



## **An innovative approach for the long-term conservation of lions** **An *Animals on the Edge* report, written by Chris Weston**

In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, roaming west to east, north to south across large parts of sub-Saharan Africa, there were an estimated half-a-million lions. Today, that number is believed to be as low as 23,000. In a single generation, over 95% of the world's lions have been extirpated from the wild.

### **Fifty years of failure**

The principal reason for the lion's decline is man. Over the past fifty years, large parts of Africa's wilderness has been developed for agriculture and livestock farming, to supply food for the continent's – the world's – ever expanding human population. For lions, this has been a triple whammy. Loss of habitat means less room for both lions and their prey. A reduction in prey species means less food for lions. Combined, these two problems have led to increased conflict with humans and to the greatest threat this most majestic of big cats faces – indiscriminate retributive and pre-emptive killing.

The King of beasts is dying and yet, despite years of research and conservation, according to the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) – the authoritative body on endangered species – the causes of its decline are "not well understood, are unlikely to have ceased, and may be irreversible." In the words of the African Lion and Environmental Research Trust (ALERT), "Conservation methods implemented at the cost of millions of dollars over the past forty or so years have so far failed the lion. New ideas are needed if we are to see any real long-term success."

And in a small corner of Africa I met one man with a plan.

Andrew Conolly is a fifth generation Zimbabwean and the founder of ALERT. In 1987 he bought a game ranch, Antelope Park, and inherited six captive lionesses with cubs. To exercise the cubs, he and his wife, Wendy, used to take them on walks into the bush.

"We started to notice that, despite being captive bred and having lived their short life entirely inside an enclosure, they were showing the same behaviour and instincts as wild lion cubs. The more we walked them, the more these natural instincts developed", he told me. It was from these observations that Andrew Conolly started to think about the possibility of rehabilitating captive lions into the wild. More profoundly, he realized that what he had was a large cog in the complex machine to help save Africa's wild lions.



## **Bucking the trend**

There are numerous lion breeding programs in Africa, most of which purport an intention to release lions into the wild. In most cases, the claims are erroneous. There is a significant challenge to wild-releasing captive bred lions. Any lion that is raised in the presence of humans will lose its fear of man, increasing the chances that, once in the wild, it will be unafraid to enter villages and trespass on farmers' lands, bringing it into direct conflict with people. While this problem prevails, wild-releasing lions is both pointless – it won't solve the problem – and potentially dangerous to indigenous communities.

But, with lion numbers so low, a solution was needed. Sitting in an open jeep watching three of Antelope Park's young lions take a morning amble, Andrew Conolly explained what he sees as the nightmare scenario. "Wild populations no longer have the luxury of time for us to get habitat protection right. By then numbers will be so low, populations too fragmented and genetic diversity so weak that the species will be in crisis. A solution is needed to the problem of how to reintroduce lions into areas that can sustain them, when the opportunity arises."

He continued, "There is a current belief that protected areas can be re-colonized by remnant populations or augmented by translocation of lions from other regions. But this belief is misguided. Re-colonization would be too slow and susceptible to random events. Also, given the already low numbers, few areas remain that can be considered as parent sources. Finally, many wild lion populations are infected with untreatable and incurable diseases, such as tuberculosis, that would preclude their involvement in any reintroduction or reinforcement programs. A better, more sustainable solution is needed before it's too late, and captive breeding is a viable option."

## **Actions speak louder than words**

Fortunately for the lions of Africa, Andrew Conolly is a man of action. Recognizing the many complications and potential dangers inherent in releasing lions into the wild – a dependence on humans, the lack of a social structure, a lack of inter-species and cross-species competitive experience – he set about developing a program that would overcome these historic challenges. The result was the Lion Rehabilitation and Release into the Wild Program.

The program consists of four stages. In stage one, captive bred cubs are taught predatory skills during daily walks and, as they grow older, during night game encounters in the bush. Research conducted during this period shows that by 18-months cubs are able to stalk and bring down prey up to the size of small antelopes, such as duiker. By 2-years, the lions are seasoned hunters preying on larger game, including sprightly impalas, wildebeests and even young zebras.

# Animals on the Edge

During a recent assignment at Antelope Park for the non-profit organisation Animals on the Edge, I witnessed the success the program is having. I was out on a night encounter when two of the lions spotted a lone impala. Working in silent harmony they set their ambush, one lion flanking the antelope while the other lay motionless in the long grass. There was no sound and the dark night was penetrated only by a slither of light from an adolescent moon. The calm was broken by a fury of action. The flanking lion flushed the impala, which ran straight into the ambush and was skilfully cut down in mid-flight by the penetrating claws of the second predator. It was an impressive kill for two young lions.

After stage one, the lions progress onto stage two. It is during the second stage that the now juvenile lions develop their social skills, forming natural prides in a minimum 500-acre enclosed area. They continue to fend for themselves, hunting game. And, although they continue to be monitored closely (using radio collars and microchip technology), at this stage all human contact is removed, allowing the lions to develop and grow naturally.

Once the lions in stage two have matured and formed into a strong pride, they are ready for stage three. In the third stage, the pride is translocated into a 10,000+ acre managed eco-system, which provides a complete absence of humans, sufficient game to sustain the pride and competitive species, such as hyena. The pride is now fully self-sufficient and will develop exactly as it would in the wild. Over time, cubs are born into stage three prides and it is these cubs, having grown up without the influence of human intervention, that are suitable for wild release into nationally protected areas – stage four.

## **Self-help**

Andrew Conolly sees the program as “an African solution to an African problem”. Dr Peter Kat, an ecologist of 25-years experience, and author of over 60 scientific papers, agrees and is excited by the initiatives taken by ALERT. He told me, “Despite the drastic decline in lion numbers, CITES, the UN and other world conservation bodies have remained at best complacent to the predicament of Africa’s lions. I believe the future for lions is in African hands.”

Africa, too, seems appreciative of the program. Angola, Mozambique, Zambia, Malawi and even Ghana, in west Africa, are resurrecting their protected areas with a diversity of aid programs. All have massive areas suitable for wildlife reintroduction and eco-system revitalization programs, including the eventual reintroduction of top predators, such as the lion. And all have been in touch with Andrew Conolly about how he can help.

# Animals on the Edge

It's true to say that the program is controversial and attracts its share of detractors and sceptics. In a badly researched article published in the Sunday Times in 2008, entitled 'A Bloody Con' it was claimed that Antelope Park had sold "as many as 59 lions ... to big-game-hunting operations to be shot for sport." The article was flawed in fact, libellous in publication and illustrated by erroneous photographs that were disingenuously acquired. The newspaper was forced to print a full retraction and apology.

Even so, while at Antelope Park I met an African conservationist who voiced concerns about the program's potential for success. She believed that conservation energy (and money) was better targeted at continuing to protect habitat alone. Asking for my thoughts, I responded, "Securing places for lions to live is important. But wouldn't it be a shame if, when we finally get around to finding some land, we discover there are no lions left to inhabit it?"

Sustainable, long-term lion conservation requires a multi-faceted and holistic approach to conservation. Perhaps amid the social and political turmoil that currently infects Zimbabwe, one man has found an answer.