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forlorn looking female. "She only has three legs. The male ripped one off." Given this scenario, one might have expected to see a sign reading "No sex please, we're cats". But then sex in the wild never looks like much fun. Especially for the female.

Nonetheless, the breeding programme here has been an outstanding success.

"After three years we've had 10 cubs born with eight surviving. We could pack up tomorrow and call it quits and by any stretch the project has been a success. But there's more to it than that. Important information and data has been gathered. The lives of many animals have been improved dramatically, dramatically to the point of reproduction!

"This is the normal barometer by which captive animal managers measure their success in making their charges feel ultimately at ease in artificial surroundings. Two genetically important animals have already been shipped to the US to help bolster the currently stagnant captive breeding population there."

He then opens another enclosure. We follow, timidly. "It's okay, he won't bite. He's hand raised, born here, and is about 15 months old." I kneel down. The young leopard jumps up on my shoulder and proceeded to lick my head. It's not a lick, it's a rasp. And so it should be, for these tongues are designed to sear off scales and rip out plumage.

Passaro won't enter the enclosures that house the few leopards that have been brought in from the wild.

"Why not?"

"Because they are wild."
"What would they do?"
"Well, they'd… I'm not sure… and that's why I don't."

There is no doubt that Passaro puts his heart, soul and professionalism into raising these little cubs.

"But, I'm a scientist and a professional. They are basically a bag of genes. A means to an end. Namely, to gain information that could ultimately save the species from extinction."
It's a given that under his loving care and attention the future for clouded leopards, although decidedly dicey, now holds considerably more promise.

But if anyone happens to know of any restaurant that boasts clouded leopard on its menu, let me know will you? Perhaps we could go and visit them - as a moral obligation - and have a little chat.

We won't need much. Just lawyers, guns and money.

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Things We See And Hear

How Standards Are Created Historically

Does the statement, "We've always done it that way" ring any bells?
The U. S. standard railroad gauge (distance between rails) is 4 feet, 8 and a half inches. That's an exceedingly odd number.
Why was that gauge used? Because that's the way they built them in England, and English expatriates built the US Railroads.
Why did the English build them like that? Because the first rail lines were built by the same people who built the pre-railroad tramways, and that's the gauge they used.
Why did "they" use that gauge then? Because the people who built the tramways used the same jigs and tools that they used for building wagons, which used that wheel spacing.
Okay! Why did the wagons have that particular odd wheel spacing? Well, if they tried to use any other spacing, the wagon wheels would break on some of the old, long distance roads in England, because that's the spacing of the wheel ruts.
So, who built those old rutted roads? Imperial Rome built the first long distance roads in Europe (and England) for their legions. The roads have been used ever since.
What about the ruts in the roads? Roman war chariots formed the initial ruts, which everyone else had to match for fear of destroying their wagon wheels. Since the chariots were made for Imperial Rome, they were all alike in the matter of wheel spacing.
The United States standard railroad gauge of 4 feet, 8 1/2 inches is derived from the original specifications for an Imperial Roman war chariot. And bureaucracies live forever.
So the next time you are handed a specification and told we have always done it that way and wonder what horse's arse came up with that, you may be exactly right. The Imperial Roman war chariots were made just wide enough to accommodate the back ends of two war horses.

Now the twist to the story...

When you see a Space Shuttle sitting on its launch pad, there are two big booster rockets attached to the sides of the main fuel tank. These are solid rocket boosters, or SRBs. Thiokol makes the SRBs at their factory in Utah.
The engineers who designed the SRBs would have preferred to make them a bit fatter, but the SRBs had to be shipped by train from the factory to the launch site. The railroad line from the factory happens to run through a tunnel in the mountains. The SRBs had to fit through that tunnel.
The tunnel is slightly wider than the railroad track, and the railroad track, as you now know, is about as wide as two horses' behinds.
So, a major Space Shuttle design feature of what is arguably the world's most advanced transportation system was determined over two thousand years ago by the width of a horse's arse.
And you thought being a horse's arse wasn't important?

P.S. Roman chariots have been unearthed and all found to have 5ft. axles. Come in 1 3/4 in. on each side to the wheel centre and you have that magic size "4ft 8 1/2".