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Opinion: Poisoning of Ugandan Lions Highlights Africa's Rural Poverty Crisis

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[Michael Schwartz](#)

No wild animal on earth has an easy death. Be it starvation, disease, mortal wound, or a predator's teeth, an inevitably grisly end awaits all creatures born into a world where nature's dictum is the daily struggle to survive.

Though seemingly cruel, the ebb and flow of an animal's precarious existence is the status quo that conservationists the world over are fighting to preserve. Without that primal but necessary ecological rhythm, wildlife in all flesh and form would simply cease to be.

I preface the savagery of the natural world in contrast to the [recent alleged poisoning of a pride of lions in Uganda](#) to emphasize an important point.

As someone who loves Uganda, who spends time in the field doing research on its resident lions, observing and documenting their struggles for survival, even getting to know some of them as individuals, I've come to accept that their transient, unforgivingly harsh lives and equally cruel deaths are part of the natural order.

Yet despite the fact that wild lions don't live that long, I was crestfallen to hear of the premature deaths of 11 of them in Queen Elizabeth National Park, done likely in retaliation for livestock predation.

Sadly, these lions, eight of which were cubs, did not die as ecologically intended. Their lives were tragically snuffed out as a result of suspected poisoning, which as it relates to lion conservation, is an unfortunate setback for the Ugandan population.

What happened in Queen Elizabeth National Park is not an isolated event. Human-wildlife conflict is endemic across much of rural Africa, impacting the entire conservation apparatus: regional biodiversity, the stability of ecosystems, and the well-being of marginalized peoples acting on basic survival compulsions. It is a nearly insurmountable hurdle with no straightforward way over.

Upon learning of the tragedy, I immediately wrote to my colleague and friend, Dr. Ludwig Siefert. As head of the Uganda Carnivore Program, he dedicates himself to finding a balance between the lions of Queen Elizabeth National Park and the vibrant communities of fishers and farmers living near them, including the village of Hamukungu, where the deaths occurred.

By working closely with the Uganda Wildlife Authority, Siefert's efforts have seen lions celebrated throughout the park's enclave villages, financial compensation for the loss of goats and cattle thanks in part to tourist donations, and a number of other human-wildlife conflict programs aimed at protecting people and lions from one another, all under the umbrella of greater carnivore conservation.

When lions and people clash | DW English



To say that I wasn't overcome with emotion at the loss of these 11 lions would be dishonest; my initial reaction was a plurality of anger, frustration, and sadness. But though my feelings were justified, I eventually had to swap them for critical thought.

"Lions will do what comes naturally to them," Rachael, my fiancée said, referring to the all too common attacks on livestock. "Whoever poisoned them did so to protect their animals. How can we, who have grocery stores and access to so much that many people in Africa don't have, even possibly understand what life is like for them? There's just no good solution at the moment."

Though not a conservationist by trade, she'd provided a profoundly teachable moment. I needed the reminder that even though a lot was done to ensure the safety of these lions, human conditions in this part of the world meant that it was only a matter of time before another flash point was reached. It was, and has been for some time, a no-win situation.



THE LIONS OF QUEEN ELIZABETH NATIONAL PARK ARE FAMOUS FOR CLIMBING SYCAMORE FIGS IN THE SOUTHERN ISHASHA SECTOR, AND CANDELABRA EUPHORBIA CACTI IN THE NORTHERN KASENYI PLAINS. PHOTO BY MICHAEL SCHWARTZ.

When taking a bird's eye view of Africa, her people and her wildlife, one must admit that something is truly wrong with the overall picture. Yes, there are a number of organizations—government agencies, researchers, NGOs, volunteers, effervescent activists—all dedicated to saving lions. Some are quite successful. Yet in spite of

management strategies and livestock husbandry schemes, compensation plans and cattle enclosures, lions are still being eliminated at an alarming rate.

This steady decline reveals a hard truth: As long as a growing rural population remains tethered to poverty, the risk of losing more lions stays high. And if we (the Western world) react to every wildlife tragedy with nothing more than moral exhibitionism toward the disenfranchised, then the root of the problem will stay buried beneath the conflict.

This may come as a surprise, even go beyond the frame of reference for some, but though I'm saddened, I hold no ill will toward the perpetrator(s). I know that if caught, there will likely be a hefty jail sentence or stiff fine. But how many times have we seen people apprehended, issued severe punishments, then become recidivists?

While arrests may be a salve to our personal wounding at the loss of wildlife and painstaking desire to see justice served, in the end it is nothing more than an attack on the symptom of human-wildlife conflict. The source, meanwhile, remains free to dictate these sad turn of events ad nauseum.

This is not to argue that there are no circumstances that warrant justice, nor is it wrong to express sympathy over the loss of these amazing creatures. But to put one living thing on a pedestal while refusing to empathize with the difficult circumstances of the other is the wrong way to approach the problem.

In other parts of the world, where poverty isn't as rampant, there doesn't exist the same level of concern about dangerous wildlife, if one's cattle or crops are safe, when the next meal can be successfully speared, trapped, shot, or fished, or if there is enough wood for the fire or water fetched from the nearest body of water to drink.

Ironically, while many of those suffering from domestic stock losses that take punitive action against offending lions arguably don't see their intrinsic value, those in the Western world who hold lions in high regard live in places completely devoid of them.



A UGANDAN FISHERMAN HEADS OUT AT DUSK TO EARN A LIVING. PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL SCHWARTZ

Human poverty and wildlife is like oil and water. Not only are they incompatible, but they exist at the heart of so many tragic events contributing to wildlife loss in Africa. From retaliatory aggression against predators acting merely on instinct to unsustainable bushmeat poaching in support of a starving family, poverty has crippling effects on the lives of humans, animals, and the environment at large.

For people living in the African bush, tending herds is an occupational hazard, while for lions, easy meals can come at deadly costs. To boil it down, both parties living on the fringes are a continued threat to one another. How, then, can the problem be fixed?

Though I'm immensely passionate about lions, part of the answer begins by having compassion toward my fellow human beings. It must start by changing public opinion of the African people, many of whom are still seen unfairly as the callous enemies of wildlife. By continually impugning their character, by pitting human against beast without understanding the root cause of the issue, we are doing nothing more than reinforcing the status quo, meaning lions won't stand much of a chance.

Like it or not, the lives of people and lions are inextricably linked, as they have been since time immemorial. The survival of latter being dependent on the welfare of the former is more important than ever.

Rather than immediately casting judgment, we must rediscover our empathy. We must ask ourselves what we would do if we were living without the means or resources to protect ourselves. Only then will more people care enough to act in the best interest of people and lions. Only then will another Ludwig Siefert join in the effort. That, in my opinion, is the true definition of a conservationist.

A conservationist is not someone who only loves animals. A conservationist is someone who sees the whole picture, and dedicates herself or himself to finding solutions that are beneficial for all involved. They are the ones who tirelessly work to build rainwater collection systems, or raise funds to open a school where young minds can learn about the value of the wildlife in their own backyards.

I must be careful not to paint with too broad a brushstroke, as I do not want to oversimplify all that human-wildlife conflict entails. There are similar issues such as ivory poaching, unsustainable hunting, corruption, and rhino horn harvesting that require the law's intervention.

But when I envision communities with safe access to clean drinking water, proper forms of waste disposal, and improved or alternative fishing and farming methods, all with the idea of healthy local economies in mind, I believe lions will have a better chance of survival.

Imagine if the outside world showed as much care and concern for the people of Africa as it does for its wildlife? What if we traded in empty criticisms for helping hands? Once more, that is the essence of what it is to be a conservationist, not to mention what it is to be human.

This effort must coalesce with the celebration of the amazing people—black, white, and otherwise—that call Africa home. From the four kingdoms of Uganda to the Rainbow nation of South Africa, the herders of the Maasai Steppe to the San who can read the intricacies of the bushveld the way no other human can, the future of lions, indeed all wildlife under the brilliant African sun, is under their care.

Lions have as much a right to be on this earth as we do. But it is only when we give the same amount of compassion and care to people that lions will be free to live and die as nature intended.

"If we do not do something to prevent it, Africa's animals, and the places in which they live, will be lost to our world, and her children, forever. Before it is too late, we need your help to lay the foundation that will preserve this precious legacy long after we are gone." Nelson Mandela



MEET THE AUTHOR

Michael Schwartz is a journalist and African wildlife conservation researcher. With field experience around the continent since 2005, his passion for Africa's wildlife is matched by his compassion for the people who live

there. A significant portion of his field work is carried out in Uganda, where he studies lion and elephant conservation. You can visit his website at <http://www.michaelwschwartz.com>.



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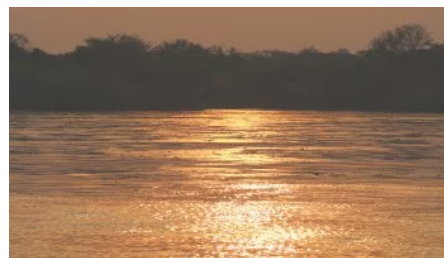
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