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African Responsible
Tourism Awards 2017
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WINNER



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To:

Mr Nicolas Woodman (CEO)

Ms Aimée Lopic (Senior Vice President, Chief Digital Officer)

Mr Rick Loughery (Vice President of Global Marketing and Communications)

GoPro

6th May 2022

Dear Nicolas Woodman, Aimée Lopic, and Rick Loughery,

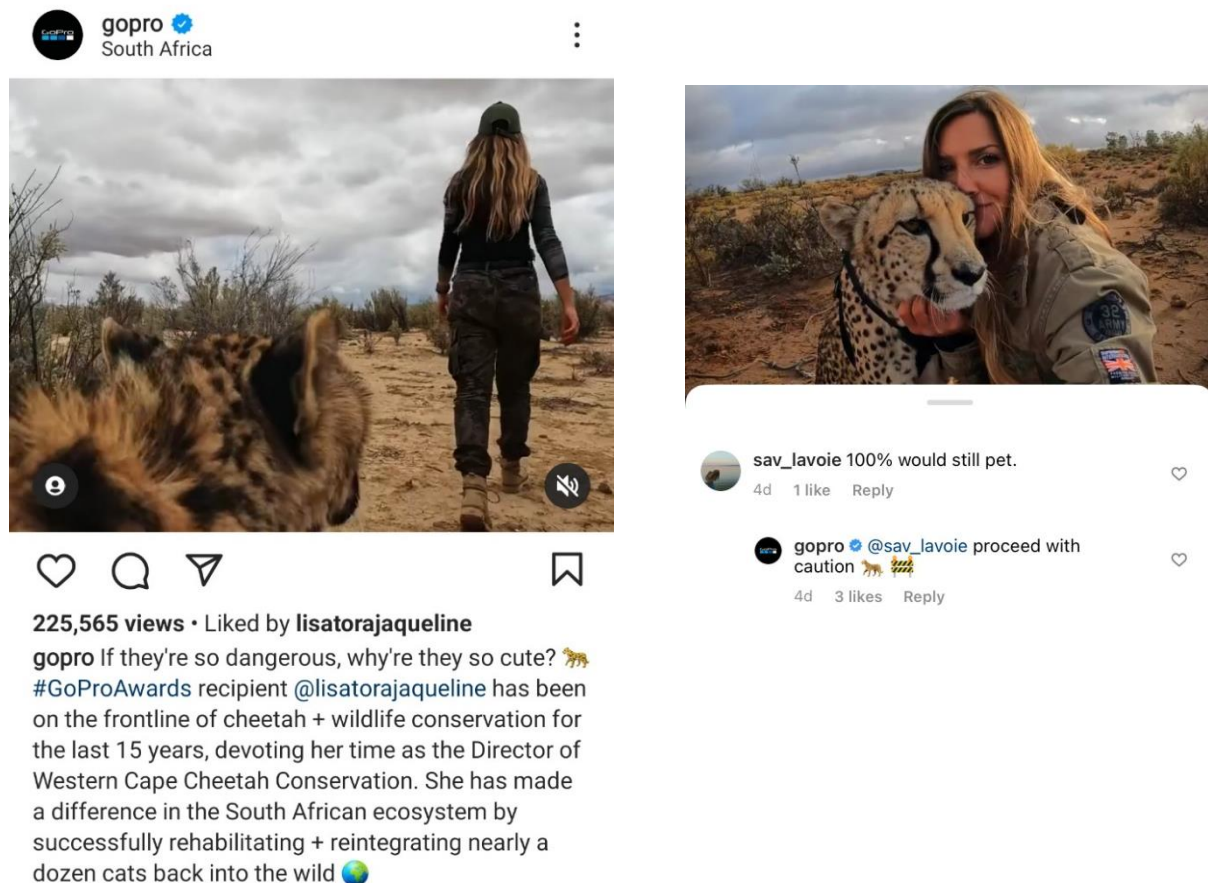
As a collective of 28 nature conservation and animal welfare organizations, we would like to bring the following to your attention.

Back in 25th February 2020, Blood Lions wrote to GoPro International and GoPro South Africa with regards to a social media post on [Instagram](#), [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#), showing a young woman physically interacting with a cheetah. It appeared that this woman was in partnership with GoPro to create footage for use as advertising material and appeared to live and work on a so-called 'sanctuary' in Gauteng (South Africa) that openly allows interactions with their lions, cheetahs, and other wildlife.

After a lengthy conversation involving a number of GoPro employees in South Africa, Germany and the USA, the post was eventually taken down from the GoPro SA platforms, although it remained on the GoPro International platforms.

On the 7th March 2022, GoPro posted yet another post to both their International and South African accounts, with a video of the same woman (a GoPro Awards recipient) interacting with cheetahs.

Unfortunately, there does not appear to have been a fundamental policy shift by GoPro on this issue, despite sensitisation to the serious concerns regarding such practices.



We would like to remind you of the many reasons why sharing this kind of content with your 19+ million followers is not only irresponsible but potentially damaging to South Africa's tourism and conservation reputations.

- 1) South Africa is well-known for its **intensive captive predator breeding industry**, although cheetah breeding has never received the same exposure that the lion breeding receives. However, as with lions, captive bred cheetah cubs are taken away from their mothers within days of birth to be hand-reared, which starts the habituating process. They are then used for petting and walking with cheetah activities, and as photo props from a few weeks old until fully grown adults, who then receive the status of "ambassador species".

We can only make an educated guess on the number of cheetahs in captivity in South Africa, which is an estimated 600-1,000 cheetahs in 80 breeding and tourism facilities. The Hoedspruit Endangered Species Centre alone houses more than 100 cheetahs.

Many of these facilities breed under the **guise of conservation with promises of reintroduction into the wild** and for the preservation of genetic material. However, reintroductions of captive-bred cheetahs into South Africa's meta-population that support conservation of the species in the wild are at the most a handful every year. In addition, this process should only be carried out by selected facilities applying strict internationally recognised protocols for captive-bred animals, which would certainly exclude the kind of interactions featured in the post in question.

- 2) **So where do these cheetahs go?** South Africa is the top exporter of live cheetahs in the world and most of these animals are legally exported under CITES. Between 2008-18, South Africa exported 422 live cheetahs across the world with the top three importers being China (101 animals), USA (64 animals), and United Arab Emirates (UAE) (47 animals).

This trend is extremely worrying, as the suffering for these animals both on the breeding side of the trade in South Africa and once imported overseas is unimaginable. We know for example that the “pay-to-play” industry in zoos in the United States is huge. Despite the fact that private ownership of exotic pets in the UAE was outlawed in 2017, many cheetahs are still bought as a status symbol. The Gulf region is a key transit and destination country for illegally sourced and traded cheetah, and no country in the region explicitly criminalizes all activities along the entire trade chain for illegally sourced wildlife. The welfare and wellbeing of wild animals in Chinese zoos and entertainment parks are generally well below globally accepted norms and standards.

- 3) It is becoming ever more evident that the exploitation of wild animals in captivity for human entertainment, such as cub petting and cheetah interactions, is increasingly considered to be unethical by society at large. There is a **growing global social movement towards sustainable and responsible travel** witnessed on platforms such as [TripAdvisor](#), [Instagram](#), [Airbnb](#) and [Expedia](#). In October 2019, the [New York Times](#) reported on Airbnb’s new featured offering of “animal experiences,” which will have an ethical focus and will ban any direct contact with wild animals. In March 2019, the [New York Post](#) reported on a survey revealing that 57% of respondents said they want tour companies to have responsible wildlife policies. The respondents included riding on elephants, swimming with dolphins and posing with wildlife for photos on their list of unethical activities that they would not repeat.
- 4) **The types of ‘tactile interactions’** seen in this video **have been labelled as unacceptable** by the Southern African Tourism Services Association (SATSA) in their [Captive Wildlife Interaction Guidelines](#) that received formal support from the [National Department of Tourism](#) (NDT).

In conjunction with South African Tourism, SATSA undertook 12 months of research and rigorous, country-wide stakeholder engagement workshops, surveys, and feedback sessions in all nine provinces in South Africa. These were open to all SATSA members, as well as the wider tourism industry and other interested and affected parties that intersect with the tourism industry.

SATSA’s “line in the sand” clearly indicates what is generally believed to be ethically acceptable and what is not, and follows many of the international standards for wildlife tourism, such as the [ANVR guidelines](#). The [Association of British Travel Agents](#) (ABTA) released their revised captive wildlife interaction guidelines in December 2019, closely following the SATSA guidelines.

It is evident that we are experiencing a global shift in the way the tourism industry and tourists view ethical and responsible travel, which does not equate to a popularity contest, but a **global movement that increasingly recognises animals as sentient beings**.

- 5) Earlier this year, the SATSA six steps decision-tree was applied by [WildChoices](#) to **assess all 220+ captive wildlife tourism facilities in South Africa**, in order to make more ethical and informed decisions on captive wildlife easier for tourism professionals and visitors.

The shocking statistics that came to light from this exercise were that 64% of all facilities in South Africa fall straight into the Avoid category and a further 19% into the Support with Caution category. Less than 17% of the facilities assessed fall into the Support category.

- 6) More than 200 South African and international tour operators have signed the Blood Lions [Born to Live Wild pledge](#), committing to securing the survival of South Africa’s predators in the wild by supporting and **promoting South Africa as an authentic, wild and responsible tourism destination**.
- 7) The draft Policy Position on the Conservation and Ecologically Sustainable Use (gazetted in June 2021) that followed a year-long process of a High-Level Panel appointed by Minister Creecy of

Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, speaks clearly of the intention to **increase wildness, naturalness and wellbeing of fauna in conservation policy**, as well as moving away from a small, captive, insular approach to a landscape approach, bringing South Africa more in line with the rest of the world and Africa. It has now been widely accepted that these kinds of unethical captive wildlife practices create reputational damage to South Africa's tourism and conservation standing.

- 8) Habituated or not, these animals are **predators and their instinct remains wild**, which can lead to serious injury or even death, when people interact with them, especially when they are hungry, irritated, or tired. We are aware of **50+ incidents involving captive lions, tigers and cheetahs** that have been reported in the media and at the same time we know that many more go unreported.

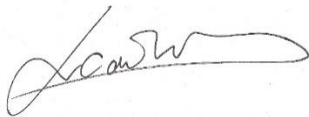
The showcasing of footage of interactions with wildlife on social media normalizes the activity and will further stimulate the human desire to have close up interactions with wildlife and iconic big cats in particular. The detrimental impact of such footage extends far beyond the individual animal used, as it simultaneously glorifies the cruel and unsuitable breeding and keeping of wild animals in captivity for commercial purposes and as pets.

By partnering with people who openly promote such behaviour, GoPro appears to be endorsing the captive breeding and exploitation of wild animals. As a leading videography and photography equipment producer with a strong global presence, and at a time of serious crisis for biodiversity, it is imperative that GoPro acts in synchrony with public sentiment in order to stay on top of current trends and ensure the ethical promotion of wildlife and the natural world.

We respectfully request that the said footage is removed immediately from all platforms to prevent further damage and a public pledge is made by GoPro to cease promoting these kinds of interactions with wild animals, and instead to adopt an approach that is consistent with high standards of wildlife conservation and animal welfare.

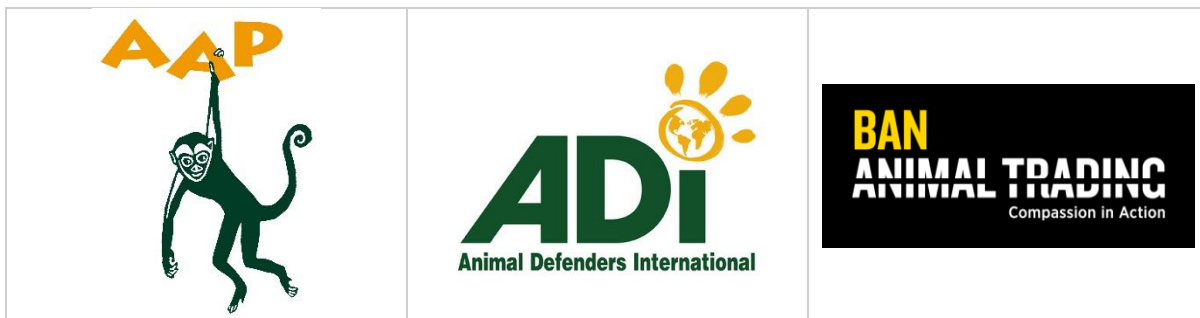
Please don't hesitate to contact us should you have any further queries.

With warm regards,



Dr Louise de Waal
Blood Lions (Director)

On behalf of the following nature conservation and animal welfare organisations:



WILD CHOICES

