

PAPER 3: ON WHITE LION CONSERVATION, CULTURE AND
HERITAGE

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White Lion Protection Plan™

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to highlight the urgent need to protect South Africa's rare White Lions. Legislation, both nationally and internationally, is required to ensure their survival. This paper not only presents the case for their conservation value, but also for their vitally important cultural and spiritual value according to indigenous African beliefs.

The White Lion Protection Plan has been developed over a seven year period, with input from numerous field specialists: conservationists, environmental management specialists, wildlife veterinarians, reintroduction and rehabilitation experts, cultural leaders, enviro-education and enviro-law specialists.

Motivation

There is **no** legislation that protects this unique and naturally occurring genetic rarity from becoming extinct. The White Lions were once a natural occurrence in a specific distribution range in South Africa, and should be protected as such. Being endemic to the Timbavati / southern Kruger Park region, White Lions made a significant contribution to the biodiversity of that region. The AmaShangaan, and other indigenous peoples in South Africa, revere the White Lions and regard them as sacred.

Background

After their well-publicised “discovery” in the 1970s, White Lions were artificially removed from the wild to captive breeding / hunting operations (McBride 1981; Tucker 2001). These captive operations as well as zoos, specifically, bred White Lions because of their rarity and exploited them for financial gain. Along with the artificial removals, lion culling in the Kruger National Park (especially in the 1970’s and 1980’s) (Smuts 1982), and trophy hunting of pride male lions in the Timbavati (Marco Scheiss pers. comm.; *Sunday Independent* May 28th 2006), depleted the gene pool, contributing to the drastic decline in the frequency of occurrence of White Lions and ultimately a 12-year extinction in the wild. Unethical and ecologically irresponsible hunting of lions has taken place in this region up until as recently as May and October 2006 (*Sunday Independent* May 28th 2006; Patrick O’Brien pers. comm.). Furthermore, since genetic research has not yet identified the genetic marker that distinguishes the White Lions from tawny lions (Cruikshank & Robinson 1997) (Dr Dan York pers. comm.), a tawny lion hunted in the Timbavati may therefore be a gene-carrier of the white phenotype. These artificial removals have continued actively over the past three decades, and will continue to take place unless White Lions are specifically listed for protection. Past legislation in South Africa, as well as the most recently proposed **Norms, Principles and Standards for the Management of Large Predators**, do not prevent the White Lions from being removed from the system. For this reason, the Global White Lion Protection Trust (“the Trust”) is implementing the White Lion Protection Plan™ and pursuing the urgent protection of the White Lions at a national level with the Minister of Environment and Tourism, Mr Martinus van Schalkwyk. The Trust has submitted several formal requests to have these unique animals listed on the **SCHEDULE OF THREATENED AND PROTECTED ANIMALS OF NATIONAL IMPORTANCE**. Furthermore, the Trust has begun the process of having White Lions listed as a *critically endangered regional polymorphism or variety of Panthera leo* on the **IUCN’s Red Data List**. However, the national **SCHEDULE OF THREATENED AND PROTECTED ANIMALS OF NATIONAL IMPORTANCE** is largely based upon CITES recognition, and for this reason, we are making simultaneous submission for CITES listing. White Lions have significant conservation, cultural and eco-tourism value and should, therefore, be granted specific protection.

Conservation Value

The White Lion is a genetic rarity of the African lion (*Panthera leo*) that is unique to South Africa, and was born naturally in one endemic distribution range - the Timbavati Private Nature Reserve and southern Kruger Park. It is a rare phenotype or regional polymorphism of *Panthera leo*, which is a unique contribution to the Biodiversity of a specific natural distribution range in South Africa. **Note:** According to the National Biodiversity Management Plan for Species, the definition of a “species” includes subspecies, varieties, cultivars and races.

[A complete copy of the history and ecology of the White Lion, written by lion ecologist Jason Turner, is available upon request].

Comment from Dr Ian Player, leading conservationist credited with saving the white rhino from extinction, and Lake St Lucia from being mined:

"The reintroduction of the White Lions back to their endemic habitat represents a critical landmark in conservation history." [2004].

Presently, the White Lions are listed as *Panthera leo*, under CITES Appendix II, and, therefore, fall under the classification of a "Vulnerable Species": “species that are not necessarily now threatened with extinction but that may become so unless trade is closely controlled”. Appendix II means that White Lions (as with *Panthera leo*) or their derivatives (ex: skins) can be more readily traded without strict regulation. Because of their rarity, a white lion trophy is prized by hunters and can fetch up to US \$165,000. In reality, there are currently no White Lions in the wild in their endemic range. White Lions are, therefore, critically endangered. Appendix II means that White Lions (as with *Panthera leo*) can be hunted, and therefore any White Lions born / reintroduced to the wild are not protected. ***Every permit issued to hunt a lion (Panthera leo) can be used to hunt a White Lion.***

The Timbavati and certain other Associated Private Nature Reserves continue to 'trophy hunt' lions, often in an unethical and ecologically irresponsible manner (*Sunday Independent* May 28th and June 4th). Therefore, the survival of White Lions in this region is not guaranteed. The unethical hunt of a pride male lion in the Umbabat Private Nature Reserve (*Sunday Independent* May 28) led to the death (through infanticide) of the 1st

white cubs born in this region in 12 years. The male lion that was hunted was also the dominant male for the pride that gave birth to a 2nd set of white cubs, born in the Timbavati in September 2006. These cubs as well as their tawny siblings similarly succumbed to infanticide (Turner pers. comm. – based on having studied these prides for a period of 6 years as part of an M.Sc study)

The Timbavati and the other Associated Private Nature Reserves have proposed becoming a contractual park under SANParks, facilitating (amongst other things) that they can continue to trophy hunt lions. As a contractual park, the Timbavati would get around the contention that Governmental should ban hunting in buffer reserves that border on the Kruger National Park. Since White Lions have always been targeted for their rarity, a separate listing is urgently required to protect this rare genotype from probable extinction. Furthermore, the Minister of the Environment has taken a principled decision in proposing a prohibition of the canned trophy hunting industry, whereby wild animals, in particular lions, were bred in cages for trophy hunting. Unfortunately, the canned hunting industry is suing the government (DEAT) based on this proposed policy, and it therefore remains to be seen if the unethical hunting industry will be clamped down. Even if the stricter regulations are imposed, the Minister has proposed that these operations will be granted a period of grace, in order to “get rid of their stock.” Since the vast majority of White Lions were removed from their natural habitat into these canned hunting operations, the probability is that large-scale trophy hunting and possibly euthanasia over this window period will result in an eradication of their gene-pool (the integrity of which will be determined through DNA testing before inclusion in anyway in the project).

The imperative to protect the white lion gene pool within its endemic distribution range is all the more urgent. The White Lion Trust (WLT) has, therefore, initiated a scientific reintroduction program to return the White Lion gene to its natural endemic habitat.

Reintroduction Programme

The protocol for the reintroduction of White Lions to the wild in their natural distribution range, and their long-term protection, was developed over 7 years with input from experts and specialists in numerous fields. Successful lion reintroduction techniques and methodologies are currently being used (Van Dyk 1997; Hunter 1998; Kilian 2003; Druce

et al. 2004). The Trust's reintroduction programme is utilising pedigreed White Lions (i.e. of high genetic integrity) whose lineage is directly traceable to Timbavati. A pride of unimprinted White Lions have been successfully reintroduced to the semi free-roaming conditions on the 1000 ha control area. They are now hunting for themselves and are completely self-sufficient. Until the Timbavati changes its hunting policy, the White Lion Trust (WLT) will not consider returning White Lions to that region. If and when a reintroduction takes place into Timbavati itself, the wild-born offspring of the founder pride would be integrated into an existing pride/s in the Timbavati. As a next step, therefore, a suitable wildlife area within the greater endemic range of the white lion has been selected to establish a protected subpopulation of integrated white and tawny lions. In accordance with current strategies for lion conservation, the white lion reintroduction aims to contribute to the meta-population management approach that has already been implemented for lions in southern Africa (Nowell & Jackson 1996). As lions have become increasingly confined to protected areas, individuals are moved over large distances between protected areas (Barnett *et al.* 2006). In order to completely re-wild the White Lions and ensure genetic diversity, our aim is to establish and manage a number of separate subpopulations before considering the integration of White Lions with a resident pride/s in the Timbavati Private Nature Reserve itself.

[A complete copy of this scientific reintroduction protocol ©Jason Turner is available upon request].

Cultural Value

As icons of South Africa's rainbow nation, the White Lions are radiant symbols of African pride and the richness of our cultural heritage. According to the **IUCN** (World Conservation Union), species are important not only because of their conservation value but their **cultural value** as well. The cultural and spiritual significance of these genetic rarities in traditional African belief systems should not be underestimated. Of all animals in African cosmology, the White Lions are pre-eminent. To the African elders, used to looking for spiritual signs in nature, the White Lions' arrival in Timbavati was nothing less than a "gift from God". They are understood to be "King of Kings", which deserve our highest reverence and protection. In the words of Selby Gumbi, Zulu indigenous priest, healer and African cosmologist, 'The White Lions are the first-born of God's creatures.

They are part of the hierarchy of pure light and love.' [Encounters Magazine, 2003] Similarly, Credo Mutwa, one of the greatest living libraries of African oral tradition, refers to the White Lions as the '*Children of the Sungod*'. African elders explain that the colour white in spiritual terms, means "purity" and "enlightenment", going beyond all racial connotations. White is "sunlight", i.e. all the colours of the spectrum in one, beyond colour, creed, race or gender. It is believed that the White Lions have been born in symbolic harmony with the birth of South Africa's own **Rainbow Nation**. They are seen not only as icons of African cultural enlightenment, but also as a motivating symbol for uniting all cultures and people in the African Renaissance. They are the "Rainbow Kings", ushering in a new time for the planet, an African Renaissance - indeed a "World Renaissance".

In the words of Swazi elder and traditional healer, Baba Mataba, who has been writing praise songs to the White Lions in the Great African Tradition: 'By holding the White Lion captive, the spirit of Africa is "held captive". If we can free the White Lion, the spirit of Africa can be free.' [Encounters, 2003] So important is the urgent need for the protection of this unique animal to the indigenous people of the region (and indigenous people throughout Africa), that, it is believed, the future of the whole of humankind is dependent upon their survival. Should the White Lions become extinct, Zulu/San High Priest Credo Mutwa maintains "the whole of Africa would cease to exist."

While Western records document their existence for a period just over half a century, old African records in the Great Oral Tradition indicate that they survived successfully in the Timbavati region and areas neighboring the Kruger National Park for over 400 years. According to Mutwa, African kings declared this Timbavati region a "sacred site" long before the Kruger was declared a National Park, because of the presence of the White Lions in this region. The name "*Tsimba-vaati*" itself is derived from the ancient Shangaan language, meaning "the place where star-lions came down." Timbavati is, therefore, viewed not only as their natural homeland, it is also their spiritual homeland.

Although this remains the only region on earth where they appeared by natural occurrence, stories of the White Lions occur throughout the African continent. The meaning is consistent. In Zimbabwe, for instance, they are imbued with spiritual or angelic significance, and termed *Mondoro* (or 'spirit lions'). Similar stories have been

documented in the Kalahari, Botswana, Senegal, Kenya and as far north as Egypt. After the reintroduction of the White Lions to the Timbavati region, events of ceremony and celebration have welcomed the return of these majestic creatures to their original endemic homelands. As an example, Chief Axon Khosa of Nyani Village, son of Chief Kapama, views the White Lions as the “icons of hope”. “They are symbolic to our [Shangaan] people because the White Lions were a light. Now that light is back...” [Kruger2Canyons, April 05].

Whereas they once played an integral part in Shangaan culture, there is much concern that many of the younger generation are unaware of the White Lions' importance. To rectify that deficiency, the older Shangaan people in the region are planning a project to educate the younger generation on the importance of the White Lions to their people. Youth groups, like the Institute for Higher Learning, have focused on raising the cultural awareness around the White Lions' importance. Our application for CITES listing submits that the rich cultural, spiritual and historical value of the White Lions be considered alongside their environmental value.

It is of vital consequence that South Africa's unique White Lions are part of this country's Cultural Heritage and African Renaissance, and require urgent protection as a threatened animal of national significance. **Credo Mutwa expresses it in no uncertain terms: “No-one in their right mind would ever travel to Siam and there murder the rare White Elephants that we find in that country. But people come to South Africa to brutally murder the White Lions of Timbavati in the name of manliness and in the name of sport. The sacred icons of other races and nations in this world are respected, revered and protected. But the icons of Africa are massacred with cold impunity....As the devastation of South Africa’s wildlife goes on at a pace, I understand much to my sorrow, that there is not a single white lion left in the wild. And I ask myself: Did we win our freedom for this? This quiet devastation of our country’s most sacred animals? Did we, by joining the ranks of the democratic countries of the world, also join those people who see it as their task to denude this planet of all life? I say: *Please. Leave South Africa’s White Lions alone.... Let them walk tall in the wilderness which is their mother.*” [Foreword: *Children of the Sungod: Mystery of the White Lions*, 2001]**

Moreover, the belief of South Africa's indigenous priesthood concurs with that held by other indigenous elders around the globe, who maintain that the White Lions of the Timbavati require urgent protection as a symbol of great significance for humankind. The Trust has established a "Council of Elders", which includes indigenous elders from numerous global cultures who give perspectives on issues of cultural significance and urgent conservation imperatives - particularly concerning the White Lions. Furthermore, according to the principles laid out in the **IUCN Durban Accord** [World Parks Congress 2003], the conservation measures of Indigenous and First Peoples will play a centralised role in conservation efforts today.

[The cultural importance of the White Lions is detailed in the book by Linda Tucker, entitled *Mystery of the White Lions*, which published in 2001 after 10 years of primary research with African elders of different cultural backgrounds.]

Eco-Tourism Value

The rarity of White Lions and the limited natural distribution range that they inhabit means that there is phenomenal interest in their presence as a "living heritage". There is moreover, significant interest in their reintroduction to the wild - particularly given the many prevailing misconceptions regarding their ability to survive in the wild. White Lions have proved themselves to be "apex predators" in their endemic habitat: they camouflage themselves expertly in the ashen-white bush habitat, with the earth scorched white by the sun, where they are equally adept hunters by day or by night.

White Lions are a unique draw-card for eco-visitors within the greater Timbavati / Kruger Park region. The Trust is establishing the "White Lion Eco-Cultural Route" in collaboration with Open Africa, the NGO working closely with the South African Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism in opening up eco-cultural tourism routes in low-income areas. The Trust will engage the rural communities of the area in establishing the White Lion cultural points along the route. It is anticipated that the community will benefit directly - economically - from the outputs of eco-tourism in the region.

Scientific Evidence

There is evidence that White Lions survived successfully in their natural distribution range for a minimum of 56 recorded years. Despite the continual persecution through hunting, the White Lions persisted in this Timbavati region (Joyce Little 2003), until they were forcibly removed to captive breeding farms and to zoological institutions (McBride 1981). Eye-witness accounts of the White Lions occurring in their natural habitat in the Timbavati region, record that White Lions were exceptional hunters, often showing dominance in their prides (Mike Kay, Dave Zeller, Mario Cesare pers. comm.). The White Lions were a natural occurrence that contributed to the genetic diversity of *Panthera leo* and the biodiversity of the Greater Timbavati region. ***There is no scientific evidence to indicate that the White Lions cannot survive in the wild due their unique colouring.*** In fact, those White Lions that were studied in the wild in Timbavati often showed dominance in their pride structure (Mike Kay pers. obs.), and were adept hunters (Cesare pers. obs.) despite their perceived lack of camouflage. Several eye-witness accounts record individual White Lions hunting without the assistance of the pride and killing prey as large as adult giraffe, (Mario Cesare, Mike Kay, Zakkie Eloff and David Zeller pers. obs.). The White Lions adapted their hunting skills by hunting in the white sandy riverbeds, characteristic of the Timbavati region. Furthermore, the preliminary findings of the White Lion Trust's research team indicate that White Lions are "apex predators", with a kill frequency comparable to or higher than the lion prides studied by lion ecologist Jason Turner in the Timbavati region for 6 years (Turner 2005; Turner & Vasicek in prep.). The "mean kill" frequency of the Trust's White Lion pride is **a kill every 2 days**. It is acknowledged that the conditions of the Trust's reintroduction programme are not fully free-roaming and there is currently no challenge of other lion prides. However, the habitat conditions and prey density in the primary reintroduction area are similar to that of the Timbavati itself. Furthermore, the results do suggest that if an **all-white pride** of White Lions can hunt this successfully, an integrated pride of white and tawny lions will have no difficulty hunting collaboratively.

Scientific Research Centre

The Global White Lion Protection Trust is in the process of establishing a Scientific Research Centre and Cultural Heritage Centre on its reserve (the founding property) in

the greater Timbavati region, dedicated to the conservation and preservation of White Lions in their endemic homeland. The Scientific Research Centre aims to establish, through genetic research and scientific observation in the field, the unique genetic traits shown by the White Lions. This research - and close collaboration with leading wildlife and genetic specialists - will be used to classify the White Lion as a "unique and critically endangered regional polymorphism / variant" of *Panthera leo*, according to the criteria for the IUCN Red Data List. The following criteria are outlined: **a) reduction in population size b) geographic range (extent of occurrence or area of occupancy) c) estimated population size and rate of decline d) population size and e) probability of extinction based on quantitative analysis.** Only one of five criteria needs to be satisfied for classification on the IUCN Red Data List. The White Lion satisfies criterion **b**, and criteria **a** and **d** can be argued for the White Lion. The sub-speciation issue in general continues to be controversial in scientific circles, with arguments both for and against such classifications. In the case of the African lion, the lack of objective consensus on intra-specific lion phylogeny is complicating conservation efforts of lion populations in certain regions (Barnett *et al.* 2006). The lion populations in west and central Africa could possibly be characterized as 'critically endangered'; however, because their status as a separate lion subspecies (*Panthera leo senegalensis*) is unclear, the situation has not been officially recognized (Nowell & Jackson 1996; Bauer & Van Der Merwe 2002; Chardonnet 2002). Sub-species classification of the White Lion will also be carefully considered by the Trust in collaboration with leading genetic institutions. The issue of whether the White Lion should be classified as *Panthera leo krugeri variety white lion* or simply *Panthera leo* will be conclusively investigated. The Trust's lion ecologist, Jason Turner, is currently in the process of co-authoring a scientific paper in this regard, and will proceed with a Doctoral Study on various aspects of White Lion conservation.

Initially, the Trust will apply for CITES listing of the White Lion as a rare phenotype and genotype of *Panthera leo* that is naturally unique to a specific distribution range. This unique phenotype needs to be preserved, and the gene-pool restored. Since trophy hunting still takes place in the White Lions' natural distribution range, and the captive breeding in canned hunting operations has put the genetic pool under duress, the Trust's Scientific Research Centre aims to acquire key individual White Lions of the highest genetic pedigree to take part in the genetic research and preservation program.

Precedents

Other nations have drafted and implemented legislation to protect rare genetic variants under national law. A case in point is the so-called **Spirit Bear (a.k.a. the Kermode Bear)** of British-Columbia, Canada. Like the White Lion, the Spirit Bear is a unique genetic variant / regional polymorphism of the Black Bear (*Ursus americanus*), and occurs in only one place in the world, the temperate rainforests of British-Columbia. Like the White Lion, the white coat of the Spirit Bear is believed to be the result of a double recessive allele. The Spirit Bear has, however, been classified as a sub-species (*Ursus americanus kermodei*) and since the mode of genetic inheritance is similar to that of the White Lions, indications are that the White Lions will also be classified as a sub-species (of *Panthera leo*) (Valhalla Wilderness Society unpublished letter to Minister Marthinus van Schalkwyk). Just as the White Lion is regarded as a creature of great reverence by South Africa's indigenous people, so the Spirit Bear has a long cultural history with the Canadian First Nations of that region.

The Spirit Bear has been protected by law in British Columbia since 1925, but only recently (February 2006) did conservation groups and First Nations representatives win a battle to have 212 000 ha of land set aside for their protection. As is the case with many species today, habitat loss is currently the main factor threatening their continued existence. The present position is that only about 400 Spirit Bears remain in the wild. On February 7th 2006, the British-Columbia Provincial Government announced a plan in conjunction with the First Nations to protect 1.8 million hectares of British-Columbia's coast, which includes the Spirit Bear's habitat. In addition, on April 4, the British Columbia government passed legislation that proclaimed the Spirit Bear as the official mammal emblem of the province. **It is illegal to hunt the Spirit Bear in British-Columbia.** For more information, please see: www.bcspiritbear.ca www.savespiritbear.org.

Closer to home, the **rare black leopard** in the Lydenberg area has been referred to by the Mpumalanga Parksboard as a rare mutation with significant scientific importance that should have a large impact on the tourism industry in the area (Chris Nel 20 January 2006). In 2002, the Development Bank of South Africa offered a grant of R150 000 for

the launch of a development program to ensure the conservation of this rare animal and to fund the conservation of the black leopard as a tourism draw-card.

[A detailed copy of this scientific reintroduction protocol ©Jason Turner is available upon request].