become a haven for such practices and the criminal syndicates that feed off them? In my experience, the majority of the participants are representative of the old South Africa, and most grew up with a lifestyle that promoted the killing of wild animals as a leisure activity. But while this serves as an explanation up to a certain point, developments over the past two decades indicate that something far more alarming and deep-rooted has taken hold. To

understand what drives this thinking, we have to delve back into the apartheid era. In every way imaginable, apartheid was a violent system that sought to dominate and control all facets of life. It institutionalised prejudice, and there was no regard for human rights.

This archaic political and social thinking was in turn supported by an ultra-conservative religious belief system that still has followers today. According to the congregants, the scriptures separate mankind from his universe and in doing so legitimise any and every use of wildlife, for man is the master of all creatures.

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The apartheid mindset reinforced this viewpoint and, if you were an adherent, the idea of superiority and the use of brutality to enforce it became pervasive. What's more, the notion of animal rights had no place in such a tyrannical state. It was during this dark period of our history that the template was formed.

But such attitudes are not the only component. Colonialism and apartheid were also responsible for excluding South Africa's non-white population from gaining access to and enjoying the country's national parks and game reserves. The impact of more than 100 years of forced detachment from the wilderness was seen in the first years after independence in 1994, when the wildlife and conservation portfolios were relegated to the lowest rung of significance. The result was a vacuum in management, regulation and policing, which allowed opportunists within a burgeoning private-sector wildlife industry to flourish as they wished. When the government did become more actively involved, it embraced a wide-ranging transformation process that saw

Domesticating wild animals and breeding them for their rarity value is becoming a common practice in South Africa.

countless conservation officials from the old regime lose their jobs. Many were skilled and experienced, and quickly found situations in the private sector. Still bearing a sense of entitlement but now also disaffected and armed with inside knowledge of how the state and provincial systems worked, they set about exploiting the circumstances, at times with more than a hint of revenge.

I have spent a fair amount of time in this sector and whether dealing with operators or regulators, there is little evidence of what naturalist and writer Ian McCallum calls 'ecological intelligence'. There is no moral or ethical view towards wild animals, and the notion of biodiversity conservation or a greater-web-of-life thought process hardly registers. More recently, maladministration, inefficiency and a lack of funding on the regulatory side have exacerbated the situation.

Given this, what do today's practices tell us about the future of wildlife in this country? While there are some exemplary private initiatives and the national parks still function in a state of good health, the possible collapse of the provincial reserve systems and the manner in which wildlife is being domesticated on private farms does not bode well. These stories also need to be told.

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Ian McCallum's book *Ecological Intelligence* can be purchased at www.africageographic.com. Follow Ian Michler's take on other environmental issues at www.africageographic.com/blogs/?cat=5

