REVEALED: WILD NAMIBIAN ELEPHANTS ILLEGALLY SOLD INTO CAPTIVITY IN UAE

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In March 2022, a group of wild Namibian elephants landed in the UAE. An exclusive investigation by The New Arab reveals that the sale served to simulate an African safari experience in Emirati zoos with no benefit for the animals and Namibian locals, and violates international protocols.

Initially captured from their natural habitat in Kamanjab, north-western Namibia in early September 2021, these African elephants — an endangered species — spent six months in quarantine captivity. They were then heavily sedated before being loaded into shipping containers, onto a plane, and transferred to their final destinations: the Sharjah Safari Park and Abu Dhabi's Al-Ain Zoo.

For Emirati rulers, the tourism-driven African theme of their wildlife parks apparently mattered more than the success of breeding programmes. It was made clear to Al-Ain Zoo Director Mark Craig that there were no imports from Africa with a European Association of Zoos and Aquaria (EAZA)-accredited breeding programme because past ones had not been successful. Arne Lawrenz, the EAZA Ex-situ Programme (EEP) coordinator for elephants, described the "philosophy" of the Emirati zoos as "I got the money, I want to have it. I don't care if that works." The outcome was a lucrative deal finalised through middlemen rather than a non-commercial exchange between zoos.

After months of back and forth between The New Arab and EAZA officials, during which TNA shared the information it obtained and questioned the role of the European association's members in the elephant sale, the EAZA decided to terminate the Al-Ain Zoo's membership on September 15. John Grobler, a Namibian journalist involved in this investigation, is planning to draw on this exposé to call for sanctions against Namibia at the CITES CoP 19 meeting in November, which is considered the world's most important annual summit on wildlife trade.

Wildlife trafficking is the fourth most lucrative illicit trade in the world, worth an estimated USD 15 billion annually. Is this a case of illegal elephant trafficking? Our exclusive investigation (click here) sheds light on the involvement of shadowy intermediaries, the violation of international conventions on endangered species, the mistreatment of the elephants, and the lack of long-term benefits for conservation or the African communities affected by their presence.

"While all parties involved claim that the trade was legal and done with the well-being of the elephants in mind, international guidelines were clearly flouted, and involved parties were likely aware of this."

ENDS

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