

notes from the field

FALL 2017

Lion
Recovery

Okapi
Sightings

The Elusive
Sawfish



WCN

Wildlife Conservation Network

Recovering Lions, Restoring Landscapes

It's well past midnight, but still before dawn in Zimbabwe's Gonarezhou National Park. Most people have been asleep for hours, but Peter Lindsey is wide awake, acutely aware of the primeval sounds of lions roaring nearby. The rumblings are so loud and deep that his tent seems to shake, goosebumps begin forming on his arms. These lions are commanding their ownership of this part of the African bush, demonstrating their place amongst nature's most powerful animals. Peter lies there with eyes closed, listening to these sounds that are both exhilarating and chilling, each roar the embodiment of the African wilderness itself.

Gonarezhou literally means "place of the elephants", but Peter, WCN's Conservation Initiatives Director, was there because of its lions. Across Africa, lions are in trouble. In just 25 years, half the lion population has been lost, disappearing from over 90% of the wilderness where they once reigned as King of Beasts. It's a quiet crisis, but one with high stakes. The loss of lions is a dagger to the heart of Africa's ecological and economic wellbeing. There are many reasons for this decline—including human-lion conflict and habitat loss—but in particular, Africa's parks and reserves lack the resources to effectively manage their wildlife populations. Thankfully, this problem has a solution; if we help provide park authorities with the support needed for effective management, we can see lions return. This is a primary strategy of the Lion Recovery Fund (LRF), a new funding initiative created by WCN and the Leonardo DiCaprio Foundation. The LRF aims to raise and invest millions of dollars, and foster collaboration among funders and conser-

vationists, to support the best efforts across Africa to bring lions and their landscapes back.

In Gonarezhou, after years of massive population declines, largely as a result of inadequate resources, lions are fortunately rebounding. Yet many of Africa's other parks and reserves are being emptied of the magnificent animals for which they are so famous. The LRF is supporting efforts to tackle and reverse this loss, knowing that with proper resources and effective management, these landscapes can be suitable for lions and other wildlife again. LRF funding will also support a variety of efforts to thwart the biggest threats to lions, including the bushmeat (wild game meat) trade that is devastating wildlife across Africa. In fact, it was the pervasive destruction caused by the bushmeat trade that inspired Peter Lindsey to focus on lion conservation over a decade ago.

Based in Zimbabwe, Peter now vets the projects that the Lion Recovery Fund supports, collaborating with conservationists, governments, scientists, nonprofits, and local communities to identify and bolster the best ideas to recover lions. Working with local people is especially critical; lions can be difficult neighbors, so solutions to lion recovery must work for lions and people alike. The LRF commits that through deeper engagement of philanthropists of all sizes, we will see lions recover and their landscapes restored. As time goes on, with this support, more people throughout Africa can lie awake listening to the sounds of lions roaring in the bush—a sign that the King of Beasts has returned. ■

The Lion Recovery Fund was created by the Wildlife Conservation Network and the Leonardo DiCaprio Foundation to catalyze recovery of lions in critical landscapes across Africa, while fostering a philanthropic movement to restore lions and their vast landscapes. Visit lionrecoveryfund.org to learn more.



**Lion
Recovery
Fund**



WCN Partners
Ewaso Lions and
Niassa Lion Project
help reduce
human-lion
conflict, one of
the biggest
threats to the
survival of
this iconic
animal.



In northern Kenya's rainless heat, a sandy-colored lion moved eagerly towards a waterhole seeking relief from his thirst. Earlier, a herder was there with his livestock—lions and livestock had been congregating at waterholes and fiercely competing for water since the Ewaso Nyiro River dried up in January. This competition from Kenya's persistent drought increased human-lion conflict; the team at **Ewaso Lions** helped combat the conflict by digging waterholes in the dry river. Operating in an area where lions and nomadic pastoralists live closely together, reducing human-lion conflict is a keystone to Ewaso Lions' conservation work. Through research and working with local communities, **Ewaso Lions** is helping people and lions safely coexist.

Learn more about Ewaso Lions at
wildnet.org/wildlife-programs/lion-ewaso.

The enclosure is simple, but sturdy; logs of wood lashed together for the roof and walls, one side marked by a secure door. Ernesto, a “wildlife guardian” from the Maolela village in Mozambique’s Niassa National Reserve, has just finished helping a neighbor build a corral to keep his goats safe from lions and other carnivores. Helping villagers construct secure livestock corrals is one way in which the **Niassa Lion Project** (NLP) works to reduce human-lion conflict. By training and employing wildlife guardians to help other local villagers safeguard their livestock, NLP ensures that protecting lions can also help communities thrive.

Learn more about Niassa Lion Project at wildnet.org/wildlife-programs/lion-niassa.



Seeking the Elusive and Reclusive Sawfish

It's a gorgeous afternoon; a generous breeze moving off the sea is keeping the heat in check. Rachel Graham of MarAlliance is on a Belizean beach deep in conversation with a local fisher—a sun-soaked man in his late 40s who's describing his historical encounters with some unusual fish. His stories no longer come as a surprise to Rachel, who for thirteen years has searched these waters for a particular “unusual fish” called a sawfish. It's been about 25 years since sawfish were seen regularly in the calm, warm waters throughout Central America. Decimated by the use of gill nets, which indiscriminately destroy huge volumes of marine

species, sawfish are now so rare here they're effectively extinct.

The sawfish obtained its aptly-fitting name from what looks like a long, double-sided serrated saw protruding from its head. This defining feature, called a rostrum, can grow to be six feet long; the sawfish itself can be 20 feet—half the size of a city bus. It's staggering to think we could have lost such a massive, dramatic looking animal, but Rachel doesn't believe they're completely gone. Since 2004, she has been conducting surveys with fishers and colleagues throughout Central America hoping to record sightings



MarAlliance staff inspect the rostrum of a sawfish.

of sawfish. After years of no reports, things are starting to change.

MarAlliance is now conducting research in more remote areas, farther from human activity, where sawfish are more likely to persist. The local fishers they work with in these areas have been talking about recent encounters with strange looking fish, possibly sawfish. The conservationists continue to conduct surveys which they use to identify pockets of possible remnant sawfish populations, and they have a new tool to help find these elusive animals. Boating to these locations, they are employing a technique called eDNA analysis (environmental DNA) wherein they filter water samples to separate out any existing sawfish DNA.

If the eDNA matches known sawfish DNA, it's proof these extraordinary animals still exist in these waters.

Pursuing sawfish not only benefits scientific inquiry—though there is a tremendous amount to learn about these species—it helps conservationists understand ecological shifts that occur with the loss of a key mid-level predator. Sawfish are both ecologically and culturally valuable; their return could boost the health of coastal



MarAlliance regularly conducts surveys in remote fishing communities.

and estuarine ecosystems. Beyond these tangible gains, the search for sawfish also provides hope that even if these species seem to have disappeared, we may find them again and bring their populations back from the edge of extinction. ■





Camera Trapping the Unusual Okapi

Located nearly in the center of Africa, bisected by the equator, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is a nation blanketed in tropical forest, the lifeblood of countless living organisms. Beneath its jungle canopy is a labyrinth of plant life—grey parrots flutter in the treetops, chimpanzees traverse the branches. In the shade of the forest floor is one of Mother Nature’s most unusual creatures. This is the only place on Earth where you will find the okapi.

Okapis are unusual looking animals—a living patchwork with a mule’s stocky body, a zebra’s striped rear, and a giraffe’s exaggerated neck. Despite their unique appearance, they are

extremely well camouflaged; their shy nature makes them even more elusive. Conservationists are not likely to see okapis in the wild; their best hope of observing them is through camera trapping. Lucas Meers of Okapi Conservation Project (OCP) has come to the DRC to do just that.

Accompanied by OCP’s founder, John Lukas, a forest guide from the local Mbuti pygmy tribe, and a cadre of Institute in Congo for the Conservation of Nature rangers who patrol and protect the Okapi Wildlife Reserve, Lucas is here to help install a series of camera traps. Camera trapping is a key part of most conservation work, especially with animals that are difficult to observe.

“Over the next few months more images of okapi are recorded in different parts of the rainforest, indicating their population in the reserve appears to be stable.”

The OCP team can use images from the camera traps to learn more about the okapis’ population and behavior and to determine where they should concentrate their conservation efforts. OCP wants to use these particular camera traps to see if okapis are returning to areas of the forest where human activity has been recently eliminated.

In silence, the group enters the forest at a fast clip, moving single file along a path so thin it’s virtually imperceptible. Their guide searches amongst the endless vegetation for the newly sprouted bright green leaves that okapis prefer to eat. This is the most strategic place to set up the camera

traps, and it pays off. Weeks later, the team discovers that they have captured video footage of an okapi in the wild for the first time in OCP’s 30 years of operation. Over the next few months more images of okapi are recorded in different parts of the rainforest, indicating their population in the reserve appears to be stable.

These camera traps will continue to gather vital observational information about the reserve’s okapi population—which will inform the rangers’ patrol strategy to protect this endangered animal and the millions of organisms sharing the rainforest with okapis. ■



WCN protects endangered species and preserves their natural habitats by supporting entrepreneurial conservationists who pursue innovative strategies for people and wildlife to co-exist and thrive.

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