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## Help save a penguin on your next vacation

**Organizations offer volunteers the opportunity to get up close and personal with animals, while learning about the world around them**

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Jan. 21: Matt Lauer talks with "Today" travel editor Peter Greenberg about how people can give back on their next vacation by helping wildlife.

RTV

Today show

### By Peter Greenberg

Travel Editor

TODAY

updated 11:54 a.m. ET Jan. 21, 2004

There are a lot of groups out there that specialize in helping animals at risk, but here is a volunteer vacation where you really get up close and personal with wildlife.

I-to-I has been providing volunteer opportunities for nine years around the world. We went to South Africa to check out two of the nine programs offered there.

Walking a tiger, bottle-feeding a lion cub, cleaning a lion's cage — not things you'd normally do on a vacation, but that is exactly what these volunteers are doing at the Lion Park in Johannesburg, South Africa — home to tigers, leopards, giraffes, and of course lions.

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I-to-I volunteers come from across the world to help clean cages, mix formula, assist feeding the at-risk cubs and other lions, and lend a hand with the giraffes.

"They help us clean the enclosures. They help making the food. They might make the milk. They wash the dishes. They help with the customers. When we need to go pick up papers, or anything like that,

they're always there to help us," says lion trainer Helga van der Merwe.

Lions truly are the "king of the jungle," but a lion rehabilitated from hunting injuries, soon loses its fear of other animals, especially humans. Reserves like this let lions and other endangered animals roam in safety.

Sometimes in more safety than the volunteers...

"I've got scratches up and down my arms, plenty, just from yesterday," says Amy Markus a recent Tulane University graduate. While her friends tackle white collar wildlife back home, Amy is tackling the real thing here.

"I won't be afraid to go to the interviews and get a job anymore, if I can go in a cage with a lion. Nothing will really seem scary anymore," she explains.

More than just an interesting trip, she sees her work here as a life-enhancing experience.

"You get to see another country, but you're also giving to the country. You're helping them, and getting help yourself, to explore the country. So, it's kind of fun, and working, and both sides are benefited from it," she says.

For others, the experience is life-altering.

"I recently graduated in English literature. Now that I've done the English degree, I'm thinking seriously thinking about veterinary science. And coming out here has just confirmed that I want to spend the rest of my life working with animals," explains Victoria, another volunteer.

### Volunteer vacations: helping wildlife

Learn how you can participate in one of these special programs:

**I-to-I:** Visit <http://www.i-to-i.com/today> or call (800) 985-5881

**Earthwatch Institute:** Visit [www.earthwatch.org](http://www.earthwatch.org)

**Save a Sato in Puerto Rico:** Visit [www.saveasato.org/](http://www.saveasato.org/)

**South African White Shark Research Institute:** Visit [www.whiteshark.co.za](http://www.whiteshark.co.za)

**Sail Hawaii Volunteer Program:** Visit <http://sailhawaii.com/internships.html>

Three hours away in Capetown... These guys (penguins) may look cute, but looks can be deceiving.

Says volunteer Michael, "It is a lot of fun being bitten by the penguins."

At the South African Foundation for the Conservation of Coastal Birds (Sanccob), the I-to-I volunteers help rehabilitate and then release seabirds — mostly penguins — back to the wild.

"A lot of them are oiled, and they're just really, really weak," explains Louisa, a volunteer.

Penguins treated here are sick, injured, or contaminated by oil slicks.

"The volunteers are absolutely crucial to the work that we do. We have only ten permanent staff members and over 800 volunteers. And they worked 17,500 hours last year. We couldn't pay someone to do that," explains Darden Lotz.

Volunteers give penguins medicine, feed them, and clean their pens.

One volunteer says they are living very well, "This is the penguin Hilton," explains Alexis Gutierrez.

Gutierrez, from Denver, Colorado, took three weeks off from her real estate job to help the penguins.

When asked how she would describe this to a friend as a vacation (because it's really hard work), she explains, "I mean it is a lot of work but it's fulfilling. Most vacations, what do you do? You go out and you probably get all liquored up and you don't get anything out of it other than an empty wallet. At least here I get an empty wallet and a little bit of fulfilling at the same time so I win."

More than the work, it's the results. Penguins who would have died are now living.

"The African penguin population has been proven to be 19 percent higher today than it would be without Sanccobs assistance," says Darden Lotz.

I-to-I volunteers help rehabilitate and release more than 600 seabirds per year. Louisa Brown and Nicolas Webster are on vacation from Nottingham, England.

"Volunteering as a couple has been great. And it means that we got to meet loads of new people. And everybody's got the same interests at heart. And it's just been really good," they explain.

## Volunteer vacations



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But all vacations come to an end. After the care, and the bites, and watching them grow, it's time to watch them go. (Volunteers release penguins.)

"You really feel like you're giving something back, especially with these guys because you can see them right when they come in, and then they're released," say Brown and Webster.

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