Israel Nature and Parks Authority Headquarters
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Free The Wild
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Monday, 19 May 2025

Request to oversee the 5 lion cub relocation from Israel to Simbonga Sanctuary, SA

Dear Mrs. Raya Shurki, General Director of the Israel Nature and Parks Authority,

Thank you for seeking our opinion on the case of the five rescued lion cubs currently under the care of the Israel Nature and Parks Authority (INPA). We have been kept informed of the situation by our colleague, Dr. Itai Roffman of the Jane Goodall Institute Israel and Max Stern Yezreel Valley College, as well as by our friend, Knesset Member Yasmin Sacks Fridman. We are encouraged by her recent submission of a vital bill to criminalise the illegal wildlife trade as a serious offence in Israel.

At Free The Wild, we have considerable experience in rescuing and rehabilitating captive wildlife through expert medical care and re-wilding efforts, relocating animals to ecological sanctuaries where they can recover and thrive. We view wild animals as sentient beings with individual personalities, needs and rights. We are deeply aware of the physical and psychological toll that captivity can inflict—especially in zoo environments lacking privacy, enrichment and natural ecosystems. The transformation we have witnessed in rehabilitated lions, both physically and mentally, is profound.

Life in the African savannah bears no resemblance to the limitations of a zoo enclosure. The aggression displayed by captive lions is often misinterpreted—it is not a sign of failure to adapt, but of their retained wild instincts and a strong will to live free. We firmly believe this instinct demonstrates their capacity to survive in the wild, given the right transitional care. Our mission is to support a global shift from zoo-based captivity to sanctuary-based conservation, where animals live in semi-wild conditions until full re-wilding is possible.

The INPA has an excellent track record in re-wilding native species and we hope this success can extend to the return of other extirpated species in the future.

The illegal wildlife trade is a global crisis. It fuels species extinction, organised crime and terrorism. From poachers and traffickers to sellers and buyers, the network operates largely unchecked due to insufficient government action. But this is not just an "animal issue"—it is a human issue. Trafficked wildlife often carry zoonotic diseases and the collapse of ecosystems contributes to the rise of pandemics, as we saw with COVID-19. This is a moment to act—to prevent the next crisis, to protect biodiversity and to dismantle the criminal networks profiting from exploitation.

From an ethical and symbolic standpoint, the best decision would be to relocate the five lion cubs to Africa. This would represent a powerful and hopeful message: a return home and a new beginning. Public opinion is shaped by meaningful stories, like that of Zion Niv (also known as Abu Malek), whom you previously approved for transfer to our partner sanctuary, Simbonga, in South Africa. His story and now the story of these five cubs, can serve as a global precedent—showing what is possible through international cooperation and compassion, especially in these challenging times.

These lion cubs have endured severe trauma and survived against the odds. It is our hope that they be reunited with Zion Niv and other lions of their species in the African bushveld—a biodiverse environment to which they are evolutionarily adapted and in which they can thrive. At Simbonga Sanctuary, they will have access to natural surroundings, round-the-clock veterinary care and expert rehabilitation overseen by leading conservationists.

Though wildlife may not yet have legal rights, we believe this is the time to begin defining what those rights could and should be. The INPA plays a crucial role in setting the standard for ethical wildlife protection and conservation. You have the opportunity here to lead by example.

We kindly ask you to reach out to us so we may begin the necessary preparations at the sanctuary. We fully support the relocation of the cubs to Simbonga, to be implemented by Dr. Nicole Benjamin-Fink of Conservation Beyond Borders. Her organisation has committed to covering the costs of the acclimatisation zone and will coordinate the logistics directly with your office.

We also understand that our esteemed partner, Dr. Jane Goodall, DBE, UN Messenger of Peace, will be writing to you in support of this mission.

Thank you for your time, care and commitment to wildlife welfare.

Warm regards,

Cher
Co-Founder, Free The Wild

Gina Nelthorpe-Cowne
Co-Founder, Free The Wild

CC:

Hon. Minister of Environmental Protection, Mrs. Idit Silman
Head of Wildlife Trade, Captivity Permits & Maintenance Supervision Unit, Mr. Ori Linial