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K I L L E R C A T S

THE DANGERS OF CAPTIVE CARNIVORE INTRODUCTIONS

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PREAMBLE

They say the path to hell is paved with good intentions, and that is certainly true of this subject. Here is how it typically plays out: a well-meaning villager finds a tiny tiger or leopard cub at the edge of a jungle. Believing it to be abandoned, he takes it to the nearest Forest Office, where a well-meaning Forest Officer takes pity on the helpless but adorable orphan, and decides to raise it with the help of a well-meaning NGO. 18 months later, when the cub is nearly full grown, unmanageable and expensive to care for, the surrogate parents decide that the noble thing to do is to return it to its “rightful home”, the jungle. The problem is, the hand-raised cat has no idea how to survive in this alien place. Some days or weeks after being “set free”, the lost, starving and disoriented predator pounces on an unsuspecting human, inflicting horrendous injuries or death. The victim’s enraged kin attack the local forest office in retribution and, under tremendous pressure, the Forest Department is forced to shoot the cat or capture it and send it to a zoo. The photographs below depict one such incident from Karnataka, which has since stopped the practice of releasing captive big cats into the wild. However, more such releases are being contemplated in other states, and, in all probability, more poor and powerless local people will die as a result.



Released leopard kills a human



Angry local people go on a rampage



Released cat is hunted down

Must more innocent lives be lost before this reckless practice is banned in India?

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Introduction

The desire to return captive raised big cats to the wild probably stems from a romantic misinterpretation of wildlife conservation. To better understand this “feel good” fad, which is currently sweeping through India, we must go back in time, to *Born Free*, the 1966 family movie based on a best-selling book by Joy Adamson. The film became a worldwide hit for its touching portrayal of the trials and tribulations of introducing a hand-raised lioness, Elsa, into the wilds of Africa. Although no one could have guessed it back then, *Born Free* sparked off similar “rehabilitation” experiments in India, and its deadly legacy continues to leave a trail of disasters.

Rewind - the Elsa saga and beyond

In 1956, Joy Adamson’s husband, George Adamson, a Game Warden in Kenya, was tracking down a man-eating lion, when a lioness suddenly charged him. After shooting her dead, he discovered the three young cubs she was defending, and took them home for adoption. As the cubs grew bigger – and became troublesome to handle – the two larger ones were sent off to a zoo in Europe, while the smallest of the trio, Elsa, stayed with the Adamsons. Joy was apparently insistent that Elsa be returned to nature; so, when the cub was old enough, the couple began preparing her for a future in the wild by taking her out for familiarizing walks in the bush around their camp. Elsa’s natural instincts began to kick in, and, slowly, she got the hang of stalking and killing wild prey. However, when she began to wander away from the camp, she was attacked by other lions, went hungry or fell sick, and the Adamsons had to provide her with food and nurture her back to health. Indeed, they apparently believed that she might not have made it in the wild if wasn’t for their frequent ministrations.

The rehabilitation experiment was considered a success when a fully-grown Elsa disappeared into the wild one day and reappeared some months later with three cubs of her own. But the euphoria did not last long; Elsa fell sick when her cubs were just a year old and died from suspected tick fever. Her offspring soon became a nuisance, attacking domestic livestock and earning the ire of local herders. Fearing that the cubs might be killed in retribution, the Adamsons managed to capture and release them in the wild expanse of the Serengeti in Tanzania. However, it is not clear how well the cubs fared there, or for how long they survived.



Soon, George Adamson found his hands full with more lions, as it had been decided that three of the captive big cats that starred in *Born Free* would also be released into the wild. Having learnt from the Elsa experience that it's tough for a single lion to survive in the wild, Adamson decided that he would create a captive pride and release them together. The project seemed to be going well until disaster struck one fateful day in 1969 when one of Adamson's lions, Boy, deliberately attacked Mark, the 3-year old son of Peter Jenkins, a Game Warden. The child had been sitting inside a vehicle, when the lion reached in and grabbed his head and then seized him by the arm. Luckily, thanks to his father's presence of mind, Mark survived the ordeal. But in that instant, local support for Adamson's lion rehabilitation project evaporated. Many believed that he was raising potential man-eaters. Adamson had no choice but to move with Boy to Kora, an undisturbed 750 sq km area of thorn scrub. While he continued adding more lions to the 'pride', nature took its toll on them through predation and fights with wild lions. Perhaps predictably, disaster struck again, with Boy killing one of Adamson's African assistants, a man who had helped raise him for many years. This time Adamson had no choice but to shoot the beast. In the pre-Internet era during which all this took place, these cautionary incidents did not receive widespread publicity, and the world at large only remembers the fairy tale of Elsa, the lioness that was "set free".

Reality check

Whichever way you look at it, releasing captive-raised big cats into the wild is irresponsible. To learn how to survive, wild cubs undergo an 18 to 24 month apprenticeship under their mother's tutelage. Even so, about half don't make it to adulthood, succumbing to hunger, disease, natural calamities or aggression from other big cats. The challenges are even greater for cubs raised by human surrogate parents.

A captive big cat that is released into an area inhabited by its wild cousins stands a high chance of getting into a territorial fight with a member of its own species. Such fights can result in severe injuries, or even death, to one or both contestants, negating any perceived benefits of the rehabilitation exercise.



And unlike wild tigers and leopards, which give humans a wide berth and rarely pose any threat, hand-raised predators are extremely dangerous to humans because they not only have no fear of people, but in fact associate them with food. A hungry, “rehabilitated” big cat will not hesitate to approach a human settlement in search of food, and kill livestock or even people, inviting retribution. Such retaliation, which usually takes the form of poisoning kills, may result in the deaths of many big cats in the area, including those that have never harmed any humans. Thus, rather than doing any good, releasing captive big cats into the wild actually does a lot of harm by increasing conflict and worsening community hostility towards the Forest Department and wildlife.

Copycats

There are several Elsa-like tales of captive big cats from India. In the mid 70s, Saroj Raj Choudhury, the then Field Director of the Simlipal Tiger Reserve in Orissa, raised an orphaned tiger cub in his house. He called her Khairi, after the river on whose banks she was found. Fortunately, Choudhury made no attempt to “rehabilitate” her into the wild, and she lived a pampered life in his home until succumbing to disease while still in her prime.

About a year or so after Choudhury adopted Khairi, the late, legendary, ‘Billy’ Arjan Singh adopted Tara, a tiger cub of mixed blood from the Twycross Zoo in the UK. Like with Elsa, Arjan Singh’s plan was to raise Tara to adulthood and then release her into the wild. By this time, Singh was quite experienced with rearing big cats, having brought up three leopards – Prince, Harriet and Juliet - that roamed freely at *Tiger Haven*, his farm adjoining the Dudhwa National Park. He chronicled these experiences in popular books and was featured in television documentaries. Dieter Plage, a well-known wildlife filmmaker working for Survival Anglia, made an entrancing film called *The Leopard That Changed its Spots* in 1977, about Harriet’s life at *Tiger Haven*. Unfortunately, this film only reinforced the fable that large predators could be rehabilitated into the wild with no adverse consequences. The fact is, the semi-tame, semi-wild Prince mauled two young girls and fatally injured the eight-year old son of Singh’s elephant keeper; Harriet not only killed a young boy sleeping in a room on the farm, but also attacked the teenage daughter of one friend, and the wife of another on separate occasions. Both women escaped with their lives thanks to Singh’s intervention.



These incidents however did not deter him from releasing Tara, the zoo tiger, into Dudhwa, where she reportedly mated with wild males and produced several litters of cubs. Two months after Tara was “returned to nature”, a cart man was killed by a tiger nine kilometers west of *Tiger Haven*, the first such incident in the region in 20 years. This was the beginning of a spate of man-eating events that claimed nearly 200 people during a span of ten years. Local forest officials, with whom Singh had a running battle over various issues, blamed Tara, citing her lack of fear of humans. Singh disagreed vehemently and sought evidence. While the identity of the man-eater was never established, about 13 tigers were killed in retaliation during that decade.

Fast Forward, Karnataka

In the late 1990s, and again in 2011, Vishalakshi Devi and her husband Gajendra Singh, who run *Tusker Trails*, a wildlife resort in Mangala Village near the Bandipur Tiger Reserve in Karnataka, raked up controversy and concern with their attempts to “rehabilitate” several “orphaned” leopards, which were brought to them as cubs. Some of the shocking events that unfolded during their rehabilitation endeavours - as well as those by other “animal lovers” in Karnataka - are chronicled in an article titled *Who let these cats out?* by Jay Mazoomdaar, a freelance wildlife journalist.

Piecing together information available from several reliable eyewitnesses, this is the story that emerges: Even when they were full grown, the first two *Tusker Trails* leopards, Bully and Baby, were very affectionate and playful with Devi, Singh and the other keepers. But whenever any strangers approached their enclosure, particularly children or women, Bully, the male, would go into a crouch and start behaving like the predator that he was. Baby, the female, would sometimes follow suit, although she generally had a more docile disposition.

On one occasion, when both leopards were on leashes, and resting in the forest with their keepers after a long walk, Bully, who spied a filmmaker’s companion 30 m away, charged without warning, and sunk his canines into her neck. It took the combined might of several people to pry his jaws open and free the stricken victim. The serious puncture wounds and lacerations required nearly 40 stitches by a skilled surgeon, but, fortunately, the canines had narrowly missed the spine and any major blood vessels.



Notwithstanding this near-fatal incident, arrangements were made to release both leopards into the jungle. Initially, they were shifted to a “half-way house”, a large enclosure specially constructed within the core area of Bandipur Tiger Reserve. Everyday a vehicle from the resort – sometimes carrying select tourists – would ferry meat to the leopards. After they were released from the enclosure and “set free”, the semi-tame big cats’ habit of accosting people and jumping on vehicles, spooked forest personnel into abandoning their patrolling duties in the area.

Within a month of the release, Bully was found dead with deep wounds on his body. It was inferred that he had been gored to death by a large ungulate, which he had probably tried to tackle in his inexperience. Baby, however, lived for several years in the Bandipur forest and is said to have produced three litters.

A decade later, perhaps encouraged by the partial success of their first attempt, Devi and Singh undertook to “rehabilitate” three large leopard cubs that had become unmanageable for the Forest Officials who were raising them. After being kept in an enclosure in the forest for “acclimatization”, they were radio collared and released on January 15, 2011. Neither tourists nor people living on the forest fringes were warned. Tragedy struck on June 1, 2011, when one of the released leopards attacked a *Jenu Kuruba* man walking in the forest with four others, killing him, and severely wounding a companion who came to his rescue. In the pandemonium that ensued, the leopard is said to have received an injury to its spine, which reportedly resulted in its death. The matter however was hushed up, and the remaining *Jenu Kurubas* in the group were threatened with dire consequences if they spoke about the incident.

Just three weeks after this deadly encounter, a Forest Official released four hand-reared leopards, which had been raised with the help of an amateur “conservation group”, *Vanamitra*, into the Bhadra Tiger Reserve. Two weeks later, one of the leopards attacked and killed an unsuspecting 20-year old student who was walking outside the reserve, and mauled his brother and a companion who went to the rescue. Incensed locals ransacked the nearby Forest Office and burnt down a jeep. Two days later, one of the released leopards attacked a forest department party in the same area, and was shot dead. Subsequently two of the released leopards were trapped by the Forest Department and transferred to the Bannerghatta Biological Park in Bengaluru.



In this latest round of “rehabilitations” in Karnataka, at least three people died and three were wounded seriously due to the reckless actions of “well-meaning” animal lovers and officials. ***Born Free*** had struck again.

Following the Bhadra incident, the issue was discussed at a meeting of the Karnataka State Board for Wildlife on July 26, 2011. The proceedings of the meeting record the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (Wildlife) and Chief Wildlife Warden’s statement as follows: “The PCCF (WL) expressed that no more hand rearing of leopards and tigers will be carried out and released into the wild” (sic). Karnataka thus became the first state in the country to officially stop this practice.

2011, Ranthambhore

In the winter of 2007, villagers found an injured leopard cub and handed it over to the local forest *chowki* (outpost) at Balas, which is at the edge of the Man Singh Sanctuary, a part of the Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve (RTR). Initially the park authorities took the right decision to send the cub to a zoo, but, apparently **due to pressure from local activists**, they decided that she would be brought up in the *chowki*. The cub, named Lakshmi, was attended to by a vet and recovered from her injuries. All through her period of growing up she was in close contact with lots of people – the Forest Guards, the General Manager of a big resort that was helping with her upkeep, local people, tourists, and government officials. She was housed in a large enclosure with a 6 m high chain-link fence; although she could have climbed a tree within the enclosure and escaped using its overhanging branches, she did not show any inclination to do so.

When she was about 2 years old, her custodians started letting her out of the enclosure overnight, but she usually ran back to the *chowki*. Once, she went into a nearby village and sat under someone’s cot. Luckily, there was no untoward incident and the Forest Guards brought her back. Another time, she charged at some local women who managed to repulse her by throwing stones. Such incidents began to recur frequently, creating panic amongst the local people.



The Forest Department soon realized that she could create a lot of trouble, and moved her enclosure to Kuwalji Forest Range (at the edge of RTR), where human density is lower. She is fed baited animals (goats or buffalo calves) and has to be kept in the enclosure most of the time. She is radio collared, and has a retinue of staff to look after her (staff who would otherwise be patrolling the forest to help keep wild leopards and tigers safe). Her minders are deeply worried that an accident is waiting to happen.

2011, Maharashtra

At the time of writing this (end of October 2011), the Maharashtra edition of *The Times of India* has reported that three tigers that were rescued from the Dhaba forest range in Gondpipri in Chandrapur district in September 2009 and brought up in association with a Nagpur based NGO, *Srushti*, may be shifted to an enclosure in the Pench Tiger Reserve (Maharashtra). The report goes on to say that on October 4, 2011, a 2-man team from the Wildlife Institute of India, a scientist and a veterinarian, spent 2 hours inspecting the tigers, and subsequently submitted a report to the Forest Department stating that the three big cats were suitable candidates for release into the wild. A final decision on whether to release the trio into the wild or not will apparently be taken by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA). At the time of writing no decision appears to have been taken. However, through a letter dated September 13, 2011, the Ministry of Environment and Forests, Project Tiger Division, sanctioned a sum of Rs.105 Lakhs (about US\$ 210,000) for “Construciotn (sic) enclosure for Tiger cubs in Comptt. No. 543 with all necessary provisions (Already proposed vide PCCF (WL) No D-22 (6)/Plan4120).”

The government’s idea of shifting the three tigers to a 4 ha “halfway house” enclosure in the forest and driving prey into it for them to kill, is bound to run into a number of ethical and practical problems, which it apparently has not foreseen. Big cats enclosed in a small area with their prey are likely to go on a predatory rampage, killing more than required. In their bid to flee, the panicked herbivores will probably injure themselves on the fence in droves. Faced with a public relations disaster, officials will end up releasing the tigers posthaste into the wild, with all parties washing their hands off the matter. Sooner or later, the tigers will start killing livestock or people, and will either be poisoned by local people or will have to be shot or recaptured by the Forest Department. *Deja vu.*

Insanity ~ doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results - Albert Einstein.



Expert opinion concerning the release of captive big cats into the wild

Biological and conservation implications

Dr.K. Ullas Karanth, Senior Scientist, Wildlife Conservation Society

“The numbers of big cats supported in any forest area is firmly set by the available prey numbers. There are very few situations in India where prey numbers indicate there is room for introducing big cats. If captive cats are introduced, in most cases either they will get killed by resident cats, or in a more unlikely scenario, the introduced cat may kill and replace an already resident cat. Clearly, there is no conservation gain, and the most likely outcome is predation on livestock and local people by the introduced cat, followed by a huge backlash of anger against nature reserves and predators in general...we do not need this at all. The only way to recover and increase big cat populations is to stop poaching of the cats and their prey...thereafter numbers will bounce back in a decade or two to reach potential carrying capacity; all this is hard work and there are no short cuts...but predator recoveries in many Indian reserves show this is possible...”

Behavioural and social implications

Vidya Athreya, Wildlife Biologist

“A mother is absolutely crucial for the development of a cub’s skill and temperament. Hunting and survival skills apart, the mother also teaches her cubs to avoid humans. This is especially important in India where people are literally everywhere. When raised in captivity, cubs do not fear or avoid humans. Set free, such big cats are attracted to people, who invariably panic at the sight of a tiger or leopard, react aggressively, and invite counter aggression. Even a playful, young, hand-raised tiger or leopard is a powerful carnivore with fearsome weaponry in terms of claws and canines. When released in the wild, they can be extremely dangerous, and willfully turn on people - either due to their inability to hunt wild animals, or upon discovering how easy it is to bring down humans. If local people learn that a released animal has attacked a person, the life of the local forest staff, and the Forest Department’s property, will be endangered, not to mention the fate of the released animal, as was seen when a tiger released on the Maharashtra - Chattisgarh border was stoned to death”.



Veterinary implications

Dr. Aniruddha Belsare, Wildlife Veterinarian

“Animals in captivity are potential hosts to a number of pathogens and parasites, which they pick up from other animals, the food they eat or the humans around them. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and other international bodies have specified health-screening protocols to be followed prior to release. Before any big cat is introduced into the wild it needs to undergo a rigorous regimen of periodic medical examination, such as a complete blood count, serum chemistry profile, urine analysis and fecal examination. A captive animal could easily be carrying a potentially dangerous disease, but be asymptomatic. The potentially dangerous organisms harboured by such animals may become pathogenic under conditions of stress in a new environment. Worse still, the destructive pathogens may have devastating effects on native wildlife”.

Legal implications

Praveen Bhargav, Managing Trustee, Wildlife First

“The legal implications of introducing captive animals into the wild are twofold:

- 1. Welfare of wildlife populations:** Section 33 (b) of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 mandates that the Chief Wildlife Warden shall take steps to ensure the security of wild animals. It is a well established concept in law that all decisions taken must be in the larger public interest. Given the potential hazards posed by introduced captive animals, it is imperative that a Chief Wildlife Warden prioritize security of the free living wild animal populations in a Protected Area over the welfare of the captive individuals.
- 2. Welfare of humans:** Although it can be claimed that all such introductions are undertaken in “good faith”, the fact that there exists a high probability of a released animal causing injury or death to humans is well known. If such an event occurs, an affected person or his or her kin could invoke Section 304 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) (**culpable homicide not amounting to murder**) or IPC Section 338 (**causing grievous hurt by act endangering life or personal safety of others**)”.



Summary

- The goal of conservation is not the welfare of every individual wild animal, but the safeguarding of free-living wild populations in their natural habitats. Protecting predators and their prey from poaching – and preventing the destruction of their habitat – will ensure a natural increase in numbers over time.
- Rearing big cats in captivity and releasing them into the wild does more harm than good to conservation. It is not only a huge drain on resources, but is also dangerous for both the big cats and humans. The captive-raised predators, lacking the long apprenticeship that they would have had with their mother in the forest, are ill equipped to survive in the wild, especially amongst other large and fiercely territorial carnivores.
- In the wild, big cats have a clear social structure. The ad hoc release of a strange individual into an area already inhabited by other wild big cats could lead to conflict with a resident animal, resulting in injuries or death to one or both contestants.
- When unable to hunt natural prey, hand-reared predators, which have no fear of humans, are more than likely to turn into livestock lifters and man-eaters. This poses a grave threat to local people, and endangers all the wild big cats in the area, as the victims or their kin may take matters into their own hands and indiscriminately kill any leopard or tiger they find in the vicinity in an attempt to get rid of the problem animal. In fact the Ministry of Environment and Forest's ***Guidelines for Human-Leopard Conflict Management*** clearly states that *"cubs that are hand-reared in captivity have a negligible possibility of future release back to the wild. Lifetime care is the only suitable option for such cubs, since their release in the wild even after a long term rehabilitation process may only worsen the already existing conflict situation"*.
- A great majority of such releases have resulted in failure or tragedy, or both. Many human lives have been lost and, in many cases, the released cats themselves have not survived. In other instances they have had to be recaptured or put down after injuring or killing people.



- Once imprinted on humans, big cats do not forget that association for a long time. Arjan Singh's experiences with his leopards and Vishalakshi Devi and Gajendra Singh's experiences with Baby testify to this. A graphic demonstration of the effects of imprinting can be seen in the YouTube hit video, *Christian the Lion*, the true story of a pet lion that was released in the wilds of Africa. In the video, Christian can be seen exuberantly greeting and nuzzling his former owners – after being away from them for a full year in the wild. A similar reunion with Christian took place two years later, demonstrating that a hand-reared big cat can remember its association with humans for at least two years. However, just because captive-raised predators are “affectionate” to their keepers, it should not be assumed that they would be “friendly” to everyone. In fact, it has been proven again and again that these cats can and will attack other human beings without warning.
- Incidentally, all Indian big cats are protected under Schedule I of the Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972. Raising or owning them – by anyone other than a Central Zoo Authority (CZA) authorized zoo – is a serious offense under the Wildlife Protection Act. If the rearing takes place in a Project Tiger area, it may require additional approval by the NTCA.

Sound reasons *against* the introduction of captive cats into the wild:

- 1) High risk to human life, including danger to Forest Department field staff
- 2) High cost of feeding and housing, and cost of monitoring after release
- 3) High degree of failure (virtually all attempts in India have been disasters)
- 4) Backlash from local people in case of mishaps
- 5) High cost of compensation for resultant human injuries and deaths
- 6) Potential for disease transmission to wildlife
- 7) No real gains to conservation, as existing wild populations of big cats in the area will increase in numbers if adequately protected

Sound reasons *for* the introduction of captive cats into the wild: **None**



Recommendations

1. Ban all such “rehabilitation” attempts by adopting the precautionary principle, which is defined as follows: “*if an action or policy has a suspected risk of causing harm to the public or to the environment, in the absence of scientific consensus that the action or policy is harmful, the burden of proof that it is not harmful falls on those taking the action*”. The Ministry of Environment and Forests must send out an advisory to all Chief Wildlife Wardens to desist from such introductions. Appropriate rules must be framed under the Wildlife (Protection) Act to ensure a permanent end to this practice.
2. Uninformed local people sometimes pick up “orphaned” cubs from the forest under the mistaken belief that their mother has abandoned them. Usually this is not the case at all, and the mother has merely left them in hiding while hunting for prey. Conservation groups and Forest Department extension cells should conduct awareness campaigns to educate local people around forest areas to leave cubs alone and not “rescue” them.
3. Any “rescued” cubs must be *immediately* returned to the spot from which they were found so that they can reunite with their mother. If that is not possible, they must be sent to a zoo for a life of permanent captivity. This is as per the **Guidelines for Leopard-Human Conflict Management** prepared by the Ministry of Environment and Forests, and should be applied to the case of tiger cubs also.
4. Forest Officials and local activists must be made aware of the dangerous consequences of such introductions to local people, the released cats, their wild conspecifics, and to conservation in general.
5. While humane euthanasia may be the most sensible solution to the problem of unwanted cubs, it may not be the most acceptable solution. Therefore, spacious facilities should be created in each state – outside Protected Areas – for the permanent housing and care of orphaned cubs. These centres can also be used to educate people about big cat conservation. Animal birth control must be implemented at these facilities to ensure that no breeding takes place.



Conclusion

Wild tiger and leopard numbers have rebounded in several reserves since the 1970s thanks to good protection through time-tested methods such as patrolling, anti-poaching operations and habitat protection. What is required today in other reserves with low prey and predator numbers is a similar approach, combined with scientific inputs and monitoring. “Rewilding” captive big cats may have a lot of emotional appeal – and provide instant gratification – but it will likely end up endangering wild populations, as well as cause antipathy towards conservation in local communities, which always bear the brunt of these risky endeavours. It is my hope that wildlife managers and conservationists will carefully consider the issues presented in this White Paper, and help put an end to this *ad hoc* practice, which is often driven by sentimental considerations, rather than a dispassionate analysis of the long-term implications to free living wildlife populations.

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Lion Research Center

<http://www.cbs.umn.edu/lionresearch/research/diseases.shtml>

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