

think before you walk

There's a decided feel-good factor to cuddling a lion cub or riding an elephant; it's something that, given half a chance, many of us would do without thinking twice. But would we be contributing to research and conservation, as wildlife-encounter operations claim? Probably not, says **Ian Michler**.



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OVER THE PAST DECADE THERE has been a proliferation of enterprises across Africa that offer interactive or close-encounter experiences with wildlife; sign up and you can walk or romp with a wild animal, cuddle it or even ride it. Such operations include primate and bird parks, elephant-back riding and diving with crocodiles, and the most popular are those that feature the large cats.

The abundance of experiences on offer may have something to do with the current trend in wildlife television programming, which fosters a provocative approach. It seems that almost every nature-based TV series aired today has staked its revenue stream on a lead character harassing wild animals and, if you believe the directors and marketers, they always do so in the name of education or for the benefit of science and conservation.

There is no doubt that humans feel a powerful emotional desire – even need – to be involved in caring for and conserving wild animals, and it is this sentiment that organised wildlife encounters so effectively tap into. But, if the truth be told, supporting such enterprises may well have the opposite effect.

Some of them take a frank approach and sell themselves for what they are – commercial ventures that rely on the lure of a 'touchy-feely' encounter. But there are many others that have a deceptive tagline, promoting themselves under the banner of conservation, science or education in an attempt to acquire legitimacy for their activities. And, although organisations such as these may be supported by a sector of the general public and some of the large local and international tour operators, they find little favour within the wider conservation and wildlife management communities.

These communities' attitude to the African Encounter and Antelope Park outfits that

run the 'Walk with Lions' operations in Zambia and Zimbabwe suggests that they, for example, fall into the latter category. Both are directly linked to the African Lion and Environmental Research Trust (ALERT), which attempts to legitimise their lion captive-breeding programmes and money-spinning tourist operations. It claims that charging visitors large sums of money to walk with sub-adult lions and cuddle captive-bred cubs is justified because the outfits are involved in data-collection and reintroduction programmes. Is it coincidence that they have set up shop in towns that draw substantial numbers of tourists to view the Victoria Falls, one of Africa's iconic sights?

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What's more, these outfits list a number of volunteer agencies as 'supporters'. Persuading foreign volunteers to pay for an African experience on the basis that the work they do is beneficial makes for an extremely lucrative business model. But further investigation reveals that most of the volunteer agencies are also linked to the ALERT network.

And, ALERT's vigorous efforts notwithstanding, not a single recognised carnivore conservation or research institution in Africa or elsewhere will have anything to do with it. Panthera, a respected global organisation involved in wild cat conservation (www.panthera.org), brings together the world's felid experts to direct and implement effective management strategies. Notable exceptions from this pool are ALERT and its sister bodies.

Having been eliminated from 70 per cent of its original range in Africa, the lion is in dire need of conservation whose foundation is hard research, not sentiment.

Dr Guy Balme, a well-published scientist on various issues relating to big cat conservation, is the director of Panthera's lion programme in Africa. 'Reintroducing captive-bred and human-imprinted lions into natural ecosystems is almost always problematic,' he says. 'The cats are typically killed by other lions or end up in conflict with neighbouring communities, often endangering human life. We need to focus instead on the key reasons for population declines – habitat loss and the indiscriminate killing of lions and their prey.'

As all conservationists know, income for their work is limited. 'It is very easy to raise money when cuddling cubs is involved, but these are tame animals with no chance of ever going back into the wild,' adds Balme. 'These organisations divert much-needed funding and attention away from legitimate carnivore conservation efforts.'

There's little doubt that lions are in dire need of protection; they've been eradicated from more than 70 per cent of their original range in Africa. But if you want to support lion conservation, get involved with the recognised organisations that are actively conserving wild populations and their habitats. **AG**

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