



OPEN LETTER

Addressed to:

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The Wildlife Animal Protection Forum South Africa Requests an Urgent Independent Health and Well-Being Assessment for Opal

The members of the Wildlife Animal Protection Forum South Africa (WAPFSA), a collaborative network of approximately thirty South African non-governmental organizations, are united in our efforts to ensure that Opal, a forty-seven year-old female, Bornean, orangutan's ongoing welfare and wellbeing are both carefully and satisfactorily considered. Orangutan's possess advanced cognitive abilities, deep emotional lives, and a moral right to a flourishing existence.

WAPFSA is hereby politely requesting urgent assistance from [Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife](#), the mandated regulatory authority in KwaZulu-Natal that issues permits regulating the housing, movement, and care of wild animals to ensure compliance with animal welfare and environmental legislation.

WAPFSA is requesting that permission be provided that an in-person independent, professional assessment of Opal's physical health and wellbeing at the Natal Zoological Gardens is carried out by a team of experts. These assessments will pave the way for providing Opal with the best possible care, support and enrichment programs. The owners of this private zoo rely exclusively on their internal veterinary team and have never publicly released independent medical records for the animals.

We are aware that the zoo management maintains that Opal is in perfect health for her age, and that she receives regular veterinary checks. The lack of transparency regarding specialist credentials and medical records frequently fuels public concern. Without detailed, publicly

verifiable clinical reports, it is difficult for advocates or independent experts to assess whether a zoo's management and geriatric care fully align with established animal welfare standards.

We note that after more than a decade of intense advocacy to move Opal to a recognised, international specialised primate sanctuary, [some](#) animal welfare groups have shifted their strategy as they believe that a high-stress, late-life transfer could prove fatal. The basis of these claims and the experts who have come to these conclusions have not been publicized and as such, our request stands.

To satisfy our members and the general public who have maintained an interest in Opal's welfare for decades, that moving her poses significant, life-threatening risk, WAPFSA members require in-person medical and veterinary assessments for Opal as well as copies of all her raw, detailed medical history. Our primate experts can advise on the appropriate appointment of such experts.

While not every member of WAPFSA is an individual primate specialist, our coalition includes professional primatologists, wildlife ecologists, and specialized primate welfare groups. WAPFSA maintains an active Non-human Primate Working Group that specifically focuses on the ethical and non-lethal management of species like the Chacma baboon and the Vervet monkey. These experts provide scientific research and advocacy to government bodies, including the [Ministerial Wildlife Well-being Forum](#).

Background

WAPFSA was established in 2017. We collectively advocate for the protection, welfare, and ethical conservation of wild animals and the natural environment. We provide a unified voice representing various sectors including science, animal welfare, law, and social justice to engage with government bodies and lobby for legislative changes.

Opal is a female, forty-seven year old Bornean orangutan who was born at the [Natal Zoological Gardens](#). Known widely as the "World's Loneliest Orangutan," her life has been the subject of a decade-long, highly publicized ethical battle between animal welfare organizations and the zoo's owners.

The published, sparse, chronological history of Opal suggests that Opal was born at the Natal Zoological Gardens in 1980, her enclosure, a concrete-walled space with a climbing gym has been the only home she has ever known. [Boswell said](#) Opal was born at the Gardens and her mother died when she was four years old due to old age. "Opal had a brother but we did not want him breeding with her or the mother," said Boswell. "We did try to bring in a male so Opal could have a baby for herself, but Ezemvelo Wildlife said I could only have another female orangutan." According to [media reports](#) Opal gave birth to a male offspring.

Orangutans, are among Earth's most intelligent primates, are critically endangered. Restricted to Borneo and Sumatra, they face massive habitat destruction driven by the palm oil industry. They are the world's largest tree-dwelling mammals, spending almost their entire lives high in the rainforests of Borneo and Sumatra. Their incredibly long arms, which can span over two meters, allow them to effortlessly brachiate (swing) through the forest canopy.

In conclusion, the request for an independent assessment of a captive wild animal is not unusual, in April 2022, Minister Creecy formally invited the Pro Elephant Network (PREN) and the [EMS Foundation](#) to assemble a team of international and local elephant specialists to conduct comprehensive behavioural and medical evaluations of [Charlie](#), a bull elephant that had been in captivity for more than four decades.

The undersigned Members of WAPFSA await your urgent and considered response.

Michele Pickover, Executive Director **EMS Foundation**
Dr Adam Cruise, **EMS Foundation**
Megan Carr, Founder **Rhinos in Africa**
Ross Harvey, Director of Research and Programmes at **Good Governance Africa**
Cormac Cullinan, Founder **Wild Law Institute**
Chad Cupido, Executive Officer **Beauty Without Cruelty**
Vishwas Satgar, Founder and Chair **Co-Operative and Policy Alternative Centre**
Charles Simane, Communications **Climate Justice Charter Movement**
Wynter Worsthorne, Founder **Animal Talk Africa**
Stefania Falcon, Founder **Future for Wildlife**
Luana Pasanisi, Founder **Green Group Simonstown**
Guy Jennings, Consultant **Wild Africa Fund Southern Africa**
Linda Tucker, Founder and CEO **Global White Lion Protection Trust**
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Kirsten Youens, Chief Executive **AllRise Attorneys for Climate & Environmental Justice**
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Pete Oxford and Rene Bisch, Founders **Betty's Bay Baboon Action Group**
Cora Bailey, Founder **Community Led Animal Welfare**
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Jabu Myeni, Founder **Gifted for Good**
Les Mitchell, Director **Institute for Critical Animal Studies**
Janet Solomon, Founder **Ocean Not Oil**
Steve Smit, Co-Founder **Monkey Helpline**
Liz Cornwall and Catherine Nyquist, Co-Founders **Panthera Africa Big Cat Sanctuary**
Lex Abnett, Director **Southern African Fight for Rhinos**
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