

EFFECTS OF UNSUBSTANTIATED STATEMENTS ON LEGITIMATE ORGANIZATIONS

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Greed has been around for centuries and it hasn't lessened with the advancement of the human race. If anything, it has become more diabolical using elaborate schemes under the guise of "good" and very similar to some animals, uses mimicry and camouflage to appear legit. As such, there has become good reason to investigate and question the background of organizations prior to giving them your support, either financially or otherwise. But as an environmental conservationist with decades of being involved in, even leading, both small and large campaigns for conservation, the most damaging thing that can be done to good work is the unsubstantiated negative opinions and statements about legitimate animal welfare orgs, businesses, and facilities. The false association of unethical practices with ethical endeavors have serious consequences.

I have been involved in conservation for over 30 years. I have friends and acquaintances across the globe who are involved in conservation, both as members and true leaders. These people are involved in everything from sharks to big cats to Elephants to birds, snakes and more. I have been involved in the investigation of international orgs, groups, and businesses to establish their legitimacy. As part of my investigations and efforts I have often established interesting relationships with people who sit on the other side of the subject. From shark fishermen to trophy hunters to lion meat sellers, I have had many interactions, many extremely positive interactions, with the "opposing side" that has really enlightened me on many sides to an issue. I have truly come to know that nothing is as simple as "right" or "wrong." These subjects are not black or white.

One of my particular pet peeves has been the effect some statements and opinions can have on legit conservancies and sanctuaries. It takes a LOT to run one. A LOT of time and a LOT of money. An average German Shepherd dog can eat \$150USD in dry food a week. If that's a domestic dog, then imagine how much to feed a large exotic cat! A single large cat (i.e. lion or tiger) can eat around \$100USD of food per day...yes, PER DAY. The care of a big cat (including food, utilities to have a facility, upgrades to the facility, rental space of land or buildings) can reach well over \$500 per week if the cat is to have any resemblance of a good life with good treatment. When talking about birds, a small falcon or owl can cost as much as \$150 per month just for food and can be about \$250 per month to provide a good life for. Of course a facility that houses multiple animals will drop the cost per animal (rent is split among 10 animals instead of 1), but the overall cost of operations is still a substantial amount per year. When people scoff at the cost of entry or activities, they need to really keep in mind that the housing, care, and welfare of animals costs a lot of money!

"Well why even keep them in captivity? They should be in the wild," are statements I often hear. In a perfect world, yes they should be exclusively in the wild. But until we get to a perfect world there are still a HUGE number of animals that are: injured and would not survive in the wild, were taken as domestic pets and now abandoned, orphaned when their family was killed or they were abandoned, or born with defects. If you turned every single facility: zoo, sanctuary, conservancy, farm, etc. into a fully legitimate facility, there still wouldn't be enough space, money, and time to take care of all the animals of the world that can no longer survive in the wild. It is literally impossible to give every needing animal a good life in the world as it exists today...impossible. And there is no good future in sight either.

The roadblocks to legit care of needing animals are great. Greater than ever before. People are struggling more and more to survive, so volunteering is diminishing. There are very few hard statistics available, but some say that in the last five years, volunteering for animal welfare causes has dropped by a third in just the U.S. But it's not just hours that have dropped. In the last 10 years, every country has seen its dollar increase in personal value to the average worker and household, and thus more scrutinized when spent. This has resulted in overall diminished dollars to "extracurricular" activities; from massage to buying art to traveling, and especially to animal welfare causes. From zoos to non-profits, already struggling facilities have needed to expand "how" to bring in the needed funding to stay alive. Some have turned to unusual, and even controversial ways, such as

petting or riding. Some don't budge on very strict standards and instead reduce operations. This has resulted in a large spectrum of how legit operations may appear.

You visit a facility, say a big cat sanctuary, and your impressions are: "Wow, they have small areas," "This place is dirty," "The food is horrible here," "It sure is a lot of money for this place," and, "They have too many animals." You also think, "I don't know if petting is good," or, "These poor animals have to endure *that*?" Too many people instantly go to condemning the facility rather than truly questioning the 'intent' of the facility. Good questions to ask in your head, and even to facility staff are:

- 1) Where did the animals come from?
- 2) What would have happened to these animals if not for this facility?
- 3) Do the animals have the capability to be returned successfully (that's an important word) to the wild?
- 4) Is this place making enough money to not only sustain the animals, but also provide a life for the people caring for them so they don't have to find a job elsewhere?
- 5) Are the animals living decent lives in a fair ratio to how the profits are?
- 6) Are the animals being abused, made to do things they are unwilling to do (not necessarily unnatural), or put under unnecessary stress?
- 7) What is happening to these animals in their future?
- 8) Most importantly...what will happen to these animals if this facility goes away?

Then, once you have these answers, properly evaluate the total pros vs. the total cons. One bad answer does not necessarily condemn a facility to instant negativity. Here are two real examples to consider (I am always against naming any facilities specifically in any of my writings due to possible repercussions):

Example A:

A group of people want to create a place where injured or rescued lions can live out their years instead of being euthanized. An area is created and a few lions taken in. All lions are "rescues" coming from pets or parents that were killed. At first visitors are kept at distance, but the facility cannot maintain. It expands to allowing tourists to walk with the lions and pet them, but rising costs and prime land increase the roadblocks. There is not enough money surplus to move. Finally a zoo offers to buy a lion and the money breathes life back into the facility for a bit longer. Knowing they can get money for selling lions, they reach out to sell another. No more zoos buy any and instead a fully legit conservancy buys one. Struggles yet again but this time the only buyer is a conservancy that is involved in *some* hunting. The cycle continues until a decision is made...sell a lion to a hunting reserve and keep the facility alive and let the other lions live on there, or close and let all the lions get sold off to the highest bidder or euthanized. But the cycle doesn't stop and eventually, before they know it, this once legit facility is now breeding lions for canned hunting. Although I might have visited this facility in its infancy, I would never visit or encourage it today and it shows one example of how not everything is clearly black and white.

Example B:

One particular "Elephant sanctuary" in Africa acquires a family of Elephants through some very questionable means. In one particular area, Elephant families that had negative interactions with people were killed by game wardens instead of alternative options. As many as 300 Elephants were being killed in a year. It was highly questionable as to if killing whole herds was truly necessary, especially since it was the people who were blatantly encroaching upon their habitat. One particular individual thought, "Maybe I can make some money if I get them to allow me to take a family, instead of killing them, and use them in an entertainment type way." A business was opened with a good sized herd of several individuals. Tourists can go to the facility and touch, walk, and even ride the elephants. There is a small profit generated by this. The facility has not accepted anymore animals and only uses the single family it has. The animals are very well taken care of and not forced to do anything they aren't interested in. In fact, the staff even tell the tourists there is no guarantee they will get a ride the day they visit. If the Elephants seem moody or not interested, they do not force a ride and instead you can accompany them on their daily walk. The Elephants are not forced to walk, but "strongly encouraged" to walk every day. This can be visible on occasion when staff do some firm poking and prodding to get the

animals to stand up and follow the others. But this is for their own health and staff say there are obvious behavioral issues (i.e. depression) that develop when they have missed their walks for multiple days, no different than many people. Walks are taken over a large naturally vegetated piece of land (exact acreage unknown, but well over 20) next to a river where the Elephants are allowed to drink and bathe (yes, even if there are tourists on their back!) Unfortunately though, if this facility was to close, these animals could very well be euthanized. There are VERY FEW facilities (and none near that facility) that can properly house a full family of Elephants. Separation of families is questionable and not always successful. They are too used to people to be released to the wild and would most likely have a negative interaction that could get them killed. So this facility is their best hope for any kind of good future. Regardless of what the history or profit of this business is, I would absolutely consider visiting this facility because I know that ultimately this family of Elephants will have a pretty decent life there.

But what about that 'profit' and greed? Someone is making money off these animals, shouldn't we be against that? Well simply put, "Maybe." Is there a profit being made off the Elephants? Yes. But quite honestly and bluntly, so what! If the positives of this family of Elephants existing with a fairly decent life is the end result, where is the harm in someone trying to make a life for their own family by providing a facility for animals that could have ended up, or may end up, dead instead. The lions are a different answer though. Whatever the history of the facility, today the animals are bred and sold to perpetuate canned hunting. My visit is supporting these animals being sent somewhere to be shot, sometimes multiple times before they die, or worse...a bad shot with a bow and arrow to live a couple days suffering until it is found and then shot. If someone is driving around in their BMW, with multiple houses, reaping huge profits while animals sit in filthy, cramped, cages and are abused or forced to do stupid tricks, then by all means 'profit' becomes a negative factor about a facility. But, "So what!" if someone is making enough to feed their kids, buy a house, maybe even drive their BMW and have multiple houses, as long as the animals are being well cared for and living a decent life. In the latter case, 'profit' should not be a determining factor in the support of a facility. So profit off of animals by itself is not necessarily a negative aspect to a facility.

What does this all have to do with people making statements? As you see, there are just so many factors involved in the legitimacy of a facility. Facilities that may have started out questionable may have turned legit, and vice versa. But the average person doesn't constantly re-evaluate, and blind and bold statements, often outdated, have the ability to seriously impair a good facility.

In East Africa, one conservancy was doing incredible work and fully legit from the start and maintaining very high standards. But around 2011, they were forming a solid stance that was making an impact on canned hunting, the Serengeti Highway, and poaching. A slander campaign was done by those who were in favor of those subjects. The conservancy had now been associated with participating in canned hunting and farming of threatened species. Even after it was proven they weren't and numerous articles put out, the word spread among tourists and tour companies. No one ever investigated the truth of statements they had heard. As such, the conservancy saw a drop of visitors (and income) of greater than 50% the first year, almost 75% the second. It took an international campaign involving many orgs, and even some politicians, to reverse the false reputation that had been established. The conservancy was able to survive long enough to see a rise in visitors and income again. Today it is still thriving and still a leader in African conservation.

Well how does one find out if where they are about to visit is legit or not? The best thing is often to just call the facility and ask them the questions above. Then decide yourself, with your own personal criteria, if your visit (as touristy as it may be) will ultimately be beneficial in allowing those animals to live fairly decent lives. If you can't get the answers from staff, then take just a bit of time and research them online.

- a) Use different combos of words in search engines: i.e. "Conservancy canned hunting," "Conservancy farmed animals," "Zoo animal welfare complaints," "Zoo animal abuse," "China + facility name," "Asia + facility name," "Poaching + facility name," etc.
- b) See if the facility is associated with any hunting or farming org. Does a large hunting group endorse or support the facility, or vice versa. You can also check their finances (if available) to see if they

have received any funds from questionable sources. One good source can also be if they have a donor list to see if there are any, or a lot of, names that are associated with hunting clubs or poaching business.

- c) Do a quick check on the owner of the facility. Are there articles, pictures, or comments showing they are wealthy while the appearance of the facility and size of cages are questionable.
- d) Lastly, check out any forums. Go to both conservation and hunting forums and see if there is talk about the facility (but again be sure to separate out fact from opinions!).

I have personally been to, and enjoyed, facilities that today I am thoroughly against and would never visit again. I often go through my pics and feel bad I participated in any way. But hindsight is 100% and the best way that I, and you, can be sure to prevent regret or guilt, is to spend just five or ten minutes checking out a facility before you go. You spent many *hours* prepping your trip, *hours* to work for that dollar you are about to spend, about to spend *hours* at the facility...so there should be no excuse to spending several *minutes* making sure your hard earned dollar is doing what you want it to do for the animals you are about to see.

But the most important thing I can't emphasize enough in this article is to be careful about what you say!!! Don't just parrot something you've heard or speak your opinion without properly thinking through how you are forming your opinion. Because the ultimate truth is; ***a dollar accidentally spent on an illegitimate place won't nearly do as much damage as an illegitimate comment about a good place.***

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