



Bred for profit: The truth about global wildlife farming



The time has come to end wildlife farming, for good. An investigation by World Animal Protection has uncovered the global scale of this cruel and exploitative industry. Wildlife farming is often portrayed as a solution to the conservation of wildlife species and as a safe and stable source of income for local communities. But in reality, this poorly-regulated multimillion-dollar industry can be catastrophic for animal welfare, and has the potential to cause widespread problems for public health and wild populations.

'Wildlife farming' is the breeding and raising of wild animals to sell live animals or their products for commercial gain^{1,2}. In this report, both the ranching (taken from the wild as eggs or young and raised in captivity) and breeding of wild animals for commercial purposes, are included in this definition.

During World Animal Protection's investigation into the global scale of wildlife farming, we found an astonishing lack of transparency and inadequate monitoring across the industry.

Based on the limited available data, our model estimates about 5.5 billion wild animals are currently being farmed globally*. While this figure is not a robust tally of global wildlife farmed, it is the best conservative estimate possible given the industry's lack of available data.

Untold suffering

These iconic wild animals – lions, elephants and bears to name a few – are being treated as a mere resource, ripe for exploitation and consumption. Wild animals are sentient beings who can only fully express their natural behaviour in the wild. In this industry, they are bred for profit and viewed as products, not living creatures who experience fear and pain. Captive in these farms, wild animals can suffer from malnourishment, disease, stress-induced behaviours, injuries, infected wounds, and even cannibalism. They endure a lifetime of suffering or have their lives cut short because of the horrible conditions they are kept in, or to be killed to supply the demand of commercial industries.

*This figure is based on the review of the scarce available data of wildlife farming examples over the past 20 years plus FOI requests and data modelling to develop a rough estimate for what the actual scale 'might' look like. Full detail of this calculation available in the report.

Our report provides three specific case studies of wild species exploited by commercial industries: lion farms in South Africa, elephant camps in Thailand and bear farms in China, all of which exemplify decades-long suffering for commercial use. Lions in South Africa are commercially bred for tourism, namely for trophy or ‘canned hunting’ and interactive petting experiences, as well as for their bones for use in traditional Asian medicine. Elephants in Thailand are bred for use at tourism camps where they are forced to perform for visitors, carry people for rides, and provide interactive entertainment on demand. Bears in China are farmed for their bile to be used as an ingredient in traditional medicine after wild populations were unable to fulfil the demand. These industries contribute to some of the worst examples of ongoing exploitation of wildlife for profit. Furthermore, these industries are enabled by national regulations that encourage the use of these animals as commodities.

Exploiting wildlife

In our report, we focused on some of the main industries supplied by wildlife farming: the pet trade, traditional Asian medicine, tourism and fashion. These have also been the focus of our long-standing campaigns to stop some of the cruellest forms of wildlife exploitation. In the pet industry, birds, reptiles and other wild animals are farmed to be sold as ‘exotic pets’, and sometimes even wild-caught animals are falsely declared as farmed to evade legal restrictions. Thousands of bears, tigers, lions, and millions of

turtles are bred in captivity to produce traditional Asian medicine, even though there are plant-based alternatives available. As part of the tourism industry, many wild animals such as lions and elephants are bred to entertain tourists, who are unaware of how much they are contributing to a lifetime of suffering for these animals. In the fashion industry, millions of animals including mink, foxes, raccoon dogs and ostriches are bred to die for their fur or feathers, just so they can be used in luxury fashion items. In many cases, there are only minimal welfare requirements for wildlife farms. This lack of regulation often leads to very poor captive conditions that cause immense suffering.

A public health risk

Wildlife farms also pose a risk to human health; the high numbers of animals, poor hygiene, and close contact between animals, their caretakers and visitors, increase the chance for disease emergence and transmission. Infectious diseases such as COVID-19 can spread in this way, as has been shown with the high number of animal species that are susceptible to the virus (eg lions, mink). Zoonotic disease outbreaks (infectious diseases that can spread between animals and people) are thought to cause more than two million human deaths every year and substantial human illness^{3,4}, and 72% of zoonotic diseases were of wildlife origin^{5,6}. Our existing surveillance systems are not adequate to fully detect diseases or the presence of new pathogens in wildlife⁷, heightening the risks to public health.

Photo: Group of lion cubs, recently separated from their mother, kept in a temporary cage, next to the cub interaction area. Cubs looked distressed, with fear. Used in lion tourism/farm exploitation in South Africa. Credit: World Animal Protection / Roberto Vieto



A threat to conservation

Some argue that wildlife farms could benefit conservation efforts by providing market competition and therefore reducing the incentive to take animals from the wild for money^{8,9}. But there is very little data from real-world case studies to support this theory. And on the contrary, in some cases, wildlife farming has been shown to negatively affect wild populations; low prices for farmed wildlife products can instead fuel demand and enable the illegal laundering of wild-caught animals through farms¹⁰. Escapes of species farmed beyond their native range can also put entire ecosystems at risk, since non-native species can alter these delicate ecosystems and hasten biodiversity loss^{11,12,13}.

These risks for human and animal health and wellbeing have immeasurable consequences. As well as the direct impact on people and wildlife, the cost of zoonotic diseases – particularly those that reach epidemic and pandemic scale – can have cascading effects that reach epic proportions for generations to come. Furthermore, the social and economic consequences can be particularly devastating for the rural communities in which many wildlife farms are located. These communities, whose livelihoods sometimes depend utterly on wildlife farms, see little of the vast profits the wildlife trade amasses. Instead, they bear the greatest economic burden when things go wrong, and often have to wait the longest for economic recovery^{14,15}. Wildlife farming is not a safe, reliable, or sustainable livelihood.

The way forward

Our report outlines potential solutions for governments to tackle the wildlife farming industry. Efforts should include new legislative policies, as well as actions to address demand and enforcement. This approach should focus on phasing out the industry and ending it for good, rather than improving conditions or regulations, as these wrongly bill wildlife farming as a business opportunity. The risks and negative impacts of wildlife farming on human health, animal welfare, conservation and biodiversity far outweigh any potential short-term monetary gain.

We can point to several positive examples of legislation that encourages wildlife protection. For example, in Ecuador the rights

of nature have been enshrined in the constitution, while in many European countries fur farming has been banned. Unfortunately, examples of legislation that encourages wildlife farming for profit are more widespread. In 2019, South Africa reclassified 33 wild animal species as production livestock¹⁶, and in Thailand, elephants are legally traded as livestock. Nepal also legalised commercial wildlife farming in 2022¹⁷, and Chinese legislation encourages commercial captive breeding¹⁸.

We need a holistic approach to create a responsible, permanent and worldwide shift away from wildlife farming. In addition to policy instruments, such an approach should consider:

- addressing public attitudes
- allocating resources to convert the industry and helping communities
- reducing demand and promoting alternatives
- developing programmes to help farmers currently depending on the industry; and
- working together with different interest groups to develop these solutions.

Wildlife farming treats animals as products, ignoring their sentience and their suffering. Farming wildlife is not only cruel, it also creates great risks for the health of human populations and threatens our ecosystems. When wildlife is suffering and their habitats are destroyed, we all pay the price.

Whether it be for the pet industry, luxury consumption, entertainment, decoration, or fashion – wildlife farming must end now. Wild animals belong in the wild and governments, the private sector, and individuals must prioritise efforts to ensure that they are protected in their natural habitats. This needs to happen for all wild animals, whether they are threatened with extinction or not, because every wild animal has the right to a wild life.

We must ensure this is the last generation of wildlife to suffer in captivity, and be farmed and exploited for commercial gain. It's time to end wildlife farming, for good.

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