

| WILDLIFE



World Lion Day: What Would You Do to Protect Lions?

In [Wildlife](#) Tags [Cat Watch](#), [Michael Schwartz](#) August 10, 2016 [0 Comments](#)



[Michael Schwartz](#)

After cordially being invited to “pen a post” for National Geographic’s Cat Watch in honor of World Lion Day (#worldlionday), I was elated; not only because I was asked, but, and in spite of this being quite the cliché, I simply love lions!

Given the number of conservation issues surrounding the animal kingdom’s noblest of big cats, the first question I asked myself was, “which lion topic should I focus on?”

Then, after some thought, I found the excitement of writing about my favorite feline had faded, replaced by a gathering litany of challenges storm-clouding their way through my mind.

From one issue to the next, thinking about the king of beasts only furthered an increasingly dismal outlook on their future. General prognosis: not good.

Are Lions Faring Well?

Wild lions are faring well in certain circumstances. But let's not kid ourselves—overall, they aren't exactly on the winning end of the conservation spectrum.

What's more, the press revolving around their uncertain fate has been written and rewritten, thousands of times, thousands of different ways—all by a veritable who's who of conservationists and pundits.

I could write at length about the ever growing challenge of human expansion and land conversion, which continues encroaching on lion habitat. But you probably already know that.

I could devote a page to the deceased Zimbabwe lion whose name you're all too familiar with, complete with the debate about the benefits (or lack thereof) of hunting to conserve wildlife. But despite it being a critical conversation, you definitely already know about that!

Finally, I could write an article about the dangers humans and lions pose to one another; that lions stray from reserves from time to time and make off with a cow, goat, or even injure or kill a person, and that retaliations from locals can result in the poisoning of an entire pride.

But once more, you already know that.

Protecting Lions Means Asking Relevant Questions



A LION CUB IN MURCHISON FALLS NATIONAL PARK, UGANDA. PHOTO BY MICHAEL SCHWARTZ

I soon realized that there were more important questions concerning lions than merely asking myself what subject was worth highlighting. For instance, can humans realistically exist in a relative state of balance with lions? If not, then why not? And if yes, then how?

Not long after jotting those down, another question came to mind in three slightly different ways: What can we do to further protect lions? What would I do to protect lions? What would you do to protect lions?

That last question is for the kid living in London, Nairobi, Cairo, or upstate New York, or perhaps the retiree who's been reading similar articles in *National Geographic* magazines. You may love lions too, but merely loving them won't save them.

Many conservationists have been working to answer that important question for quite some time. In some cases there's been tremendous success, while for others, abject failure.

The reason I'm asking you, the reader, is because in spite of the polemics, fundraisers, or social media slogans in support of lions, we sometimes forget that conserving them means coming up with actual solutions.

Now that the question has been posed, and not forgetting the countless number of folks already tirelessly working out how best to save wild lions, why not try proactively weighing in?

But before doing so, permit me to jot down several common sense essentials that might aid you in your response.

Protecting Lions Means Knowing the Facts



A LION PUSHES ON THROUGH A GRITTY WIND IN THE NOSSOB RIVERBED, KALAHARI GEMSBOK NATIONAL PARK, SOUTH AFRICA. NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC PHOTO BY CHRIS JOHNS.



TWO JUVENILE LIONS HUNTING WITH THEIR PRIDE DURING EARLY EVENING IN MURCHISON FALLS NATIONAL PARK, UGANDA. PHOTO BY MICHAEL SCHWARTZ.

Why are wild lions in danger? The short answer is habitat loss and not enough prey, which field researchers will verify.

I won't get into specifics, but if lions are to survive in an ever-developing world, addressing habitat loss and ensuring a stable prey base must be the main priority, which also means figuring out how conserving them can best benefit local communities who rely on land too.

Another issue related to habitat loss is the fact that lions are a threat to humans and their livestock living near and even outside of protected areas. Taking that into account, it's understandable that many African people don't want to foot the bill for lion protection while losing their lives and livelihoods in the process. Human-wildlife conflict is another multifaceted problem that must be remedied if lions are to remain.

Then there's hunting, which many believe is the *coup de grâce*. In reality, hunting is more towards the bottom of the lion's list of obstacles.

Hunting seems one of the larger problems because it's drawn more media attention in recent years than the bigger challenges lions currently face. The reason, simply put, is that hunting is wildly contentious since it tugs painfully on many an animal enthusiast's heartstrings.

To summarize, the idea of killing an animal to save the species seems incompatible with conservation to some, though hunters and some conservationists contest that it greatly offsets habitat loss; land that aside from being unfit for tourism, could become livestock pastures or fields of agriculture with more wildlife being killed in the process if left alone.

I'll admit that I have mixed feelings about hunting, and there's certainly evidence pointing to cases of gross mismanagement, not to mention the targeting of genetically healthy lions which can lead to infanticide, none of which casts it in a particularly positive light.

But emotions aside, wild lions need those who are willing to address hunting holistically.

If lion protection truly needs hunting as one of several measures in the conservation toolkit, then the evidence will back it up with verifiable facts. If not, the same applies.

Hunting will no doubt be further addressed at the 17th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to CITES in Johannesburg, South Africa, this coming September.

Protecting Lions Means Remembering Asiatic Lions



ASIATIC LION IN INDIA. PHOTO COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA CREATIVE COMMONS.

It's easy to forget that lions once roamed throughout Africa, Europe, and Asia. This touches on a smaller subspecies of lion more closely related to the small population living in West Africa.

While wild lions in Africa number somewhere between 25,000 and 30,000, there are only about 523 Asiatic (or Persian) lions left in the world, all living in India's 545 square mile Gir Forest National Park.

For these lions, the struggle for survival and real possibility of extinction goes well beyond the basic difficulties of human-wildlife conflict and habitat loss.

Changes to their environment through natural events such as wildfires, infectious diseases, and inbreeding are all very real threats that could wipe out the entire population in one disastrous blow.

For this subspecies, the difference between life and death is the continuing efforts to mitigate all of these risks, which includes growing the population, and most importantly, remembering that their survival is of equal importance to that of their African brethren.

Protecting Lions Means Staying Positive

Negative news and fear-based media seems to define our world nowadays, a concept I learned when a former professor once stated, "if it bleeds, it leads."

While I perish the thought of a world without lions, and while we shouldn't sugarcoat the challenges, the ordnance of negative conservation stories being endlessly fired out into cyberspace can hurt the cause.

"Unfortunately for many, the task ahead seems too big," African wildlife filmmaker Kim Wolhuter said in an [interview](#).

“We keep feeding people with so much negative about our natural world they can’t cope. They think their little help just isn’t going to make a difference. We need to change our approach and be more positive.”

It’s important to be intentional in counterbalancing the grim news with real stories of success. Take the [Lion Guardians](#) for example.



LION GUARDIAN KAMUNU WORKS TO PROTECT LIONS FROM POACHING AND RETALIATORY KILLINGS. PHOTO BY PHILIP J BRIGGS.

By turning rural Kenyans and Tanzanians from poachers to protectors, there has been a 90 percent drop in retaliatory lion killings in East Africa, a number of community rangelands transformed into lion refuges, and a significant increase in community conservation participation.

Lions have also been reintroduced to Malawi’s Liwonde National Park and Majete Wildlife Reserve, as well as in Rwanda’s Akagera National Park, thanks in large part to the continued efforts of African Parks, a nonprofit organization that deals exclusively with some of the toughest protected areas on the continent.

From lion-proof *bomas* (enclosures) for cattle to more active community involvement, it is these stories that should be amplified, not only for the betterment of lions, but for the people around the world standing in solidarity for their continued protection.

Protecting Lions Means Getting Involved

I started journeying to Africa in early 2005 with high hopes of seeing wild lions in their natural habitat.

Since then, I’ve been fortunate enough to see them on every field visit—from the thorny lowveld of South Africa and the majestic floodplains of Botswana, to the red-rich Zambezi river valley and the grassy savannas of Uganda, all the way up to the southernmost border of South Sudan.



A LONE LIONESS LOOKS OUT AT A HERD OF BUFFALO IN KIDEPO VALLEY NATIONAL PARK, UGANDA.
PHOTO BY MICHAEL SCHWARTZ

I remember my first encounter—watching a small pride stalking a giraffe in the early morning hours. Though they didn't make the kill, it was their concerted effort that inspired me to start looking at ways in which I could get more involved in wildlife conservation.

I once came across a quote stating, "everyone wants to eat, but few are willing to hunt," which is contextually poignant.

Many people find plenty of time to complain about the status of lions, but what about dropping the criticism and lending a helping hand instead?

There are a number of ways that anyone interested can help in the conservation of lions—both in Africa and in India.

These include volunteer opportunities (just be sure it's ethical), enrolling for science-related degrees that offer the chance of studying lions in the field, and even chances to work with rural communities on ways to improve farming and build lion-proof enclosures, which are in dire need of innovative techniques.

Sometimes it starts by simply offering to help. Who knows where you might end up if you do?

Protecting Lions Means Changing Your World View

Though social media is one way of staying connected to lion conservation efforts, it can also be a sounding board for unnecessary anger and inertia.

It is this type of fatalistic mentality that can blur the contours of effective conservation because it can foster more division with less results.

In reality, most conservation work is extremely complex. The issue of park fences is one key example.

Some conservationists believe that fences around national parks and game reserves are the best way of keeping lions, rural communities, and livestock safe. If fences aren't in place, it invites poachers in, while at the same time increasing instances of human-wildlife conflict.

However, fences can sometimes alter an environment from proper self-regulation, resulting in species overpopulation, or preventing the migration of prey animals, both of which could involve culling to prevent a loss of biodiversity.

The difficulties of such dilemmas aside, what sometimes follows is infighting over issues that desperately need a united front, both to protect local people and to preserve lions.

On a personal note, I'm not afraid to admit that I've considered ideas for protecting lions that lie outside of the conventional norm.

Unfortunately, however, some people seem content with bursts of outrage and name-calling as ways to advance their ideas for conservation. If there is one universal truth to safeguarding lions, it's this: hostility and strife are not answers and never will be.

Don't misunderstand, civil debates over how best to conserve lions are absolutely necessary. But don't forget to keep an open mind too. Who knows: You might learn something new from someone who has a different point of view, or they might even learn something from you.

What Will You Do for Lions?



LIONESSES AT DAWN SURROUNDED BY DUST IS
LOOKING FOR THE REST OF THE PRIDE AFTER A

You've no doubt figured out by now that I haven't come up with a concrete answer of my own for how best to protect lions. Truthfully, I'm still thinking it through, and I hope you too have started giving it some thought.

If there's any encouragement I might be able to offer, it's this: lion protection should not be about preventing the inevitable, so much as it should be about embracing what's possible.

No matter what the circumstances surrounding lions, their plight is not insoluble, provided we stay informed, stay positive, get involved, be forward thinking, and never give up!

FAILED HUNT ON BUFFALO.

So, given all that you've just read, I ask once more: What would you do to protect lions? What will *you* do to protect lions?

As someone who has witnessed the good, bad, and ugly sides of lion conservation firsthand, I encourage you, I implore you, remain hopeful and be part of the solution. Let your voices be heard.

Better yet, let out a mighty roar!

Lion Roaring HD (wild, deep and LOUD)



For further information about World Lion Day and ways you can help, please visit <https://worldlionday.com/>.

#worldlionday



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>.

Previous Post



How do humpback whales locate food? Scientists need your help to find out

Next Post


Extinction Closing in on Hundreds of Species in Dwindling Asian Forests, Duke Study Finds



RELATED POSTS



The Story Behind the Filming of
The Last Lions

 Living Walls Save Lions by Saving
Livestock

Living Walls Save Lions by
Saving Livestock



British Lion Debates Ban on Lion
Trophies

National Geographic Society Blog Comment Policy

Please read our [Comment Policy](#) before commenting.



0 Comments

National Geographic Society Blog

 Login ▾

 Recommend

 Share

Sort by Best ▾



Start the discussion...

LOG IN WITH

OR SIGN UP WITH DISQUS 

National
Geographic Blog

Name

☐ I agree to Disqus' [Terms of Service](#)☐ I agree to Disqus' processing of email and IP address, and the use of cookies, to facilitate my authentication and posting of comments, explained further in the [Privacy Policy](#)

Be the first to comment.

ALSO ON NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY BLOG

The Revival of Zakouma National Park's Elephant Population: Interview with Rian

1 comment • 2 months ago

Thanuji Jayathilake — I love the fact that National Geographic Society Blog is raising awareness about endangered species,**The Glorious Primitive Crane Fly**

3 comments • a month ago

Pilar — Beautifully written and the photographs transport you to the remote locations of these rare insects. Once again, job well done!**Rio Quetro1**

1 comment • 21 days ago

Brazil Ecotour — Dear Dr. R. Isaí Madriz have you ever been to the Lencois Maranhenses national park? in northeast of Brazil. In case**A Fun Approach for Educators to Engage Students in Insect Biodiversity & Climate**

5 comments • a month ago

Emily Campbell — Wow Isai this is SO amazing!!! Truly a one-of-a-kind game and what a fun way to inform the public about the

Subscribe Add Disqus to your site Add Disqus Add Disqus Disqus Privacy Policy Disqus Privacy Policy Disqus Privacy Policy

ABOUT THE BLOG

Researchers, conservationists, and others share stories, insights and ideas about Our Changing Planet, Wildlife & Wild Spaces, and The Human Journey. More than 50,000 comments have been added to 10,000 posts. Explore the list alongside to dive deeper into some of the most popular categories of the National Geographic Society's conversation platform Voices.

Opinions are those of the blogger and/or the blogger's organization, and not necessarily those of the National Geographic Society. Posters of blogs and comments are required to observe National Geographic's [community rules](#) and other [terms of service](#).

Questions? Please contact us: blog@ngs.org

| @NATGEOEXPLORERS

@ · now



@ · now

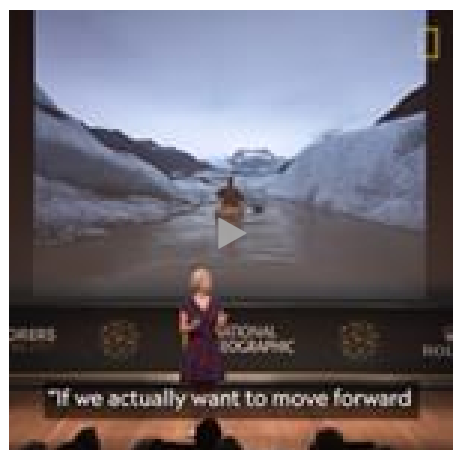


| INSTAGRAM



"Climbing Everest isn't easy, but **Barry Bishop** did it to document the first American team to summit Everest. He photographed the first American team to summit Everest on 35mm slides."

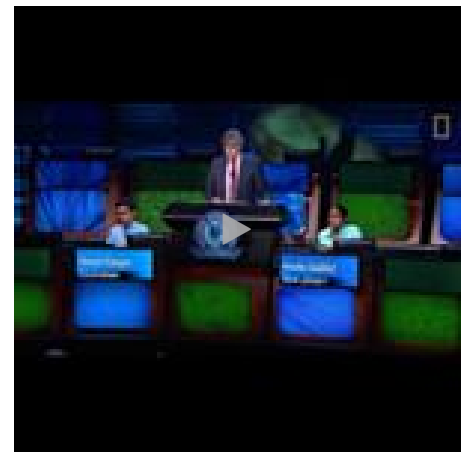
—TARA MARCO
NAT. GEO. SENIOR PHOTO ARCHIVIST
@taramarco



"At the time, most animal images were taken in zoos or on trophy hunts. If an animal was photographed in the wild they were largely obscured by foliage and bushes. **George Shiras** found a way to capture animals at night when they are most active."

—TARA MARCO
NAT. GEO. SENIOR PHOTO ARCHIVIST
@taramarco





© 1996 - 2018 National Geographic Society. All rights reserved.

[Privacy Policy](#) [Sustainability Policy](#) [Terms of Service](#)

See our stories at [NationalGeographic.com](https://www.nationalgeographic.com)