



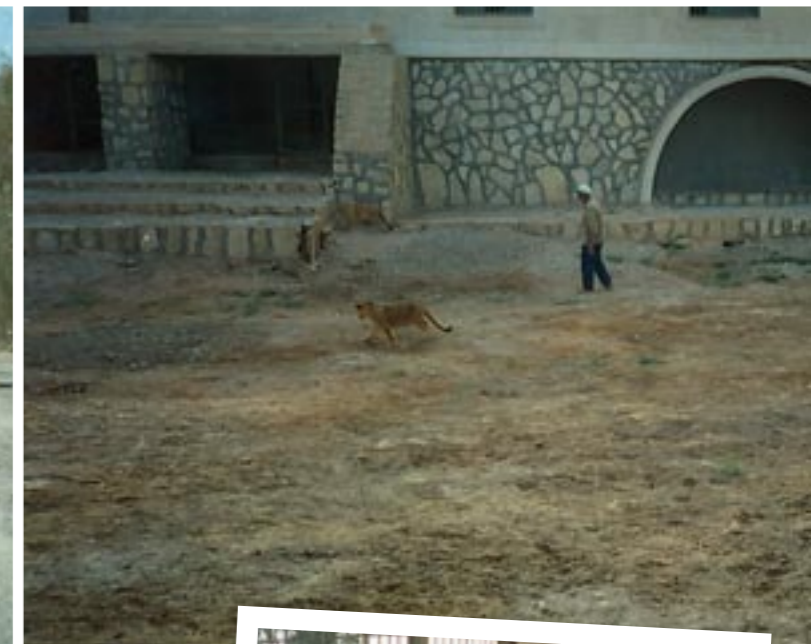
operation ZOO RESCUE



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When coalition forces invaded Iraq in 2003, Lawrence Anthony, a conservationist in South Africa, contacted the US consulate to find out whether any provisions had been made for the Baghdad Zoo, the largest in the Middle East.

When he discovered that it didn't feature at all in post-invasion plans he mounted an audacious (some would say naïve) rescue effort. Although this story takes place beyond African borders, *Africa Geographic* is proud to tell you how a South African saved Baghdad's zoo. ▶



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There was devastation everywhere. Tank tracks ran between the enclosures, a direct hit had destroyed a lion's cage and the walls were riddled with bullets.

The smell of rotting carcasses filled the air and thick carpets of flies covered piles of excrement and detritus. Just metres from the concrete walkways, unexploded fragments of cluster bombs lurked, while taps, toilet bowls, furniture, roofing sheets, in fact every scrap of workaday infrastructure had been raided or blown away.

Iraq's Baghdad Zoo, one of Saddam Hussein's propaganda showpieces, had once boasted an inventory of 650 animals and birds. Now, all that remained was a scraggly band of 30 desperately weak tigers, lions, bears, porcupines and boars – all animals with strong survival instincts and a capacity to defend themselves from the onslaught of determined, hungry looters. This was the scene that confronted Lawrence Anthony, a passionate South African conservationist who had arrived in Baghdad just nine days after US tanks rolled into the city.

When coalition forces invaded Iraq in April 2003, Anthony, who owns and runs Thula Thula, a private game reserve and lodge in KwaZulu-Natal, saw history preparing to repeat itself. During the conflicts in Kuwait, Kosovo in Serbia and the Afghanistan capital of Kabul, the zoos were annihilated by a combination of military vandalism, civilian slaughter and neglect. He approached the US consulate

in Durban to establish what arrangements had been made to save the largest zoo in the Middle East and discovered that, despite an entire government-in-waiting, there was no hint of concern for the zoo – this from two nations, the US and the UK, where animal welfare is a national priority.

With a determination born of obsession, he decided to visit Baghdad and embarked on an obstacle course littered with bureaucratic dead ends, obstructive government officials and an occupying army that considered him an intrusion. But in war there are heroes behind desks, as well as in the trenches, and the nightmare of red tape was eventually broken by Kuwait's Deputy Minister of Animal Health and Agriculture. The Minister had witnessed the destruction of his own country's zoo during Operation Desert Storm and issued the requisite permit to enter Iraq.

Obtaining permission was one thing, getting there was quite another. The coalition forces wanted nothing to do with him, so with a combination of heroic chutzpah and monumental naivety, Anthony hired a Toyota Cressida and left Kuwait early one morning with two employees from the Kuwaiti Zoo who knew the back roads.

En route they passed what remained of an uneven contest. The crack Iraqi Medina Forces had been routed in a matter of days, which led to the collapse of the entire army, and the path was strewn with burnt-out tanks and vehicles, abandoned Scud missiles and

thousands of uniforms discarded by fleeing soldiers. After nine hours and 600 kilometres, Anthony and his companions arrived at a very jittery Baghdad, and the first of several US checkpoints. The checkpoints had already been targeted by suicide bombers and were armed with tanks, machine gun nests and orders to 'shoot to kill'. Anthony approached the guard with his hands held high.

'Hi, I'm Lawrence Anthony from KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa, and I've come to...'

'Back off!'

'No, you don't understand, I've come to restore Baghdad Zoo...'

'BACK OFF!!'

Lawrence Anthony is a good listener and there was sufficient menace in the last command to send him scuttling down the road to another checkpoint where he modified his approach. Enter Captain Sydelik, a chunky American in an armoured troop carrier, who escorted the Toyota Trio to the zoo. He would become a great facilitator, smoothing Anthony's introduction to Baghdad.

The zoo was in a corner of the 100-hectare El Zawra Park, a once-beautiful piece of land that had been ravaged during the battle for Baghdad. That any animals were alive at all was thanks to the zoo's deputy director Dr Husham Mohammed Hussan, who had come to work every day despite not being paid for months. He welcomed the new arrivals with open arms.

Wandering around, the South African began to appreciate the enormity of the task he'd set himself. The zoo, like the rest of Baghdad, was without power or water, and constantly under attack from looters. To give him a small measure of mobility, Sydelik's men taped

the word 'ZOO' in large letters to the hired Toyota and approval was arranged at the checkpoints so that he could scour Baghdad's volatile, dangerous streets for supplies.

Anthony wanted to set up camp on the premises, but Sydelik insisted that he stay with the tanks and tank crews that invaded Baghdad at the Al-Rashid, an erstwhile luxury hotel. Conditions there were far from comfortable – there was no running water or electricity, Anthony's room on the 7th floor was a mosquito-infested sauna and there was only one shower between 400 men – but it was safer than remaining at the zoo after dark. After a night filled with the ceaseless cacophony of gunfire, something that would continue for most of his time there, Anthony started his restoration project in earnest.

Zoo director Dr Adel Salman Mousa rounded up a couple of men and together they began the back-breaking task of finding and transporting supplies. In a basement at the Al-Rashid they came across a treasure trove of buckets, disinfectants and cleaning materials, and at one of Saddam Hussein's palaces they 'requisitioned' a generator. Hussan, a veritable Mr Fix-It, discovered a huge pipe running through the park that still had a supply of water, and he jury-rigged a feeder that dripped into waiting buckets. At another of Hussein's residences, the team found a freezer full of meat that had, ▶



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At yet another palace, they found a magnificent lion and two lionesses rumoured to be the man-eaters sustained by the love rivals and enemies of Uday Hussein

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until then, survived the looters. It provided immediate relief for the starving animals and was an important stopgap until the zoo's butchery was recommissioned to slaughter donkeys.

Three days into the operation, the nationality of Anthony's travelling companions was revealed and they fled back to Kuwait in the hired Toyota, leaving Anthony stranded in a war zone. By the end of the second week, however, the zoo's workforce had swelled to eight as eager employees returned. A month later, Brendan Whittington-Jones, Anthony's right-hand man at Thula Thula, also arrived.

Living at the Al-Rashid, Anthony developed a great relationship with the US forces, especially Captain William Sumner, who supported the project with vehicles and manpower. These resources eventually turned the tide against the looters, many of whom were armed, and was a key factor in the zoo's salvation. (In one drastic action, the troops rounded up a hardcore mob and imprisoned them in one of the cages for a few days.)

Not only did Anthony enjoy the support of the US army, but he also succeeded in winning over the locals and engineered a level of cooperation between the two parties that was almost unheard of. When another basement in the hotel yielded huge supplies of rice, flour, maize and other basic commodities, these were distributed amongst the zoo staff, a well-deserved reward for their loyalty and hard work. Anthony himself was sustained by a daily allocation of three litres of bottled water and three army ration packs.

As the restoration progressed, the focus shifted to rescuing animals stranded in other facilities. First was the transfer of four ostriches from one of Uday Hussein's love nests. In a caper that could have come from a Monty Python episode, one ostrich was coerced into a troop carrier, where it glared out indignantly over the sides. The intention was for the other three birds, each guided by two attendants, to follow the vehicle slowly on foot. This didn't suit the birds at all, however, and they took off. Clinging desperately to their charges and using their wings as feathered ailerons, the minders hurtled along the streets of Baghdad, through checkpoints, around traffic, over obstacles and, in all likelihood, past snipers. In a feat of low-flying, they steered the ostriches to the zoo, where miraculously they came to rest in the designated enclosure.

Uday Hussein's various residences proved to be a major source of animal exotica. Six peacocks were rescued from the same enclosure as the ostriches (but were sadly lost to looters) and, at another palace, six sub-adult lionesses, two cubs and a couple of cheetahs were found in a debilitated condition. Using a large shield fashioned from a farm gate, Anthony and his team advanced on these animals and, in a heart-stopping bout of non-tranquillised snarling and spitting, managed to steer them into transportation cages. At yet another palace, they found a magnificent lion and two lionesses rumoured to be the man-eaters sustained by the love rivals and enemies of Uday Hussein.

Well into the relief effort, Anthony received word that a black-market outfit was trading animals illegally throughout the Middle East. He approached the coalition forces and was given six Humvees, a couple of trucks and 30 soldiers with which to 'engage' the owners. The stand-off resulted in an increased population of badly neglected camels, foxes, monkeys and an enormous bear, whose translocation required darting equipment and a crane. After years of misery in a cramped and uncomfortable cage, it took up residence in a specially constructed enclosure complete with shade cloth and a pool.

Since his arrival in Baghdad, Anthony had heard much speculation about the whereabouts of Saddam Hussein's 40 magnificent Arabian stallions, whose bloodlines stretched back to the Crusades. When a former Hussein employee revealed their location, the US forces again stepped in and 17 of the stallions were reclaimed in the suburb of Abu Ghraib. They were in superb condition and, after a sojourn at Baghdad University, were stabled at the zoo.

While the stallions were being rescued, Anthony was preparing to travel to Los Angeles to raise desperately needed finance. There he embarked on a series of lectures and television interviews, and raised US\$90 000. The money was channelled through the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), whose emergency relief team was leaving for Baghdad with rations, medicines, equipment and vehicles. Lieutenant General Jay Garner, then the senior US civil administrator in Iraq, visited Anthony and handed over US\$20 000, declaring the Baghdad Zoo to be the only functioning entity in the city. Anthony also managed to convince the coalition that the 100-hectare park surrounding the zoo was a pivotal facility and that the restoration of

its lawns, lakes and waterways would be a worthwhile PR exercise.

In the months that followed, Anthony and IFAW were assisted (or hampered in some instances) by visiting NGOs and animal welfare organisations, and Anthony continued to shuttle between Europe, South Africa and Iraq, raising funds and generating awareness. After six months, with the zoo in good hands – Brendan Whittington-Jones was appointed operations manager – he returned to his beloved Thula Thula. ■

In March 2004, Lawrence Anthony received the Earth Day medal from the Earth Society Foundation for his heroic exploits in Iraq. He has since established The Earth Organization to tackle projects of ecological significance (for more information, visit www.earthorganization.org). A book about his escapades will be published early next year.

AKA 'THE ELEPHANT WHISPERER'

Lawrence Anthony came to the attention of the South African media six years ago when he agreed to take on seven delinquent traumatised elephants from Mpumalanga Province. They were released into a boma with electrified fences, which they promptly flattened using a tamboti tree. After breaking into the Hluhluwe-Umfolozi Park and wreaking havoc, they were almost destroyed, but Anthony persuaded the authorities to return them to Thula Thula's now treeless boma. There the seriously ticked-off elephants vented their frustration and, mindful of the threat of extermination, Anthony decided to keep a constant eye on them. For the next two weeks, he patrolled the boma's perimeter constantly, talking and singing, while they stomped around, flapping their ears and trumpeting. After a fortnight of chatting and crooning, the hoarse-whisperer took a coffee break at the house. When he left the boma the air was thick with malice and resentment, but on his return a palpable calm had descended. Cautiously he approached the fence and stood face-to-face with Nana, the matriarch. She put her trunk through the electrified wires and gently started touching him. Deciding it was a case of now or never, Anthony released the herd into the reserve where it has settled and remained. It was the start of what can only be described as an interspecies love affair as his relationship with Nana developed to the point where he (and only he) can walk freely among the herd.