

Good Morning America Good Morning America

World News Tonight World News Tonight

Nightline Nightline

20/20 20/20

This Week This Week

The View The View

What Would You Do? What Would You Do?

2020 Elections



U.S.

Politics

International

Entertainment

Business

Technology

Lifestyle

Health

Virtual Reality

Weather

Tips

Sports

FiveThirtyEight

Privacy Policy Privacy Policy

Your CA Privacy Rights Your CA Privacy Rights

Children's Online Privacy Policy Children's Online Privacy Policy

Interest-Based Ads Interest-Based Ads

Terms of Use Terms of Use

Contact Us Contact Us

ABC News Network | © 2019 ABC News Internet Ventures. All rights reserved.

# NEWS **M NG UP** Inside South Africa's lion bone trade

Kris Everatt was tracking lion prides as part of his conservation research in Mozambique's Limpopo National Park when he came across dozens of dead vultures near a waterhole.

As he walked closer to the waterhole, he saw the mutilated bodies of three lions. Their faces and paws were missing.

## Interested in Animals?

Add Animals as an interest to stay up to date on the latest Animals news, video, and analysis

"I'd never seen a lion with its head and feet cut off before," said Everatt, the Mozambique program manager for [Panthera](#), a global wild cat conservation organization. "But I knew they were

poisoned."

That was more than five years ago. Since then, the number of lions in Limpopo National Park has plunged from 67 to about 10 or less, according to Everatt, who began studying the park's lion population in 2011. Each was poisoned by suspected poachers, and the animals that scavenged their carcasses dropped dead too, he said.

Many of the lions were found with their heads and paws hacked off, while others were only missing their teeth and claws. Some were completely deboned, with just their butchered flesh and skin remaining, Everatt said.



It's illegal to hunt lions in Limpopo National Park, a protected area of 1 million hectares along Mozambique's western frontier. But just across the border in South

Africa, killing captive-bred lions to export their skeletons is perfectly legal -- and increasingly lucrative. The bones are typically shipped to Asia, where they are often falsely advertised as tiger parts in luxury products.

Everatt said he's witnessing the detrimental impact that South Africa's legal lion bone trade is beginning to have on the conservation of wild lion populations, which are already in steep decline across Africa. He said poachers in the region have caught on to the growing market for lion parts, and the iconic big cats are relatively easy to kill by simply lacing a piece of meat with poison.

"There's been this increase in poaching of wild lions where there wasn't before," Everatt told ABC News in a recent telephone interview. "Lions are on the menu now."



[Article](#) of

South Africa has been legally exporting lion skeletons since 2008. Back then, the bones typically entered the international market as a by-product of the trophy hunting industry. Many of the trophies originated from captive-born lions that were killed in canned hunts, in which the often-tamed animal is hunted in a confined area.

Americans once comprised half of South Africa's foreign clientele, according to a [recent study](#) of the industry.

But that all started to change after the United States suspended imports of captive-bred lion trophies in 2016. Later that year, the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) directed South Africa, the world's largest legal exporter of lion bones, to establish an annual export quota for lion skeletons derived from captive breeding facilities. In 2017, the South African government set a quota of 800 lion skeletons, with or without the skull. Officials raised the quota to 1,500 last year but then reduced it back to 800 following public outcry.

Researchers surveyed 117 captive lion facilities registered in South Africa, most of which had sold live lions for the hunting industry, and 82 percent said the U.S. ban impacted their businesses. While most of the breeders said they scaled down their operations and laid off staff as a result, 30 percent said they turned to the lion bone trade, according to the study, which was published in the scientific journal PLOS One in May.

**[\(MORE: Cecil the Lion was baited before he was killed, new book alleges\)](#)**

The sale price for live lions in South Africa has plummeted while the price for their skeletons has increased by more than 22 percent since 2012, as the big cats are being increasingly slaughtered for their bones. A lion skeleton with the skull can now fetch an average of more than \$3,000, according to the study.

The growing demand for lion bones comes at a time when the African lion, which is classified as "vulnerable" on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List of Threatened Species, is already under major threat across the African continent from habitat loss, a decrease in their natural prey species, and human encroachment. The South African government has raised concerns that bones would be sourced illegally from wild lions to satisfy demand if the trade in captive-bred ones was prohibited. But the export quota seems to present a further challenge to the controversial industry, with 52 percent of breeders saying they will search for "alternative markets" for lion bones if the quota restricts their business in any way, according to the study.



Paul Funston/Panthera

[Animals](#) [Eub](#)

A [2018 report](#) by two animal welfare groups in South Africa, the EMS Foundation and Ban Animal Trading, revealed links between the legal lion bone trade and illegal wildlife trafficking after analyzing hundreds of CITES export permits issued by the South African government. The bones are often exported to Laos and then illegally trafficked across international borders into China, Thailand or Vietnam, according to the 122-page report.

"The legal trade is being used to launder illegal products," Michele Pickover, the director of the EMS Foundation, told ABC News in a recent telephone interview. "They're supposed to be reducing demand and, here, South Africa is sort of pushing demand."

**[\(MORE: Trump administration withdraws ban on elephant trophy permits\)](#)**

Once in Asia, lion bone is often sold as jewelry or sometimes used as a substitute for increasingly scarce tiger parts in lavish products, such as fortified wines and cakes. Tiger parts, which have long been used as remedies in traditional Chinese medicine,

have become a status symbol in East and Southeast Asian countries. But with just a few thousand wild tigers left in the world, tiger bone is harder to get and more expensive. So dealers and vendors are taking advantage of the fact that tiger and lion bones are virtually indistinguishable, according to [Karl Ammann](#), a Swiss conservation activist, wildlife photographer, author and filmmaker who has investigated the wildlife trade in Africa and Asia.

The Asian demand for lion parts is on the rise and South Africa's legal trade is only stoking the flames, he said.

"The demand side is obviously a major issue," Ammann told ABC News in a recent telephone interview. "The middle class in China and Vietnam is increasing and, as long as it's increasing, there will be demand for the product."



Brent Stirton/Getty Images, FILE

[Answerker](#) ©

The bone trade is just one of the many ways South Africa is commodifying its captive-bred lions at every stage of life, from birth to death.

There are hundreds of facilities across the country that are legally breeding and raising lions, sometimes in tiny enclosures and unsatisfactory conditions. Cubs are separated from their mothers just days after birth, so the female adult lions can be continuously bred.

The lions are then hand-reared so they grow up to be tame and used to humans. Cubs are used in petting attractions while they're very young and small. Adolescent lions are used in other tourist activities, such as walking with lions.

When they get too big to safely interact with tourists, the lions are either recycled back into the breeding industry or sold to other facilities where they will be gunned down in canned trophy hunts or killed for their bones.



[lioncubs](#)

Some facilities lure in unwitting volunteers to help raise the cubs, like Beth Jennings. In February 2015, Jennings traveled from the United Kingdom to South Africa where she spent two weeks volunteering at a so-called lion conservation park in a rural area, some 70 miles outside the city of Pretoria. She was told she would be helping

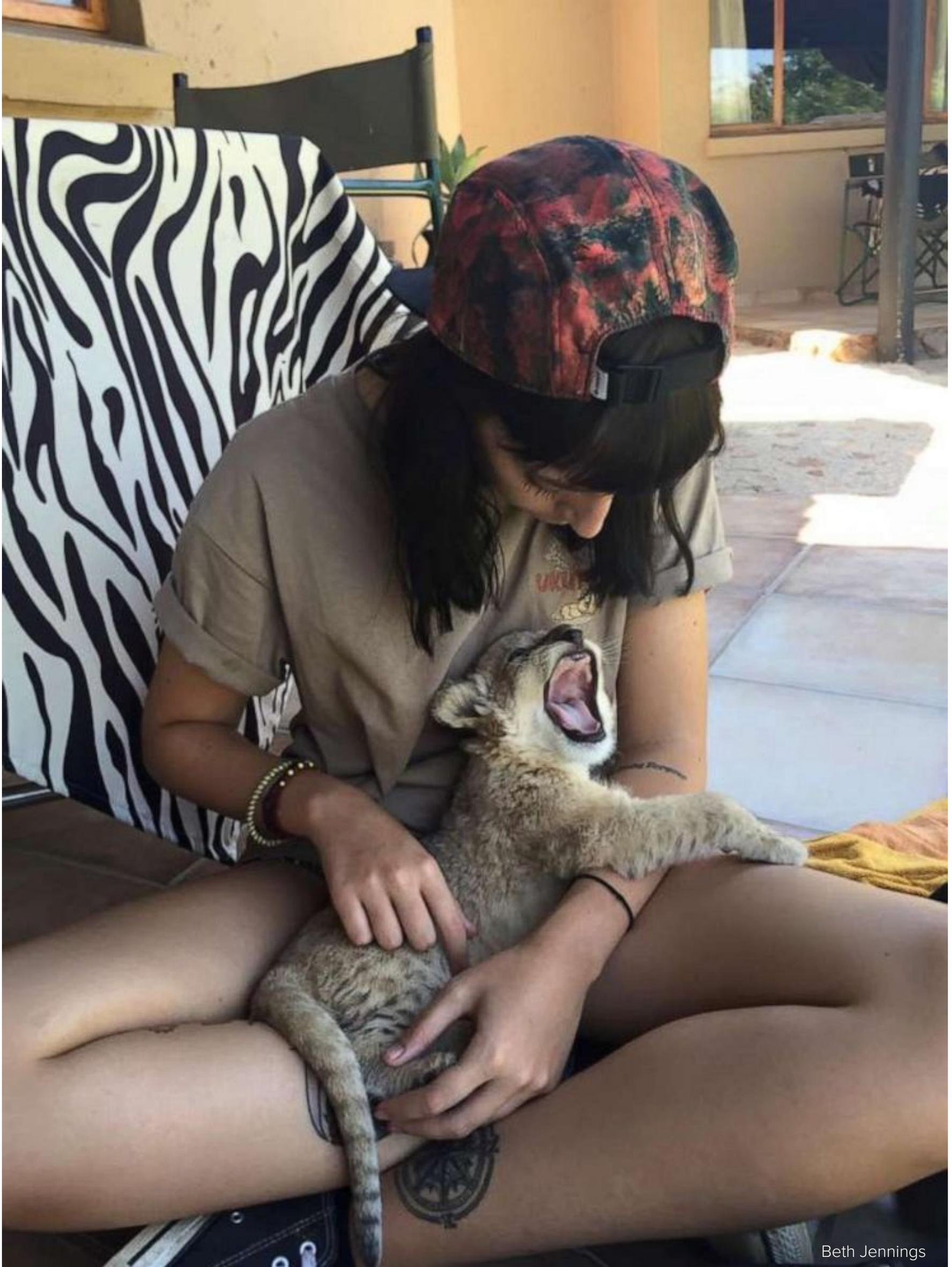
care for orphaned cubs and prepare them to be released back into the wild. But she soon realized that wasn't the truth, Jennings said.

The park was excessively breeding lions, and the staff instructed Jennings and the other volunteers to separate two-week-old cubs from their mother to hand-rear them, she said. When Jennings expressed concerns to the staff, she said they told her that the mother had become too aggressive with the cubs and was started to reject them. But Jennings said she saw no signs of such behavior during her stay.

**(MORE: Trump administration begins accepting permits to import lion trophies)**

Jennings said the young cubs at the facility were passed around to groups of tourists, who cuddled and petted them and posed for photos.

"The cubs make this absolutely heart-breaking noise that is them calling for their mum," Jennings told ABC News in a recent telephone interview. "It sounds really cute if you don't know what it is."



Beth Jennings

[Beth Jenn](#)

One evening, the staff instructed Jennings to lock five cubs in a single crate

overnight because they had apparently outgrown their enclosures. The crate was small and there was no access to food or water, she said.

"The next morning, they were covered in urine and desperate for water," she told ABC News. "It was horrible."

Jennings said the staff continued to be dismissive whenever she raised concerns, so she decided to quietly document her stay and then started [a blog called "Claws Out"](#) when she returned home. Her blog ultimately became part of a U.K.-registered charity, International Aid for the Protection and Welfare of Animals, where Jennings now works as a campaign manager and has created a short documentary about her experience.



Beth Jennings

[Claws Out](#) |

South African government officials did not respond to ABC News' questions about the captive lion breeding industry nor a request for data. It's unclear exactly how

many facilities there are, how many lions are being housed in them and what -- if anything -- is being done to ensure the animals' welfare. But critics say it's a poorly-regulated and cruel business that's exploded into a multi-million dollar industry amid the rising demand for lion parts.

"This industry has really developed over the past couple decades," said Mark Jones, a U.K.-based veterinarian and the head of policy at [The Born Free Foundation](#), an international wildlife charity. "We now have a situation where there's probably upwards of 300 facilities containing -- nobody really knows, but certainly -- upwards of 8-10,000 lions and other big cats."

**(MORE: [14 lions escape from world-famous game reserve](#))**

There have been reports in recent months of large-scale slaughterhouses emerging at some lion farms in South Africa's Free State province, where dozens of big cats are killed at a time for the sole purpose of selling their bones.

"Often raised in appalling conditions, the animals are emaciated or very diseased," Jones told ABC News in a recent telephone interview. "If you're raising an animal to sell into the bone trade, the condition of the animal doesn't really matter."



[Captive](#)-br

But a [landmark court ruling](#) this week has brought a sense of hope to those calling on South Africa to ban captive lion breeding and the bone trade.

The High Court of South Africa on Tuesday declared the annual export quotas for lion bone in 2017 and 2018 "unlawful and constitutionally invalid," because the government had ignored the welfare of the animals in captivity. The judge ruled in favor of the [National Council of Societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals](#) (NSPCA), a South African animal welfare organization that has documented incidents of alleged cruelty in captive lion facilities. It's the first time in the country's history that such an organization has challenged conservation procedure.

**[\(MORE: Botswana's elephants and Zimbabwe's buffaloes are fair game after lawmakers relax hunting laws\)](#)**

The ruling doesn't put an end to the bone trade or captive breeding, nor does it prevent the government from setting quotas in the future; but it requires officials to consider animal welfare issues when making those decisions.

"We kept this litigation relatively narrow and within our mandate as there was a risk if we went too wide that a loss would have strengthened the lion industry's position," Karen Trendler, manager of the NSPCA's wildlife trade and trafficking portfolio, told ABC News in a text message. "So one achievable step at a time."

South Africa's Minister of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries, Barbara Creecy, has yet to set a lion bone export quota for 2019. Her office did not respond to ABC News' request for comment.



[Anight.ca](#)

Everatt, the lion researcher in Mozambique, said he worries the damage has already been done and that any action the South African government may take to reverse it will be "too little, too late."

"The industry doesn't belong from a conservation and ethical point of view, but now they're in the middle of it and it's going to be a dirty end," Everatt told ABC News. "It's a lesson that the rest of Africa and the rest of the world needs to learn."

Everatt said he's already seen the bone trade cause the collapse of the wild lion population in Mozambique's Limpopo National Park. He said he's also heard of poachers coming into nearby villages where they are bribing residents to call them if they have any issues with lions in the area, rather than report it to the government which typically tries to relocate the wild animal. The poachers will poison the big cat and quietly take away its carcass, most likely to sell its parts, according to Everatt.

"My fear, and I think it's justified, is that this is going to spread around Africa," he said. "It's a real threat."



Comments

---

Before You Go

**Taboola** Feed

---

Before You Go

**Taboola** Feed

Join our Webinar on Sustainable Manufacturing!

Dassault Systèmes |

Sponsored

European Countries, Ranked from Worst to First

Far & Wide |

Sponsored

The Cost of Apartments for Sale in Dubai Might Totally Surprise You

Apartments for Sale | Search Ads |

Sponsored

South Africa: New Wifi Booster Stops Expensive Internet

Money News Tips |

Sponsored

Is This the Solution To South Africa's Mosquitoes We've All Been Looking For?

Is This the Solution to South Africa's Mosquitos We've All Been Looking For?  
Moskinator |

Sponsored

## The Cost of Stair Lifts Might Surprise You

Stairlifts | Sponsored Listings |

Sponsored

## ISIS prisoner's chilling prediction after al-Baghdadi death

Oct 29, 7:57 PM

## Father of congresswoman who resigned in scandal calls her husband 'evil,' 'wicked'

Oct 29, 11:11 PM

## Car Insurance 2019: This Is How Cheap It Can Be

Car Insurance | Search Ads |

Sponsored

## Under 65? This New Life Insurance Is Taking South Africa By Storm

Stangen |

Sponsored

## The Must-Play City Building Game of the Year

Forge of Empires - Free Online Game |

Sponsored

## Why King Price Is One Of The Fastest Growing Car Insurance Companies In South Africa

AutoTrends |

Sponsored

## Canada is looking for skilled immigrants!

Canadian Visa Professionals |

Sponsored

## 'Tarzan' actor's son unarmed when fatally shot by deputies

## Cause of death in case of murdered 3-year-old 'Cupcake' revealed

Oct 25, 3:26 PM

## Successful Families Plan For The Future Thats How Legacies Are Born

Mzanzi Review for Stangen Life Insurance |

Sponsored

## SimpleSite - The Simplest Site Creator

SimpleSite |

Sponsored

## Under 65? No Life Insurance? Read This

Clear Plan Life Insurance Quotes |

Sponsored

## Join our Webinar on Sustainable Manufacturing!

Dassault Systèmes | Sponsored

## European Countries, Ranked from Worst to First

Far & Wide | Sponsored

## Under 65? This New Life Insurance Is Taking South Africa By Storm

Stangen | Sponsored

## The Cost of Apartments for Sale in Dubai Might Totally Surprise You

Apartments for Sale | Search Ads | Sponsored

## Is This the Solution To South Africa's Mosquitos We've All Been Looking For?

Moskinator | Sponsored

## The Must-Play City Building Game of the Year

## ISIS prisoner's chilling prediction after al-Baghdadi death

Oct 29, 7:57 PM

## Father of congresswoman who resigned in scandal calls her husband 'evil,' 'wicked'

Oct 29, 11:11 PM

## Car Insurance 2019: This Is How Cheap It Can Be

Car Insurance | Search Ads | Sponsored

## The Cost of Stair Lifts Might Surprise You

Stairlifts | Sponsored Listings | Sponsored

## South Africa: New Wifi Booster Stops Expensive Internet

Money News Tips | Sponsored

## Why King Price Is One Of The Fastest Growing Car Insurance Companies In South Africa

AutoTrends | Sponsored

## Canada offers free public education for your children!

Canadian Visa Professionals | Sponsored

## 'Tarzan' actor's son unarmed when fatally shot by deputies

Oct 29, 6:50 PM

## Cause of death in case of murdered 3-year-old 'Cupcake' revealed

Oct 25, 3:26 PM

## Successful Families Plan For The Future Thats How Legacies Are Born

Mzansi Review for Stangen Life Insurance | Sponsored

## Under 65? No Life Insurance? Read This

Clear Plan Life Insurance Quotes | Sponsored

## SimpleSite - The Simplest Site Creator

SimpleSite | Sponsored