**The rescue and relocation of lions from Ukraine**

Lionel De Lange, Director of LAEO Ukraine, has had a busy year with multiple, highly successful rescues of wildlife from substandard conditions. Although Lionel’s focus has generally been on bear rescues, in 2017 he came across 4 lions that were in shocking, caged conditions, and effectively managed to move them through the complex process of relocating them to their natural habitat in Africa.

LAEO Ukraine also partnered and assisted other facilities working on animal rescue, including assisting Synevir Bear Rehab Centre in the mountains of Ukraine donating fencing to make it possible for them to accept into their sanctuary additional bears that LAEO Ukraine rescued and enhancing their property to improve conditions for all their bears. In addition LAEO Ukraine provided medication and dental supplies to do bear dentistry and sterilize rescued bears. In 2017, three bears, Boris, Buri and Jennifer, were rescued by LAEO Ukraine and sent to the facility.

LAEO Ukraine was able to secure land to be used as a place of safety or haven for abused wildlife in Sambir, West Ukraine. In August working with SOS Zoo and Bear Rescue, they rehomed their first rescued bear to the new facility at Sambir. Marsha was rescued from a life of animal slavery after 19 years as a performing circus bear, having been taken away from her mother at just 2 months old. When Marsha was not performing she lived in a cage in the back of a small enclosed truck in squalor and filth with barely enough space to turn around. Her diet was shocking and she was fed sugary soft drinks and junk food. She now has a 357 square meters enclosure and although it took some days to get her to come out into her new paradise, her new home has grass and a pool, a few fruit trees, and a swing. She gets loads of delicious, healthy food and never has to perform again.

Whilst rescuing bears, Lionel discovered three lions in shocking condition in a concrete cage of 35 square meters with no direct sunshine and no decent ventilation. Except for the front, the entire cage was closed. The lions had been in a circus until they were left behind in the dilapidated cage, living in their own filth as there was no way of cleaning their enclosure.

A temporary enclosure was built while the lengthy, formal CITES applications were made to move them to a facility in South Africa. While the preparations were made to move the three females, Charlie, Kai and Luca, Lionel heard about an animal trader that had two lion cubs. By the time the trader was approached the female cub had already disappeared and only the little male, Nathan, was left. Nathan was destined for a life in the circus so it was a satisfying and worthwhile endeavor to save him from this life. Once the trader relinquished Nathan to Lionel, he was included in the group destined for South Africa.

In November 2018, the four lions finally started their 76-hour trip to South Africa. The trip was daunting: 13 hours by road from Sambir to Kiev Borispol Airport; and 3 flights to get them to their destination from Kiev to Johannesburg International Airport, and then in a small, private aircraft from Rand Airport in Johannesburg to a private grass airstrip in Seaview, Port Elizabeth. They left Ukraine in freezing temperatures of -7C but finally woke up in their night shelters at Kragga Kamma Game Park in South Africa. The journey was not without hiccups with the truck breaking down on the 13 hour journey through snow in Ukraine to Kiev, and then Charlie needing a bit of roadside surgery and care; but they passed vet health inspection and customs in Kiev.

The lions are doing very well, healing up nicely and enjoying their new forever home in a large natural environment with the open space, grass, trees, sun and even the inquisitive giraffe and zebra who paid them a visit in the morning.

The rescue of the next batch of bears and lions is now underway. Lionel has rescued several animals from the horrors of the Pokrovsk Zoo as well as other facilities.

The next four lions are ready for their journey to Africa and will be cared for by at a temporary facility until we get the CITES export documents after which they will be sent Love Lions Alive in Harrismith, Free State, SA.

These lions are:

Diya, 9 months old - who comes from a private zoo also and was about to be given away and she would have spent her life in a small cage at a hotel complex as a tourist attraction. Diya and Frieda will be united soon and therefore not have to spend the rest of their lives alone.

Frieda, 9 months old - who comes from a contact zoo and is now no longer commercially viable for the owners to keep her as she is getting to big and strong to be handled by families for photos etc. This happens to all these cats in Ukraine, when they are no longer of use they get dumped. Again if we did not take her she would have spent the rest of her live locked in a small cage for someone’s amusement.

Demira, nearly 3 years old – who came from a monastery where she too could no longer be cared for. Priest complained about feeding cost and the roaring at night so she was about to be discarded.

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| **Item** | **Number** | **Cost** |
| Food – 4 months | 4 lions | $5200 |
| Crate | 4 lions | $2600 |
| Support staff flights | 3 people including vet | $3600 |
| Flights for lions on crate | 4 lions | $16600 |
|  | TOTAL cost | $28000 |

A great deal has already been spent on temporary enclosures, chipping each lion, vaccinations and blood work, food etc. We now just have to get these majestic animals home.