BREAKING NEWS: International volunteer comes forward after recent attack by captive cheetah in a South African wildlife facility

A young female volunteer from Belgium, assisting at a captive wildlife facility in South Africa, was left traumatised after an attack by a captive cheetah last month. Amandine Lequime was filming outside of the cheetah’s enclosure, while her colleague was on feeding duty. As soon as her colleague opened the enclosure gate, one of the cheetahs approached Lequime swiftly, jumped on her back aiming for her throat.

“I lost my balance and fell to the ground, where the cheetah continued to bite and claw my arms and legs until the facility manager succeeded in getting the cheetah away from me. I ended up in hospital for treatment of several deep bite marks and cuts that caused muscle damage and required stitches”, Lequime says.

Subsequently, she found out that the same cheetah had attacked the facility manager two years ago, causing serious neck and leg injuries.

“The manager told us volunteers to balance the meat tray on our heads while walking into the cheetah enclosures, so the cheetahs can’t knock the tray out of our hands”, Lequime continues.

“Although the facility pleaded with me to keep the incident quiet, I don’t want other volunteers to go through similar frightening experiences. People need to understand that to be close to wild animals is appealing, but not safe.”

Blood Lions Statement

This is not a stand-alone story, as many paying volunteers and tourists have been attacked by captive big cats in South Africa over the last decade or so. We can only hope that Amandine will be one of the last victims.

Most of the 60-odd facilities in South Africa that offer volunteering opportunities with large carnivores will use direct, hands-on interaction as their main draw card. However, this comes with a huge health and safety risk. We are aware of 50+ incidents involving captive lions, tigers and cheetahs that have been reported in the media – knowing that many more go unreported. A third of the reported victims weren’t as lucky as Amandine and sadly lost their lives during the attacks or as a result of their injuries.

As is the case at many so-called “sanctuaries”, the big cat enclosures at the facility where Amandine Lequime volunteered are designed incorrectly, lacking the required management enclosures separating predators from people. This poor layout forces inexperienced international volunteers (and staff alike) to be in the same space as the predators while performing their feeding and cleaning duties.

It is important to note that captive wildlife often display high stress levels adding further complications to an already volatile and unnatural situation.
This latest incident highlights the importance of the High-Level Panel’s recommendations for “an immediate halt to tourist interactions with captive lions, including so-called volun-tourism, cub petting etc.” It also emphasises the need to extend the captive lion recommendations to all other captive big cats (including all exotic species such as tigers) and reinforces the need to immediately apply the SATSA Animal Interaction Guidelines throughout our tourism sector.

Click here to watch the video of the incident