



WHERE THE WILD

Explorations / Creature comfort

In Abu Dhabi, the pursuit of luxury and novelty has seen people buying exotic animals as a status symbol. **Siobhan Grogan** meets the woman determined to change the fortunes of these magnificent creatures →

THINGS ARE



The huge Bengal tiger fixes its pale yellow eyes in my direction and seems in no hurry to be the one to blink first. It's statue still and just a metre away, so it's possible to make out every detail of its long whiskers, curled claws and the intricate striping across its thick fur. This is a 19-stone beast with almost supernatural strength, which roams for miles across the humid rainforests and wet grasslands of India to find its next meal, before pouncing with a swift bite to the throat or by snapping the spinal cord of its prey. It is not an animal to be messed with.

Yet, luckily, this one has other concerns. It rises elegantly, stretches like a house cat and pads across the manicured grass towards its own air conditioned shelter to take refuge from the blistering 41°C heat of the Abu Dhabi Wildlife Centre, which rehabilitates animals rescued from the illegal exotic pet trade. It's a long way from home, but this tiger – now called Maya – has never known any different. Smuggled illegally into the country, then confiscated at the city's airport, she was brought here at just two weeks old, starved, near death and covered in burns.

"She was in a cage in the airport for two days without food," recalls the wildlife centre's formidable director Ronel Barcellos, showing me pictures of the tiger cub in a photo album like a proud parent. Sitting in her office decorated in zebra-print cushions and tiger paintings, she remembers the difficult days and sleepless nights of Maya's infancy: "She lived in my house until she was six months old and I put all my energy into making sure she survived."

With her sensible bobbed hair, denim leggings and floral smock top, it's easier to imagine the 51-year-old South African running a WI cake stall than hand-rearing tigers and (loudly) campaigning against the UAE's booming exotic pet trade, which has seen wealthy owners flaunting on Instagram that they own animals ranging from leopards to wolves.

In person, Barcellos is quietly spoken, even a touch diffident. But her resolve is steely: the wildlife centre is her territory, the animals her world and she will do anything in her power to protect them, even in a culture where women are rarely so outspoken.

Obsessed with nature since childhood, Barcellos worked in veterinary nursing before landing a job working with cheetahs at South Africa's Hoedspruit Endangered Species Centre. When her then-husband found work as a helicopter pilot in Abu Dhabi, she

moved to the UAE in 1998 with him and their two children, and started work in a veterinary clinic, staying on in the city when her husband left her soon after. "Then six tiny cheetahs came in. Somebody sent them to the clinic when they got sick but never came back for them, so I took care of them at my house for months. Night and day, you feed them, you clean them, you make sure they're OK."

Barcellos explains that animals become almost impossible to release back into the wild once they have been removed from their mother in infancy and never taught how to hunt or survive. Preparing a baby's bottle of special formula milk as she talks, she throws open a door leading to a nursery area for animals who aren't yet old enough to be left outside. A Boston terrier puppy, Jax, and sandy-coloured lion cub, Ice, come bounding into the main office, yapping and growling as they play fight and vie for Barcellos' attention.

"I don't think Jax knows Ice is a lion – or even a cat. They snuggle up together on the doggie bed, they share toys. But when it comes to food, I keep Ice separate because lions are very territorial when they eat and I wouldn't want Jax to get hurt."

The lion cub was born in the centre after her mother – kept as a pet in a private collection – was confiscated by the authorities. She died in childbirth soon after, leaving Ice to be cared for by Barcellos. Now three months old and acting like a mischievous puppy, she makes a grab for my bag, before guzzling down the bottle so greedily she draws blood as she scratches Barcellos' arm. "That's her lion behaviour coming out," she tells me, barely flinching.

As disconcerting as it may be to a visitor to have a lion nuzzling your flip-flops, this is all in a day's work for Barcellos. She has been running the centre since 2001 after being approached by a concerned Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan, deputy prime minister of the UAE, though better known in the UK as the owner of Manchester City Football Club. The centre was established in the grounds of his house and is still funded privately by the sheikh, but moved to its current bigger location in 2007 to allow visits from school groups and pre-booked tourists.

Thirty minutes outside the city, the wildlife centre is a world away from Abu Dhabi's gleaming skyscrapers and giant malls, all presided over by the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque. It's almost impossible to find without help, past the Al Mafraq Workers City and tucked down an unmarked dirt track leading from the →



Babe in arms

Ronel Barcellos at the Hoedspruit Endangered Species Centre

BARCELLO'S RESOLVE IS STEELY: THE WILDLIFE CENTRE IS HER TERRITORY AND THE ANIMALS ARE HER WORLD

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Call of the wild

Since it was founded in 2001, the Abu Dhabi Wildlife Centre has helped thousands of creatures great and small, including cheetahs, white tigers and baboons



motorway towards the Al Wathba Wetlands Reserve. Originally a plant nursery, the site was designed by Barcellos, who created each camp with an air conditioned room and a smaller caged control area where the animals go to feast on up to seven kilos of meat once a day so keepers can enter and clean the larger enclosure.

Barcellos' second husband, Marcelo, shows me round. He points out the residents: a jaguar, white tigers, a Siberian tiger named Ruth, macaca and vervet monkeys, a white lion, peacocks, small leopard cats, African tortoises, red deer, hyenas, raccoons, wolves and gazelles. And there's 23-stone Daisy, a liger, of which there are thought to be fewer than 100 in the world. "They stick a male lion and a female tiger together and let them breed," Barcellos explains of the liger's unlikely origins. "It's completely immoral because those animals would never interact in the wild. They're from different continents, ligers can't breed on their own, they grow to humongous sizes and they have a very solitary life."

Across a sandy pathway, another enclosure houses a pair of regal Somali cheetahs, their striking spots making them one of the most popular animals to be kept as status symbols in the UAE. "The internet feeds desire as well as availability," says Dr Nicholas Mitchell of the ZSL and WCS initiative Rangewide Conservation Programme for Cheetah and African Wild Dogs. "We think two-thirds of cheetah cubs die in transit, so for every cheetah that makes it to the Middle East, there are another two who have died in order to make the trade operate."

Almost all the animals here were rescued from the illegal exotic pet trade, either confiscated in airports or by police, reported by neighbours or donated by owners who realise they're in way over their heads. Many come in with their nails removed or teeth cut and requiring emergency dental work. "People think if you cut a lion's teeth it can't kill you," Barcellos scoffs.

The flood of animals keep on coming. "We confiscated 15 baboons in a tiny cage," Marcelo says. "The guy was trying to sell them for 3,000 dirham (approx £635) each. The female baboon is Shakira. She lived in a flat with a lady in Abu Dhabi and was very fat when she came in because she'd fed her cake. We've also had a jaguar that had been fed only on Kentucky Fried Chicken."

The problem is by no means confined to Abu Dhabi. The Humane Society of the United States reports the exotic pet trade is second only to drugs and weapons on the black market. "It's a significant problem in the UAE but it's not unique," says Richard Thomas, spokesperson of the wildlife trade monitoring network TRAFFIC. "In fact, in the USA, there are actually more captive tigers than the total worldwide population in the wild."

Progress seemed to have been made in January when the UAE passed a law banning the private ownership of exotic animals.



ANIMAL KINGDOM

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"But who is going to go to these guys and say hand over your animals?" Barcellos asks. "These people are very rich and powerful. We need an organisation like the RSPCA, which has the power to confiscate animals and enforce the law." Barcellos is waiting for the next incident that reminds everyone of these creatures' wild nature. "It amazes me that no one's been killed or hurt," she admits. "I don't want that to happen but until something does, no one is going to take this problem seriously and more animals will end up here." Until then, Barcellos will be left dealing with the practicalities of looking after these displaced animals every day; once their owners have moved on to a more fashionable pet, watch or a new Ferrari. ■

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