

Where Have All The Lions Gone?

By Susan Hack, Conde Nast Travel, September 2006



What would Africa be without the king of beasts? There may be as few as 23,000 lions left on the entire continent—down from 200,000 in 1975 and 400,000 two decades before that. Susan Hack reports from Botswana and South Africa on the trophy hunting and habitat loss that threaten the most majestic animal on earth—a superlative made plain by the portraits of photographer Nick Brandt.

In early January, rain transforms the sandy plains around Botswana's Selinda Spillway into a green animal paradise. Water is plentiful, and thick grasses provide cover for the impalas, wildebeests, and red lechwe that give birth in this food-rich season. Although the grass stands taller than our Land Cruiser's hood, guide Motsamai Morundu manages to spot some beautiful, rare creatures. A cheetah mother and cub scan the world from the ledge of a termite skyscraper; three bat-eared foxes snap up winged ants that emerge with the rain to fly for a day; and a tabby-sized African wildcat with a spotted gray coat and black-sock feet pounces after a lizard. In a moment of hilarious serendipity, we park for sundown

gin and tonics and witness the birth of a dung beetle brood: The Ping-Pong ball-sized insects clamber out of their nursery of dried elephant poo and take off into the dusk like miniature buzzing helicopters.

I've come to Botswana hoping to see the one species everyone expects to encounter in Africa: lions. Two lionless days pass, and my binocular-strained eyes start playing tricks on me. Lion ears poking up from the grass turn out to be the jagged brown crest of another termite mound. A sleeping lion's belly is nothing more than a yellow log.

I am staying at Zibalianja Camp, a twenty-minute Cessna ride north of the Okavango Delta, on the eastern edge of a 334,000-acre private game concession between the Selinda Spillway and the Linyanti Swamps. My tent sits beneath an African ebony tree that rises like a lighthouse on a sea of grass known as the Pan of Lions. Abundant game, low tourist density, and some unusual lion behavior make northern Botswana the best place in all of Africa to observe the king of beasts. But as I've been learning, the species is in more trouble than most safari clients realize.

A 2006 estimate by the World Conservation Union puts the number of lions left on the entire African continent at 23,000 to 39,000, down from a 1975 report of 200,000, which in turn stated that the lion population had probably fallen fifty percent since the 1950s. A more optimistic 2002 survey funded by Conservation Force—a pro-hunting organization with a vested interest in citing higher numbers—states with strange specificity that there are 28,854 to 47,132 lions in Africa. All these figures may be off the mark, since lions are difficult to count in the wild, sleeping in thickets or tall grass for most of the day and completely inaccessible in some regions. But consider this: Even the most optimistic estimates mean that all of Africa's remaining lions could fit inside a single pro football stadium.

African lions are not in the same “critically endangered” category as Asiatic lions (just three hundred survive, in India’s Gir Forest) or Siberian tigers (there are fewer than four hundred). But scientists agree that escalating habitat loss to humans has made them more vulnerable than ever. According to the Conservation Force study, of the thirty-four African nations in which lions are found, only three—Botswana, South Africa, and Tanzania—have populations numbering more than a thousand.

Most of these lions live inside protected national parks and wildlife reserves, and yet these supposedly viable populations face serious dangers, ranging from inbreeding and disease to the lack of financing and political instability that can cripple or corrupt park management. Up to seventy-eight percent of the lions in the southern sector of South Africa’s Kruger National Park are infected with bovine tuberculosis. In Somalia, the newly elected government has no funds even to staff Kismayu and Hargeysa national parks. According to Osman Gedow Amir, a Somali biodiversity expert, poachers armed with AK-47s are killing female lions in southern Somalia and using bush airstrips to ship cubs to private menageries in the sheikhdoms of the Arab Gulf.

Outside the parks, lions are being decimated in ever greater numbers by local people preempting or taking revenge on livestock killers and man-eaters. The situation is particularly ominous in Kenya. In the past five years, the availability of the cheap pesticide Furadan has led Masai and Samburu pastoralists to forgo building bomas (lion-proof cattle shelters) in favor of a few cents’ worth of Furadan-poisoned meat, which eliminates not just one cattle-killing culprit but collaterally entire lion families. “We in the West don’t put up with predators, and in a way, Africans are just catching up with us,” says Laurence Frank, a University of California at Berkeley biologist studying human-lion conflict on Kenya’s Laikipia Plateau, where lions following seasonal migrations of hoofed game often stray into cattle grazing areas. Frank has convinced a few white ranchers to open private safari lodges, whose tourist fees more than make up for lions’ livestock predations. He is also reluctantly advocating the reintroduction of trophy hunting—banned in Kenya since the 1970s—as an enticement for the Masai and Samburu to view lions as an important source of income rather than unwanted vermin, since in other countries a full-maned male lion can fetch tens of thousands of dollars from a hunter wishing to shoot it.

In northern Botswana, lion life is influenced by the annual cycle of the Okavango River, which rises in Angola during the rainy season, starting in November, and overflows into a delta of permanent and temporary channels six months later, in the dry season. From a light plane skipping under the January rain clouds, the landscape looks like a giraffe hide of expanding or shrinking grass pans and lagoons; on the ground, each mini-environment has a shifting predator-prey dynamic, and prides living just miles apart may exhibit startlingly different behavior.

A thirty-year-old former truck driver who didn’t see a wild lion until he joined the safari industry, Morundu tells me that fourteen lions roam the vicinity of Zibalianja Camp. There are several big males, which camp staff have affectionately named after African beers—Carling, Hansa, Windhoek—but “they have been acting strange,” Morundu says.

On my third day in the bush, camp manager Sean Triestch radios Morundu that he’s come across fresh lion tracks while out jogging. As I contemplate a “wilderness” with radio communications and jogging routes, Morundu drives us over to examine the male lion footprints laid on top of last night’s elephant footpads and under this morning’s pair of sneakers. He cautiously gets out of the vehicle to scan the ground. Suddenly, a huge beer-colored form leaps out from under a bush willow. For a few alarming, tantalizing seconds, I glimpse the blond-maned lion, which runs from us, stops to look over its shoulder, and then casually urinates against a red star apple bush. “That’s Castle marking his territory,” Morundu says with a smile. “He’s leaving an “I was here’ message for his brother, Black Label.”

Castle dissolves into the brush; my sighting of Africa's iconic animal has lasted less than a minute. Morundu, who recognizes him by his scarred nose and a black spot on the mane beneath his chest, tells me how this lion's family has coped with a series of natural disasters. For several years, the pride was regularly observed hunting adult hippos, waiting for one to emerge onto solid ground to graze, surrounding it, and biting the rear leg tendons to prevent its escape. Then in July 2000, fire swept the area, reducing the reed beds to ash and burning the lionesses' foot pads, leaving them unable to hunt for three weeks, during which time their cubs all starved to death. In 2002, the pride's two elderly matriarchs died, and in 2003 the sires of that year's litter abandoned their cubs to follow a stray herd of domestic cattle—easy pickings—into neighboring Namibia.

As a youngster, Castle might have enjoyed hippo feasts, but now he and his remaining siblings and cousins, both male and female, are solitary hunters of small prey such as warthogs. "We can tell the lions are related because they don't fight when they cross paths, but they no longer kill hippos or even cooperate," Morundu says. "It's as if they've lost their knowledge and the tribe has fallen apart." Vumbura Plains Camp, twenty minutes by light aircraft to the west, consists of fourteen thatched lofts linked by wooden walkways near the junction of the Okavango River and its two main tributaries.

In addition to Land Cruiser drives, guests have the option of taking motorboat cruises on papyrus-banked rivers or mokoro trips across hippo lagoons. Dux Motakatshipi, a strapping guide with a Barry White baritone, is a bit surprised at my needle-in-a-haystack request to search for lions in the tall grass. It transpires that this camp, too, has a resident pride that suffered trauma. Four months before my arrival, two intruders chased out the dominant male, Big Red, who had grown too old and weak to hold on to his territory. Rejecting the newcomers' attempts to woo her, Big Red's partner has refused to mate with them and remains near the camp, trying to hold her ground while protecting her two sub-adult offspring, a female and a male, who has begun to sprout his father's signature red-dish mane.

After hours of searching, I am ready to give up when, in a stroke of luck and guide instinct, we drive across a final signalgrass plain and find the three lions lying in the shade of a leadwood tree. The young male bears raw, scarred flanks from encounters with his father's rivals, and Motakatshipi predicts that he will soon be driven off by the bigger males attempting to form a new pride with his mother and sister. "It will be the start of a terrible time for him," Motakatshipi says.

Scientists frown on anthropomorphism. But how can we avoid it when animal lives seem so similar to our own? The lost tribe. The young prince wandering the wilderness before returning to do battle for his throne. Before traveling to Botswana, I made an appointment to meet in Johannesburg wildlife filmmaker Dereck Joubert, who has spent the last twenty-five years living in the bush, observing Botswana's lions and getting to know the animals as individuals and not as mere numbers. His Emmy Award-winning documentary, *Eternal Enemies*, about the rivalry between hyenas and lions, was the basis for Disney's *The Lion King*.

"Lions are cultural animals," Joubert tells me in the cutting room where he is editing his most recent project, about a pride that specializes in killing buffalo. In the 1980s and '90s, Joubert and his wife and filmmaking partner, Beverly, saw many of their favorite subjects shot by trophy hunters. Nicknamed Ra de Tau ("Father of the Lion") by Setswana-speaking guides, Joubert feels guilty for having habituated the now-dead lions to humans and vehicles. "Trophy hunting and record books exist for one reason: selfish recreation," he says bitterly. "To those people who sit around trying to justify more shooting, I say, 'Is it enough to preserve lions as a species, or do we want to preserve cultures, even individual animals, as we would in our own lives?'"

“This animal is not Simba or Aslan,” counters Craig Packer, a wiry University of Minnesota biologist who has studied lions in Tanzania for more than thirty years and who, coincidentally, is attending a World Conservation Union lion conference in a hotel a few blocks from Joubert’s studio. In southern Tanzania, he tells me, lions living near villages start specializing in bush pigs, which tend to thrive after farmers extirpate other game. At harvest time, when villagers sleep in the fields to protect their crops from pigs, they themselves become prey for the lions, which then start targeting humans. “Can you imagine North Americans agreeing to live side by side with a species that kills a hundred people a year? It’s very easy for those in a comfortable city to say, “Oh, the poor lions—they mustn’t be hunted.””

Protected by barbed wire and private security guards, the dingy hotel is crawling with khaki-clad lion experts sharing their latest data from the field. During the lunch break, I ask Packer to explain Tanzania’s lion-hunting conundrum. Some eighty percent of the country’s designated wilderness consists of huge private hunting concessions, and yet Tanzania has more lions than any other country—perhaps half the continent’s population. Hunting concessions placed strategically around national parks have acted as a buffer between wildlife and the local people. And to preserve their “crop” for future generations, the more conscientious hunting companies plow profits into conservation in the form of fees to villages and grants for scientific research.

The big problem with hunting, Packer readily admits, is that the high-stakes industry is self-policed, rife with lawbreakers, and in urgent need of reform. A three-week, top-of-the-line Tanzanian lion safari costs about five thousand dollars a day, including gun-import duty, professional hunter fees, accommodations, and trophy permits. With that kind of money, professional hunters and government officials may look the other way if a client shoots a lion from a vehicle instead of on foot, as the law requires, and then, in defiance of his or her single-trophy license, finds another with a bigger mane and shoots it too. “Hunting-concession holders have been handed the responsibility of managing the largest, most critical tracts of lion territory since the Tanzanian government can’t do it alone,” Packer says. “It’s a tightrope because there are good guys and bad guys, but I believe that I can encourage hunters to clean up their act and harvest in a sensible way by selecting the nonbreeding males with little pride impact.”

When apartheid ended in South Africa in 1995, white ranchers who lost their government subsidies began transforming unprofitable cattle operations into game farms, of which there are now some nine thousand covering 42 million acres. Once a pariah state, South Africa today hosts more foreign hunters than any other country on the continent and offers trophy permits for sixty species, including the critically endangered black rhino. Until earlier this year, in a local practice known as “put-and-take hunting,” clients on tight schedules wishing to hunt multiple species could pre-order trophy animals by color, sex, and size from game breeders, have them relocated to a private farm, and shoot them all in a week. In its most extreme form, put-and-take became “canned hunting,” in which hand-reared predators, mainly lions but also cheetahs, brown hyenas, imported exotics such as tigers, and even lion-tiger hybrids, were shot in small fenced enclosures—even cages—where they had no chance of escape.

In response to the demand for hunts, as well as for lion-skin rugs and live cubs for foreign zoos and private menageries, South Africa developed two parallel lion populations: about 2,700 free-ranging wild animals, most of which are in Kruger National Park, and an approximately equal number of captive lions, many bred specifically for the hunting industry. Of the up to 190 lions that have been killed by hunters annually in South Africa in recent years, about eighty percent were born in captivity, according to the wildlife-trade-monitoring group Traffic.

South Africa is dotted with lion parks and predator petting zoos. After meeting with Joubert and Packer, I drive out of Johannesburg's northern suburbs, past car dealerships and shopping malls, toward Sterkfontein Cave, where paleontologists have uncovered 500 hominid fossils dating back 2.7 million years. Turning off the road in the middle of the veld, I enter Cub World, whose public toilets are marked LIONS and LIONESSES. For a five-dollar entrance fee, I drive my car on a gravel track through a field where three big males—one black-maned, one gold-maned, and one white-maned—live with several females behind chain-link fences topped with razor wire; each pride has its own lot with camelthorn trees for shade and concrete shacks for dens. Returning to the main parking lot, I walk past a picnic area for “cub birthday parties” to an enclosure where I wait in a line of Russian and Pakistani tourists and pay the equivalent of eleven dollars to enter a cage that holds three-month-old white lions. The cubs are sleepy, but one growls when I pat its dusty, rough-haired back. The five-month-old lions asleep in the next cage are “too big and naughty for petting,” the guide tells me, claiming that when they reach eighteen months, grown cubs are “moved to conservation parks.” At the time of my visit last January, I feared that cubs such as these might actually be headed for a trophy hunter's bullet. But in May, in response to international criticism, the South African government introduced legislation banning the captive breeding of lions and five other predator species for the purpose of trophy hunting and outlawing all put-and-take hunting. (Under apartheid, each province or tribal homeland had its own, often contradictory, hunting regulations; preoccupied with addressing human-rights imbalances, the African National Congress is only now getting around to closing the loopholes that allowed predator breeding and canned hunting.) A victory for supporters of “ethical” hunting, the proposed legislation, likely to be adopted by the end of this year, nonetheless contains a clause allowing human-reared predators to be hunted provided they are released and allowed to fend for themselves in “an extensive wilderness system” for at least two years.

“Even if the law is implemented, it will still be hard to combat the network of hunters,” warns Ian Michler, a correspondent for the South African magazine *Africa Geographic* who investigated the predator-breeding industry for the International Fund for Animal Welfare. Michler believes that canned hunts of captive-bred lions may simply move to Botswana, Namibia, and farther north. The captive-bred-lion market exists largely because wild-lion-hunting permits are expensive and increasingly difficult to come by. In 2005, for instance, Botswana restricted permits to one lion per hunting concession, causing the price of a top-of-the-line thirty-day hunt to skyrocket to \$131,975.

A few days after my Cub World visit, I speak with Piet Warren, a South African who doesn't pretend to want to breed lions for education or conservation. “People who live in cities forget that the only difference between a lion and a cow is twenty-five hundred years of human culture, because cows were once wild, too” says Warren, chairman of the Limpopo Carnivore Association. A Brahmin cattle rancher in the buffer zone west of Kruger's Phalaborwa Gate, Warren began raising lions in 1996 at the urging of a professional hunter, who pointed out the rising post-apartheid market for trophies, and suggested that farmed lions could also serve as living garbage disposals for tons of abattoir offal deemed unfit for human consumption.

Warren keeps about seventy-five lions in four breeding camps, isolating pairs of males in four-hundred-square-foot enclosures. Adult lions receive six-and-a-half pounds of meat every other day, a mixture of offal and whole dead chickens for roughage; workers throw the meat from high-walled trucks so that the lions don't associate food with people. When their manes become big, at five to six years of age, the males are tranquilized and delivered to private hunting ranches, where they tend to linger and establish territories around the piles of food Warren leaves behind.

Warren has also bred black sable antelope and white rhinos but says that lions are by far the most profitable animals he has farmed, with each male representing a hundredfold return on a five-hun-

dred-dollar investment. "Lions are wonderful farm animals that live very well in an enclosure, just like chickens," he tells me. "When they don't have to hunt, they lie quietly and eat any meat I feed them."

Since May, Warren and other South African predator breeders have been lobbying the government not to shut down their industry, arguing that it creates jobs, allows farmland to revert to nature, and reduces pressure on wild lion populations. "I have ten prime trophy males at the moment, and I have American clients ringing me up and pleading with me to name my price," Warren told me. "If the battle is lost and these lions can't pay for themselves, I'm just going to shoot them all myself."

It's difficult to single out Warren and his brotherhood for mercenary cold-heartedness when lions have been abused for glory and profit throughout history. Egyptian and Babylonian relief carvings depict rulers hunting lions as symbols of royalty and victory, while the ancient Romans captured North African lions by the thousands to take back to the Circus Maximus and the Colosseum for contests with slaves and gladiators. During staged wild animal hunts called venationes, 400 lions might be killed in a single day before an audience of 150,000. In 1909, at the time Theodore Roosevelt went shooting in British East Africa with the great hunter Frederick Selous, it was not unheard-of for clients of a single safari operator to shoot 700 lions in a season.

For a city girl like me, it's thrilling to be in the Botswana landscape, the red sun rising on creatures so perfectly designed that everything has a purpose, down to the black hoof-shaped gland beneath an impala's hock that emits a scent allowing scattered herd members to find one another after the panic of a predator's chase.

I've come to a third camp, Duba Plains, a five-minute plane ride from Vumbura, to see Dereck Joubert's buffalo killers. My guide, Ksoirebatho Maratu ("Just call me Chief"), is a teetotaling Christian and a fan of the Socratic method. "Why does the round lily pad have a slit?" he asks me. "So that it lifts but doesn't tear when wind whips it across the water. Why does the black egret have yellow feet? So that fish think they see wiggling worms and swim toward the bird's beak." Chief invites me to consider why the back tips of a lion's ears and the tuft on its tail are black. Watching lions makes the answer obvious: Black spots act as signal flags to lead other pride members during a hunt.

Since the late 1990s, deep channels have trapped a herd of about eight hundred Cape buffalo on an island near the camp, forming a permanent open buffet for the lions; normally nocturnal opportunists, they have taken to killing buffalo almost exclusively and in broad daylight. Chief's modus operandi is to drive the snorkel-equipped Land Cruiser onto the island before dawn, locate the buffalo, and circle the herd until he finds the lions, who are inevitably nearby, preparing to hunt or, more often, sleeping off their latest kill.

Aggressive and armed with dagger-sharp horns, buffalo make dangerous prey. Because a 1,500-pound adult provides much more meat than, say, an impala, the lionesses have plenty to eat and have grown massively large for their sex. The group of nine consists of a mature lioness with a milky right eye and her five daughters and three nieces. Two thirteen-year-old brothers, nicknamed the Duba Boys, have dominated the territory for years. "Those ladies keep them well fed," says Chief. One of the females is off honeymooning with one of the Duba Boys; another has recently given birth and is keeping her cubs away from the adult lions until they get bigger. We spot two lionesses whose bulging muscles suggest that buffalo meat is the leonine version of anabolic steroids; they are hanging out with a third, who is nursing a three-month-old male cub, the lone survivor of its litter (a buffalo killed one of its siblings; Chief doesn't know what happened to the other). On the other side of the buffalo herd we find the remaining four lionesses sleeping in nests of thick grass at the base of a termite mound. They lift their heads to look at us, then lie down again, rolling from side to side,

legs wagging. Lions swallow huge chunks of meat without chewing, and the rolling apparently aids digestion.

By the third day of my visit, the lionesses' stomachs are noticeably thinner, so instead of driving off to look for honey badgers and wattled cranes, Chief says it's worth sticking near the buffalo herd to see what the lions will do. Over the years, the lions have developed strategies such as driving the herd into deep water to slow them or into stampedes in which the lame get left behind. The buffalo have learned to cope: At night they lie down in tight circles with the largest males on the outside, and after years of being hunted they are less prone to panic and will turn back to drive the lions off.

Chief parks the Land Cruiser against some bushes where the lions can't see it. Like spectators at the Colosseum, we speculate about possible victims. When the buffalo get to their feet to start the day's grazing, we notice one calf has a broken rear left leg. Seven lionesses materialize in single file against a line of toothbrush trees and caperberry willows. The mother hides her cub under a bush, and the hunters silently divide into a classic pincer formation. The limping calf has disappeared behind a wall of adults, so the lionesses instead move to cut off four herd stragglers, all large males. The lionesses circle back behind our vehicle, and in an instant there is chaos as a male buffalo charges his closest assailant. Chief revs the Land Cruiser to get out of the way, the commotion starts the main herd running, and I suddenly feel as though I'm in the middle of a war. Four lionesses leap onto a female buffalo, and their weight causes the animal to somersault in a ball of black hide and yellow lion legs; two male buffalo turn and charge, and the last lioness to let go relinquishes her throat-hold just in time to avoid their horns. The lionesses regroup, run at the buffalo, and then flee as the buffalo turn to stand their ground.

The hunt fails. Six lionesses reunite and rub heads under a sausage tree while the mother lags behind, pacing back and forth and moaning for her cub. I'm surprised after the coordination and canniness of the chase that she seems to have forgotten where he is; I worry that the cub has been trampled, that we may even have driven over him in our eagerness to follow the action. But after a few minutes we see mother and tiny son together again.

The athletic lionesses have not managed to raise a cub beyond five months of age in the past five years, Chief says. In 2004, the lionesses gave birth to twenty-four cubs, all of whom died, and of the fourteen cubs born in 2005 the little male is the only survivor. Hyenas killed some, buffalo trampled others, and the females themselves have been seen breaking their own cubs' necks.

Usually it is the males who commit infanticide to get rid of a defeated rival's offspring. Joubert theorizes that these lionesses somehow know to protect their hunting efficiency and food supply by keeping their pride numbers down. What seems clear is that if a disaster should befall the pride, if one or more of the females is killed or injured, or if their number drops beneath a certain threshold, the buffalo hunts will surely fail and they will have to seek out new food sources. The Duba Boys, lucky enough to have been born in a wildlife concession with no trophy hunting, are now exceptionally old, and if not driven off by younger males, they will eventually lose their teeth and starve to death. New males might bring with them females hostile to the current pride. "It could get very interesting here in a few years," Chief says.

I wish I could stay a while longer, just to see a successful kill, but time is short. As I get into the Cessna that's waiting to take me out of the delta, I reflect that with our long memories and opposable thumbs, we humans have the ability to pass on more than genetic material—it is in our culture, if not in our nature, to manipulate the world. A brief glimpse of a few prides hardly makes me a lion authority, but as experts and interested parties debate the health of lion populations and devise strate-

gies to exploit or save them, as hunters keep the most potent symbol of wild Africa on their trophy wish lists, and as Africans themselves try to cope with predators in their midst, nothing in an individual lion's life could ever be described as stable. The Cessna takes off, and I make a note to e-mail Chief to ask for news of the cub. Below me, Botswana's lions struggle to satisfy their hunger.