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Conservation update

FEATURE: AFRICAN LION - *Panthera leo*

The lion is a magnificent animal that appears as a symbol of power, courage and nobility on family crests, coats of arms and national flags in many civilizations. Revered for its strength and bravery, the lion has been admired as a symbol of courage for centuries. Despite this admiration they face great challenges for their survival in the future.

Lions were formally found from northern Africa through to southwest Asia, west into Europe and east into India. Lions became extinct from most parts of Asia within the last 150 years and from Europe about 2,000 years ago. There is still a very small population of the Asiatic lion in the Gir forest in India. Eastern and Southern Africa are thought to contain the most African lions today. In West Africa numbers have declined greatly.

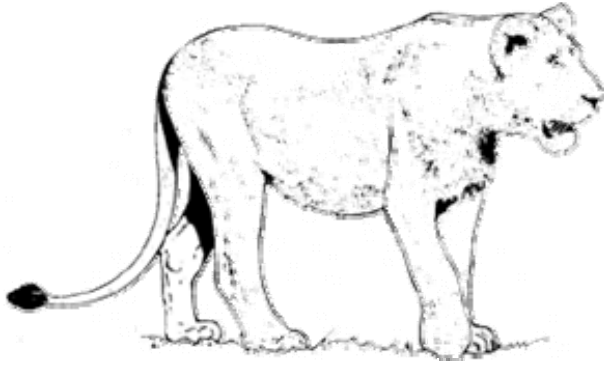
Africa's wild lion population is in trouble. Many people are largely unaware of the problem, because inside national parks lions appear plentiful. Most lions now survive in protected zones. Human population expansion is the greatest risk to lions. Habitat destruction and fragmentation results in smaller populations which are widely dispersed. This increases the incidence of inbreeding and threatens the survival of the group in the long term. Very few lions now survive outside protected zones.

Lions have long been killed by humans in rituals of bravery, as hunting trophies and to satisfy false myths relating to their "medicinal and magical powers". Although lions are now protected in many parts of Africa, they were once considered to be stock-raiding vermin and were killed on sight. In some areas, livestock predation remains a severe problem. Outbreak of disease due to human encroachment has affected the lion population in several national parks. Recently, many lions in the Serengeti died of canine distemper, introduced through domestic animals.

OBSERVE THE WILDLIFE CODE AND DO YOUR PART TOWARDS HELPING US CONSERVE WILDLIFE...

- Respect the privacy of animals – minimum viewing distance is 20 metres.
- Remember that animals are wild and can be dangerous.
- Do not disturb the animals with sudden movements or loud noises.
- It is an offence to feed wild animals.
- Stay in your vehicle except at designated places.
- Respect the speed limit of 40 kilometres per hour in parks.
- Never drive off road as it degrades habitat.
- Do not leave litter or discard lighted cigarettes.
- Respect the culture of the people – never take photographs of local people without their permission.
- It is illegal to collect any living or dead item from a protected area.

Lion Facts



AFRICAN LION – *Panthera leo*

STATUS: Vulnerable.

DESCRIPTION: Renowned for their majesty and nicknamed the “King of the Jungle”, lions possess both beauty and strength. Adult males are distinguishable by their manes which protect them while fighting. Lions vary in color but are typically a light, yellowish-brown.

SIZE: Males stand at a shoulder height of about 1.2 metres and reach about 1.5 to 2.4 metres in length. Their tails average a length of 0.9 metres, and they can weigh as much as 160 to 250 kg. Females are smaller than males.

POPULATION: Since the early 1950s, the lion population in Africa has been reduced by half. Today fewer than 21,000 remain in all of Africa.

LIFESPAN: Healthy lions live about 15 years in the wild, 24 years in captivity.

RANGE: The African lion is found throughout the south Sahara desert and in parts of southern and eastern Africa.

HABITAT: The African lion inhabits grassy plains, savannahs, open woodlands and scrub country.

FOOD: Lions feed upon a wide array of animals, including wildebeest, impala, zebra, giraffe, buffalo and wild hogs. They will also feed on smaller animals such as hares, birds and reptiles.

BEHAVIOUR: The only social member of the cat (Felidae) family, lions live in large groups called "prides," consisting of about 15 lions. Related females and their young make up the majority of the pride. A single male, or sometimes a small group of two to three males, will join a pride for an indefinite period, usually about three years or until another group of males takes over. Females do almost all of the hunting. They are mainly nocturnal and work in teams to stalk and ambush prey. A lion can run for short distances at 60 kilometres per hour and leap as far as 11 metres. They are also territorial, males roar and use scent markings to establish their domain.

OFFSPRING: Following a gestation period of 3 ½ months, a female gives birth to litters averaging three to four cubs weighing 1 ½ kg each. If the entire litter dies, she will mate again within a few days. Some mothers carefully nurture the young; others may neglect or abandon them, especially when food is scarce. Usually two or more females in a pride give birth about the same time, and the cubs are raised together. A lioness will permit cubs other than her own to suckle, sometimes enabling a neglected infant to survive. Capable hunters by 2 years of age, lions become fully grown between 5 and 6 years.

THREATS: Loss of habitat due to human encroachment, population growth and agricultural expansion, hunting and poisoning by livestock ranchers, as well as trophy hunting.

PROTECTION: *CITES, Appendix II, Endangered Species Act.

(The Asiatic Lion, *Panthera leo persica*, is listed as critically endangered, under CITES, Appendix I.)

**Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, an international treaty with more than 160 member countries. Appendix I listed species cannot be traded commercially. Appendix II listed species can be traded commercially only if trade does not harm their survival.*

SOME LIONS ARE NOMADS...

All males eventually leave their natal pride, usually in their second or third year. Then, until they are large and powerful enough to attempt to oust resident territorial pride males, they must lead the life of a nomad. Young females may also become nomadic, particularly if there are already plenty of adult lionesses in their pride. Some lions remain nomads their entire lives, remaining constantly on the move in search of prey.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN AFRICAN AND ASIATIC LIONS...

Although genetically distinct from the sub-Saharan African lion, the difference is not large. In fact, the difference is less than that found between different human racial groups. The closeness in genetic make-up between Asiatic and African lions indicates that the two populations separated as recently as 100,000 years ago.

The most noticeable physical characteristic found in all Asiatic lions, but rarely in African lions, is a longitudinal fold of skin running along the belly. Also, the mane of the Asiatic lion is generally shorter than that of the African lion, so the ears are always visible. Asiatic lions are, in general, slightly smaller than African lions.

Like their African cousins, Asiatic lions are highly sociable animals living in social units called prides. There are however differences in pride make up between the sub-species. Based on the average number of adult females, the Asiatic pride is smaller. Adult male Asiatic lions exhibit a lesser degree of sociality than African males. Asiatic males only associate with the pride when mating or on a large kill.

Asiatic lions formerly stretched from northern Greece across Southwest Asia to central India. It became extinct in eastern Europe around 100 A.D., and in Palestine around the time of the Crusades. It remained widespread elsewhere until the advent of firearms in the mid 1800s led to widespread extinction. The lion had disappeared from Turkey by the late 1800s; the last reported sightings in Iran and Iraq date to 1942 and 1918 respectively. In India the lion came under heavy hunting pressure and by the turn of the century was restricted to the Gir forest in the state of Gujarat. Today's population of Asiatic lions is estimated at only 300 individuals.

THE AFRICAN LION IS IN TROUBLE...

This is a fact agreed upon by all respected conservationists. The dispute arises when determining the best strategy to ensure the long-term viability of the species.

At the 13th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) in Bangkok (October 2004), Kenya had proposed acting with appropriate precaution regarding Africa's lions, and is urging the 166 CITES nations to "up-list" the species from Appendix II of the Convention to Appendix I. An Appendix I listing would prohibit international commercial trade in the species and ensure greater regulation of trade in general.

Lion population figures are hotly disputed. Some experts suggest the continental figure may be as low as 16,500 while others believe the population to be more robust. Matters are made more complicated by regional variations. Although lions are still found in 89 locations in 37 range States, 45% of these locations are home to 70 or fewer animals.

"There are many pressures on lions," explained Winnie Kiiru, Africa coordinator for the Species Survival Network and East Africa representative of the Born Free Foundation. "CITES cannot address problems such as habitat loss, the decline in natural prey species such as antelope due to illegal hunting, and the persecution of lions by livestock owners. However, trophy hunting, which has caused the death of 600 lions a year for the last 3 years, is an issue that CITES can and should address. It's an essential measure if lions are to avoid the same fate as the tiger."

LION FACTS...

- Although often called 'The King Of The Jungle', the lions habitat does not include jungles. They prefer open woodlands and thick scrub.
- There are 4 members of the cat family that can roar - lions, leopards, tigers and jaguars.
- The roar of a lion can be heard as far away as 8km.
- A lion's eyesight is 5 times better than a human's eyesight and it can hear prey from more than 1.5km away.
- Lions can sleep or rest for 20 hours in a single day.
- A charging lion can reach speeds of up to 64 km per hour.
- Lions are the only members of the cat family that live in social groups called 'prides'.
- All members of the pride carry a common smell that is passed on to each individual by rubbing their heads together.
- Lion prides are very co-operative with one another. For example healthier members often obtain food for old, sick or injured members of the pride.
- On average male lions hunt for only 12% of their food. Females provide 75% and the rest is taken from other predators or scavenged.
- Of all the cat species, the male lion is the only one to have a mane.
- At birth lion cubs are covered with fur and are spotted.
- All mothers share the responsibility in caring for cubs.
- Most lions drink water daily if available, but can go four or five days without it. Lions in arid areas seem to obtain needed moisture from the stomach contents of their prey.

CONSERVATION STATUS...

Kenya's proposal for CITES nations to "up-list" the African lion from Appendix II of the Convention to Appendix I is a step in the right direction. If endorsed, it would rightly change this species' status from *vulnerable* to *threatened*. Major support at an international level is required to see that this proposal is followed through.

For some African lion populations, such as those in Central to West Africa, there is little time left and it is now more than ever necessary to support the efforts of local scientists to manage small and isolated lion populations. Hopefully such scientists will also enjoy the support of their wildlife authorities and reserve managers. Otherwise – soon – the voice of the African lion, in some African countries at least, will become mute forever.

“Take nothing but photographs & leave nothing but footprints.”

Global Interlink Conservation Update compiled by: MOHIT K. ADVANI

Credits: CITES www.cites.org; Defenders Of Wildlife www.defenders.org; Werribee Open Range Zoo www.zoo.org.au; African Wildlife Foundation www.awf.org; African Lion Working Group www.africa-lion.org; Asiatic Lion Information Centre www.asiatic-lion.org; Animal Welfare Institute: www.awionline.org; "Know Kenya's Animals" (1984 edition)