



MARK CARWARDINE

WILD THOUGHTS

We are such hypocrites.

I laughed out loud when I heard about the massive police operation launched after a member of public spotted an ‘escaped white tiger’ hiding in the wilds of Hampshire. Officers rushed to the scene with thermal imaging cameras, and contingency plans were put in place to close the M27. All they found, of course, was a cuddly toy.

I realise that allowing a real tiger to wander the fields and hedgerows of southern England would have been out of the question, but there’s no denying that we’re paranoid about dangerous animals. We’ve already rid the country of all its large predators and the mere mention of reintroducing any is inevitably met with howls of protest.

Yet we blithely expect people in Africa and Asia to live alongside lions, tigers, Komodo dragons and a host of other potentially dangerous animals without question.

Often, that is exactly what they do. Last year in Assam, India, a tiger attacked three people, killing two. Far from hunting it down, forest staff captured the offending animal and released it into the core area of nearby Manas National Park.

I was in Uganda a couple of years ago when a man cycling along a public road on the border of Queen Elizabeth National Park was attacked and killed by a lion. By the time I arrived, the lion had been chased into the bushes by other locals – people who walk and cycle through lion country every day on their way to work.

It may have been killed afterwards, but we aren’t really in a position to judge, given our wrapped-up-in-cotton-wool-world. After all, our Health and Safety Executive would have banned lions many years ago.

The point is that we need to be sympathetic in our approach to the conservation of potentially dangerous animals. Born Free, for instance, is investing time and money in helping villagers to build lion-proof *bomas* (enclosures) to protect their livestock. If there is no conflict, there are no retribution killings and everyone is happy. It’s on-the-ground conservation at its best.

Mark Carwardine is a zoologist, photographer and TV presenter.



Now then, be honest: did you initially think this was a real tiger?

“Two years ago, a man cycling along the border of Uganda’s Queen Elizabeth National Park was killed by a lion.”