

THE STATE OF ANIMAL WELFARE IN SOUTH AFRICA

Honorable Mr. Singh, Honorable Alderman JP Smith, Honorable Members of Parliament, The Austrian Honorary Council, guests, those joining us online, colleagues and media.

Thank you for joining us this evening and for the opportunity to speak with you and share with you in this forum today on subjects close to my heart and which FOUR PAWS have been dedicated to for decades.

By way of introduction, FOUR PAWS is a global animal welfare organization, serving Wild, Farm and Companion Animals. We are dedicated to reveal suffering, rescue animals in need and protect them. Our vision is of a world where people treat animals with respect, empathy and understanding.

Founded in 1988 in Vienna, Austria, we have grown to be a global voice for animals with offices in 16 countries and operating 13 sanctuaries for big cats and bears.

I started working for FOUR PAWS in 2006, being given an opportunity to lead the establishment of the organisation in the country and establish our first big cat sanctuary together with a local and international team.

At the time I had recently seen the Cook Report that had revealed for the first time, the brutal killing of a lioness trapped on one side of a fence whilst her young watched from the other side. Having recently become a mother this struck a very deep chord within me, and since then myself, team and so many others have worked to shed light on the dark corners of an industry that was growing without any consideration for the welfare of the animals from which they were profiting, the consequences on our natural environment or the people who had to work in awful conditions.

These beginnings reminded me of the following quote by *Maya Angelou*

A caged bird has no freedom to stand up, lie down, turn around, groom themselves and stretch their limbs, it sings of this freedom, its tune is heard on the distant hill for the caged bird sings of freedom. –

Between birth and slaughter many caged animals never see daylight. Their small, dirty cages leave them hardly any room to move or engage in natural behaviour. At FOUR PAWS we believe that a life in a cage is no life at all. **Scared, abused, and stressed, animals in cages are subjected to short and extremely miserable lives.**

Tonight, we will discuss and highlight the state of animal welfare for wild, companion and farm animals in South Africa and why it is imperative for animals to become stakeholders in the political agenda. Within policy making there is an idea that it is not a serious topic. This is not an optional extra but needs to be addressed very seriously and in a holistic manner. There is a public demand for more action and policy. We should not be afraid of making this a political issue.

When we show our children pictures and films about wild animals, we assume that this is how it looks for these animals and that the wild will always be there.

South Africa is intensively farming and commercially trading big cats. The growing exploitation includes not only indigenous species such as lions and leopards, but also exotic species like tigers and jaguars. Big cats are being traded both legally and illegally, fuelling an international market for traditional Asian medicine products and so-called luxury items¹. This contributes to the decline of the species in the wild and a worldwide biodiversity crisis. **As long as there is trade, every big cat has a price on their head. Big cat farming is a sad reality in South Africa, a lifetime of exploitation**². In addition to the cruelty and exploitation suffered by lions and other big cats through trophy hunting and the bone trade, serious welfare concerns persist around the conditions the cats are kept in.

The bone trade means a profit can be made from the animals regardless of their health, so there is no incentive to keep animals in high standards of welfare. The facilities in which big cats are kept in largely unregulated and provide inappropriate conditions, such as enclosures that are too small, provision of poor nutrition, and lack of medical care, resulting in unnatural behaviours, the spread of zoonotic disease, distress, and physical deformities.

2024 marks three years since the South African Government announced its intention to ban the captive lion industry, including captive breeding of lions, the keeping of lions in captivity and the commercial use of captive lions and their derivatives³. The announcement signified a first step to end an industry that has been out of control for decades and has caused the suffering of captive lions across the country⁴.

The DFFE's Policy Position on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of a number of South Africa's species, including lions, which proposes to end the captive keeping of lions for commercial purposes and closure of captive lion facilities and the Ministerial Task Team's report are two documents both with strong statements and positive steps towards the closure of an industry that threatens not only the conservation of our wild species, but our reputation as leaders in global conservation.

FOUR PAWS is ready to support Government's implementation of the progressive recommendations of the Ministerial Task Team's Report with time-bound deadlines and we urge the South African, Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment to:

- Publish a government implementation plan, including time bound specific goals to follow up on Cabinet approved policy position to end the captive keeping of lions for commercial purposes and close captive lion facilities.
- Include all big cat species in the implementation plan. Due to a global convergence in the legal commercial trade and illegal trade of big cats and their parts, the rationale for closing the lion industry applies to all big cat species.

The situation for around 10-12000 lions and an unknown number of tigers and other big cats, are just indicative of the state of welfare for wild animals in South Africa.

When we move closer to our homes, we bear witness to cruelty to companion animals in our communities.

According to the State of Homelessness Index

4 million out of 18.6 million or 22% of cats and dogs in South Africa are homeless with;

- **3.4 million living on the streets while 750 thousand are in shelters.**

Within South Africa's resource-poor communities, with little or no funding allocated to companion animal welfare, pet owners struggle to access veterinary care, including vaccinations and sterilization, for their pet companions.

The state of companion animal welfare in both urban and rural South Africa calls for national, provincial, and local government to improve the health and welfare of owned and stray animal populations by providing veterinary services, sterilization, vaccination, and education on responsible pet ownership.

FOUR PAWS envisions a rabies free South Africa. With sustainable partnerships between animal welfare organisations, government, veterinary groups and funders we can ensure sustainable funding for ongoing vaccination, spaying/neutering, and public awareness programs such as our Responsible Pet Ownership Program. A nation-wide rabies free campaign is our proposed solution to manage stray animal populations particularly in areas with large populations of stray animals. Combining several strategies such as public awareness through education, collaboration with relevant authorities, community involvement and sustainable funding we can achieve a rabies free South Africa.

In our farms, animals continue to endure a cruel reality far beyond our imagination. Caged farming systems dominate the animal agriculture industry. Factory farms prioritise production and profit at the expense of animal welfare, public health, and the environment⁵. The harmful effects of factory farms on animals, humans, and our planet far outweigh the economic advantages. South Africa's National Response Climate Change White Paper has acknowledged that *"Conventional, commercial input-intensive agriculture has a range of negative environmental, social, and economic externalities, which increasingly render it an unsustainable model"*⁶. We need to review South Africa's approach to husbandry systems and -practices, such as caged confinement, routine mutilations, young calves removed from their mothers and the routine culling of millions of newborn male chicks.

The imagery of happy animals sunning themselves in grassy fields is not the reality of those animals; the factory farming landscape is designed to produce large volumes of yield for the smallest price possible, using cost-saving measures and techniques like preventative antibiotics and extreme confinement. A lifetime of confinement is unnatural and difficult for animals to endure. Battery cages smaller than the size of an A4 paper, as well as gestation and farrowing crates, is in addition to the more direct abuses inflicted on them, such as forced insemination, debeaking, tail-docking, and cruel and inhumane slaughter methods, to name a few. In South Africa, there is also a growing practice of the live export of animals – where animals such as sheep, cattle and goats are transported live on ships across the world, sometimes for weeks at a time, just to be killed⁷. **Factory farming is rife with the inhumane treatment of animals.**

South Africa relies heavily on animal protein and products to feed our approximately 60 million inhabitants⁸. The country has seen a major increase in the consumption of animal products over the last few decades. With these increases, factory farms] are continuing to develop all over the country. Not only is this model unsustainable, but it's true costs are hidden - not borne by the producers or even reflected in the cost of the product - but rather, externally borne by the South African public unwittingly.

Furthermore, the government provides the animal agricultural industry with subsidies, or funding from public funds to support them and to ensure that the price of these animal

products remains low or competitive. This essentially means that taxpayer money is being utilised to promote an industry which has long term detrimental consequences for humans, the planet, and animals.

South Africa has the highest rate of meat consumption in Africa, with the average person in the country consuming between 60 – 70 kilograms of meat per person, per year. Today, the 10th of May, South Africa hits a milestone – Meat Exhaustion Day. Already in the 5th month of the year South Africa has exceeded our annual animal meat intake. This is not in line with the scientific planetary health diet and is of major concern to us. Consuming a high amount of animal products has a negative impact not only on animal welfare but also on the climate and our health. Annually, the nation kills over one billion chickens alone, or approximately 20 million birds a week⁹.

There are some stakeholders who believe the animal-based production industries have room for further growth, and in order to do this, large investments and incentives are allocated to the animal production facilities in the country. The government is one such stakeholder, who is intent on increasing the amount of all animals killed for food. Through initiatives such as the “Poultry Master Plan”⁹, it aims to greatly expand local production and drive domestic demand as well as exports, among other aims.

The farming of wild animals raises its own additional and unique problems and challenges. The public largely believes that there are appropriate safeguards to protect against harms caused by animal agriculture or that there are suitable laws in place relating to the farming of animals. Unfortunately, this is not the case – as there are major gaps in regulation, lack of specific standards, and failure to enforce laws where they do exist

A shift in current farming models is needed not only to fight the climate crisis and improve the well-being of the environment, humans, and animals. The Government should put food and farming at the heart of urgent climate mitigation action and implement policies to enable this transition to sustainable, healthy, and diverse food systems in which animals are treated with respect and empathy¹⁰. At COP28, 160 countries have signed the COP28 UAE Declaration on Sustainable Agriculture, Resilient Food Systems, and Climate Action¹³, committing to strengthening efforts to integrate agriculture and food systems into national climate plans, and revisiting their policies and public support related to agriculture and food systems. Addressing the food-climate nexus is existential and essential for meeting the goals of the Paris Agreement and achieving food security, climate adaptation and climate mitigation¹⁴. We call for the South African government to sign on the COP28 UAE Declaration on Sustainable Food systems, and Climate Action.

South Africa’s intensive livestock farm industry practises lead to disease outbreaks and worsens climate change. 75% of all emerging infectious diseases are classed as zoonotic, But the problem is not the animals as such but rather human behaviour and how humans treat animals. Unfortunately, the question is not if but when the next pandemic will take place if we don’t change our way of treating animals and nature¹⁵.

The root causes of pandemics are tied to animal suffering: Factors that can trigger pathogen emergence, spread and mutation include a high number of animals kept, traded, transported, and slaughtered, cramped, and overcrowded environments and poor hygiene conditions. These conditions stress animals, suppress their immune systems and make them sick¹⁷.

So, the simple calculation scientists made is: if we improve animal welfare and protect our nature, we can secure our health. One Health is a once in a lifetime opportunity for us to save billions of animals by improving animal welfare and ending high-risk practices. And that's the link between preventing pandemics and improving animal welfare¹⁹.

A situation analysis carried in a FOUR PAWS report on Zoonotic Diseases in South Africa found that due to the animals' high susceptibility and the highly intensive conditions on farms with thousands of animals caged in close proximity to each other, **the factory farming industry has been proven to be a possible reservoir for mutations and pathogens**¹⁸.

Ending factory farming to prevent pandemics, requires a transition to food production systems that are more sustainable, more efficient in terms of land use, protective of habitats and biodiversity and resilient to disease outbreaks²⁰. The only way to achieve this is by reducing livestock numbers and ensuring high welfare standards for the farmed animals. Antimicrobial resistance and highly pathogenic avian influenza are just two of plenty threats factory farming amplifies. **If we don't change the system, the next pandemic could emerge in a factory farm in South Africa.**

To prevent the next pandemic, we need to acknowledge the link between animal welfare and increasing pandemic risk and follow a One Health approach on national, regional, and international level. South Africa and the rest of the world must commit to ending animal suffering to stop future pandemics. COVID-19 showed the dangers of ignoring the impact of animal cruelty. FOUR PAWS calls for animal welfare to be prioritized in pandemic prevention strategies and legislations. **Preventing pandemics at source is the key pillar of pandemic prevention, preparedness, and response.**

. For greater cooperation between the animal, human and the environmental health sectors, stakeholders must embrace a multifactorial, and multisectoral approach to gain the maximum benefit out of this improvement. We need to recognise the importance of preventing zoonotic spillover and not just responding when there is an outbreak or a pandemic. A One Health approach is essential to address this, and this should include integrated surveillance, addressing anthropocentric drivers of disease emergence, understanding infection dynamics in the natural host and environment, and developing and implementing risk reduction activities. **We cannot afford another pandemic and need to do things differently and not in silos.**

To broaden the One Health vision as **FOUR PAWS we recognise that looking after our wellbeing and that of animals, people and the environment is paramount.**

In conclusion

Life in a cage is a death sentence for many animals, the imprisonment of animals in our zoos, farms, backyards, circus, research laboratories and enclosures are a death sentence for us and our environment, the interconnectedness of animal welfare, human wellbeing and environment can and will secure us a healthy future because when they suffer, we suffer.

FOUR PAWS is calling on all political parties in South Africa to have Animal wellbeing and sentience in their political manifesto

Having borne witness over the years to exhausted lionesses languishing in cages mourning the loss of their cubs, hearing the pitiful cries of the cubs searching for their mothers, walking in our communities where those that we live with are neglected and brutally treated, and seeing first hand animals that cannot stand or move, or display any natural behaviours, all that comes to

my mind is that we have to do better, starting immediately. Let us educate ourselves, our children, communities, leaders and politicians. Let us build together a common consciousness and empathy, to live kinder and let us act together to create a worldwide animal welfare movement driven by scalable change of human behaviour and systems, so that animals can live their best lives possible:

- I close once again with the words of Maya Angelou, *“A free bird leaps on the back of the wind, floats downstream till the current ends and dips his wing in the orange sun rays and dares to claim the sky”*.

Thank you

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