

Community-based Efforts to Mitigate Human-Lion Strife in Uganda



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My colleague Moses Konde and I were in Kidepo Valley National Park in Uganda last year, hoping to film an elephant migration for the National Geographic Society.

We were heading down a long dirt track near the border of South Sudan in search of a bachelor herd, when suddenly we spotted a lone lioness hunched over a small pool of rainwater. She was a relatively old girl, judging from her charcoal-black nose and gaunt face, not to mention the noticeable ribs that ran along her underside.

Finished drinking, she headed over to a termite mound to lie down, ignoring our presence in regal fashion. As she stared off in the direction of the border, I knew that if she dared cross over, she'd either be shot or snared by Sudanese poachers, or perhaps poisoned by pastoralists defending their cattle. I mouthed a silent prayer to myself, hoping that she'd stay in the park where it was safe.

But lions are as much opportunists as they are hunters. Bottom line, they often target the easiest meals, and at that lioness's ripe old age, a small

1,442KM²

Size of Kidepo Valley
National Park

goat or a slow-moving cow would be far easier pickings than an angry buffalo.

There are a decent number of lions in Kidepo, all living in and around a park that's flanked along the border by poachers, poisons and snares. It's a harsh world for people and lions, I recall thinking to myself. A beautiful, terrifyingly harsh world.

I decided to return to the Pearl of Africa, as Uganda is often called, in early 2017 to learn more about how the lesser known population of Africa's largest of big cats were faring. Uganda boasts a small but stable number of lions

BELOW: A lioness near the border of South Sudan in Uganda's Kidepo Valley National Park.





TOP: A male lion rests atop a fig tree in the Ishasha sector of Queen Elizabeth National Park.

-- roughly 350 of them. Apart from only one reportedly living in Lake Mburo National Park, most reside in the country's largest protected area, Murchison Falls National Park, the tourist-favoured Queen Elizabeth National Park and Kidepo Valley National Park, a pristine, largely unknown wilderness in the far north of the country.

I decided to check out Queen Elizabeth National Park, a 1,978-square-kilometre wildlife sanctuary in western Uganda hosting about 70 lions, most of which are closely monitored by a small team of dedicated conservationists from the Uganda Carnivore Program (UCP).

HUMANS VERSUS LIONS

Led by Dr. Ludwig Siefert, a German wildlife veterinarian and conservationist, and with assistance from California's Oakland Zoo and the Disney Conservation Fund, UCP engages in carnivore (lions, leopards and hyaenas) research and conservation, which includes implementing

BELOW: Dr. Ludwig Siefert is a wildlife veterinarian and head of the Uganda Carnivore Program, based in northern Queen Elizabeth National Park.



PHOTOS BY: MICHAEL SCHWARTZ

CONFLICT WITH HUMANS IS THE BIGGEST THREAT FOR LIONS HERE," SIEFERT EXPLAINED

a variety of community-based efforts, primarily designed to mitigate human-wildlife conflict.

"Conflict with humans is the biggest threat for lions here," Siefert explained, referring to situations where lions and other predators encounter local people and their livestock, both outside and within Uganda's national parks.

"Whereas Queen Elizabeth's lions will sometimes venture into human territory, especially along the Kasese boundary in the north and Lake Katwe in the west, pastoralist communities occasionally bring their cattle into the park to graze, which can lead to livestock depredation."



One of the matriarchs from Lena's maternal group.

Kidepo Valley National Park

lies in the rugged, semi arid valleys between Uganda's borders with Sudan and Kenya, some 700km from Kampala. Gazetted as a national park in 1962, it has a profusion of big game and hosts over 77 mammal species as well as around 475 bird species.

Queen Elizabeth is also home to roughly 30,000 people, some of whom live in 11 enclave villages scattered throughout the park, making human-wildlife conflict the biggest challenge for conserving its lions.

Human-wildlife conflict involving lions sometimes results in deadly retaliation by people. Some of the worst years were between 2006 and 2012, when an estimated 36 living in the northern sector were poisoned, representing just under 50 percent of known lion deaths in the area within that period. Other causes of death included being shot, getting killed by fearful mobs or accidents with oncoming vehicles.

Such anthropogenic threats have impacted the social size of Queen Elizabeth's prides, meaning that instead of upwards of 20 lions -- the average size of a standard pride in East Africa -- a Ugandan pride typically consists of smaller maternal groups spread out over a wider area with dominant male coalitions controlling multiple maternal groups at a time.

SINGLE MOTHERS

Consequently, some areas of Queen Elizabeth National Park now only contain single mother lionesses that have all but lost the benefits of feline sociality they would otherwise enjoy. As it stands, there are a grand total of just 28 breeding

lions out of the estimated 54 living in the northern sector of the park.

Siefert took me to see one of the largest group of lions, located in Queen Elizabeth's northeast region of Kasenyi, consisting of two male coalitions (five lions) overlapping with two maternal groups.

Matriarch, Lena, and her sister, Bridget, lead a maternal group totalling around 12 felines. We happened upon them near a grove of candelabra euphorbia trees, all looking well rested after having recently fed on a warthog and buffalo calf.

"He's going to climb up," Siefert said clairvoyantly as one of the juveniles walked past us toward a candelabra where several other lions were sleeping. Seconds later, the young male launched himself up the spiny sides, seemingly to get a better view of us.

"There's more over there," Siefert added, pointing toward some nearby thorn bushes. As I let my eyes adjust, the outlines of several big cats inside the dense thicket began to take shape. One of them was Bridget, an old, but queenly looking lioness with a cataract developing over her left eye.

Both she and Lena had certainly seen plenty of action, evidenced by the visible scars around their faces. But the group is thriving in spite of the hardships, thanks to the continued efforts



of Siefert and the UCP team, who purchase lights for village cattle enclosures, construct safe corrals and even assist in human-wildlife conflict education efforts at local primary and secondary schools.

It dawned on me that UCP is on the front lines of an ongoing battle, their goal not only to save Uganda's lions and other predator species from extinction, but also to help improve the quality of life for people.

"Lions are an integral part of Uganda," Siefert said. "Conserving them starts with talking to communities, offsetting human-wildlife conflict and helping meet the basic needs of local people and integrating them into the tourism market."

As I watched Bridget sitting quietly in the shade, I was reminded of the lone lioness I saw in Kidepo Valley National Park one year earlier, realizing that the challenges that Queen Elizabeth's lions are facing are but a mere microcosm for every lion remaining in the Pearl of Africa.

I remember standing just over the border in neighboring South Sudan in the fading light of evening, the setting sun coating the escarpment in brilliant, fiery tones, while the sky cast a somber, bluish hue over the valley. There I stood, hoping, praying that that old lioness didn't cross

A juvenile lion in the Kasenyi sector of Queen Elizabeth National Park.

Uganda contains a high number of kob, which lions often hunt.

the border. "OK, let's be off," our ranger ordered, presumably concerned about armed poachers who typically conduct their clandestine affairs after dark.

I took one last look, the soaring plateau and thorny savanna unfolding toward a majestic horizon in the cool of early evening.

It's a bittersweet place—one I'm unashamed to admit that I will never fully understand; where sunlight and dust bathe the terrain in dazzling colours; where roaring lions and impoverished communities both struggle to survive; and where poachers, poison and snares lie in wait. ●

To learn more about how you can help Uganda's lions, leopards and hyaenas please visit: <http://www.uganda-carnivores.org>