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One Woman's Remarkable Quest To Save Africa's White Lion

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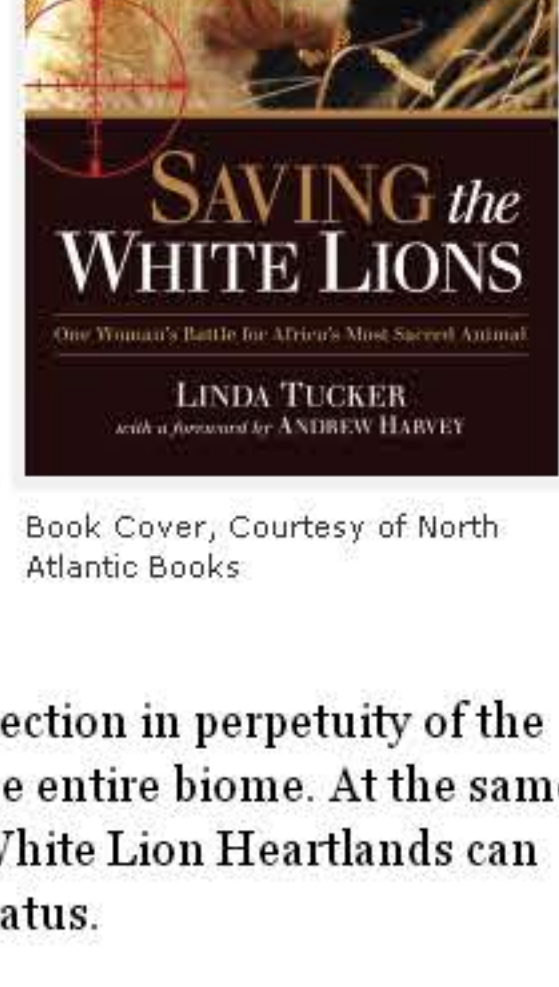


Linda Tucker with baby Marah. Photo Courtesy of Global White Lion Protection Trust (WLT)

Her name is Linda Tucker and, prior to attending the University of Cape Town, and then Cambridge (UK), she grew up during the tumult and agonies of South African Apartheid. In 1991, at the height of a fashion and marketing career, something happened to her in the presence of lions, an epiphany that turned her world upside down: she became a conservationist.

By 2002, she had founded the **Global White Lion Protection Trust (WLT)**, a community-based conservation organization whose objective is the protection of the unique White Lions, and the preservation of the magnificent cultures of the indigenous Tsonga and Sepedi communities, which celebrate these legendary animals as a cultural and conservation legacy.

The WLT has an advisory council comprising traditional leaders from around the globe, and experts from financial, scientific, accounting, political and legal backgrounds. Linda's charity has secured large tracks of ancestral pride-lands as a protected area for the White Lions, and has successfully reintroduced 3 prides back into the wild in a carefully monitored scientific reintroduction program which is restoring their gene pool to the region of their origin.



Book Cover, Courtesy of North Atlantic Books

In The Heart of Africa
 This protected area is situated along the Klaserie River and consists of approximately 5000 acres. The Trust's CEO hopes to secure far more of the ancestral White Lion territory with donations from throughout the world. What is needed is protection in perpetuity of the entire Klaserie riparian corridor that gives life to the entire biome. At the same time, there is every reason to be hopeful that the White Lion Heartlands can gain both National Heritage and World Heritage status.

Linda's new book, **Saving the White Lions: One Woman's Battle for Africa's Most Sacred Animal**, conveys an astounding odyssey that restores faith in humanity's capacity to see, feel and put the pieces together to ensure a compassionate future for all biodiversity, including ourselves.

Michael Tobias (MT): Linda, as I understand it, these amazing big cats with huge personalities are *not* albinos, correct?

Linda Tucker (LT): Absolutely. They are a genetic rarity unique to one endemic area on earth: the Timbavati region of South Africa, in the heart of a wilderness area declared by the UN to be the third largest "Biosphere" on earth.



White Lion - King of Kings; A member of Linda's Pride © WLT

MT: Of course, the whole issue of *speciation* remains a hot scientific topic today.

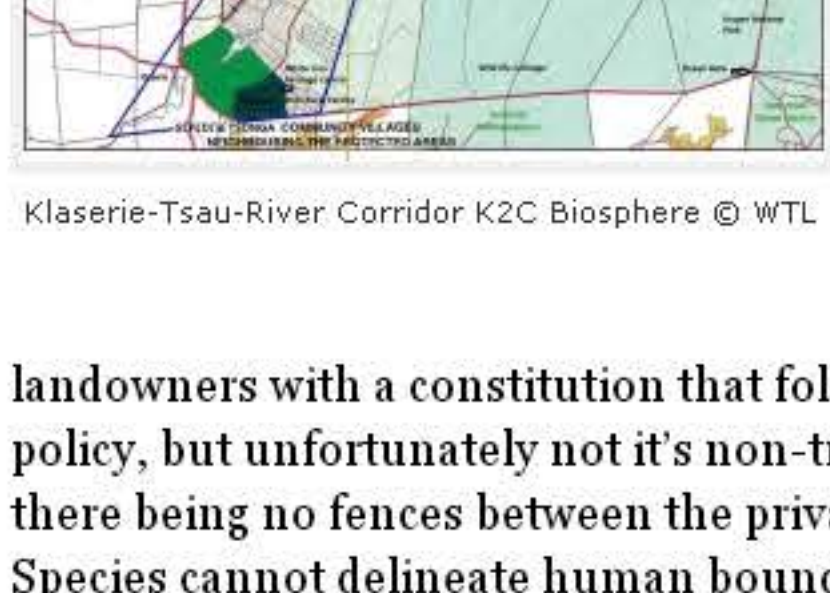
LT: Yes. Some might argue that these amazing White Lions have no so-called "conservation value" and can't survive in the wild, but recent scientific papers prove the opposite. Indeed, for nearly a decade, scientists from the Global White Lion Protection Trust (WLT) have led an international collaborative study involving 6 countries and research on Snow Leopards, Tigers and White Lions. Recently, these collective efforts resulted in a genetic breakthrough: the confirmation of a "genetic marker" for the White Lions.

MT: That's huge.

LT: Indeed, it is. This unique genetic code (carried by certain of the "Golden Lions" in this specific region) will – among other things – enable the WLT to head the campaign to have the White Lions declared a protected sub-species or critically endangered sub-population according to international legislation, listing by CITES and the IUCN Red Data Book.

MT: Bio-legislation can be sluggish. In the meantime, there is, as I have come to understand, a severe crisis afflicting the White Lion.

The Crisis



Klaserie-Tsau-River Corridor K2C Biosphere © WLT

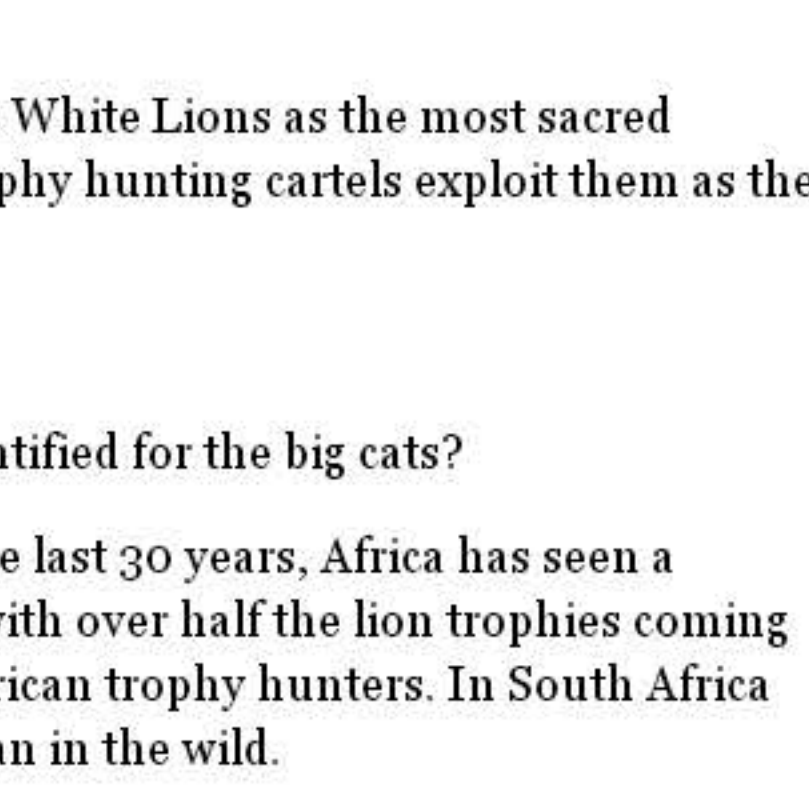
LT: Definitely. The White Lions were born naturally in one locale on earth, a wildlife area neighboring South Africa's Kruger National Park, called Timbavati – which means in the ancient Tsonga language: "The place where the Star Lions came down." It was declared a 'sacred site' by African kings hundreds of years before the Kruger was declared a national park. Today, this reserve is made up of as many as 69 private

landowners with a constitution that follows the national park's management policy, but unfortunately not it's non-trophy hunting prohibitions – despite there being no fences between the private land owners and the national park. Species cannot delineate human boundaries, as a rule, though elephants have shown amazing capacities, in this regard.

MT: But the "Big Five" continue to be killed?

LT: Yes. Commercial hunting of elephant, rhino, buffalo, leopard and lion ("national game") continues, because many migrate from the national park as there are no fences. And for the past 5 decades, white lions have been artificially removed from their natural system.

MT: By that you mean through hunting, obviously.



Matsieng, male cub, 2008 © Karen-Jane Dudley

LT: Yes. The current status is that the critically endangered White Lion is afforded no protection in legislation, and may be legally hunted in the wilds of its endemic homeland, as well as in captivity, where tamed lions are being shot in enclosures (a malpractice now known as "Canned Lion Hunting"). While the indigenous elders revere the White Lions as the most sacred animals in Africa, the international trophy hunting cartels exploit them as the highest income-earning trophy.

The Complexity Of The Crisis

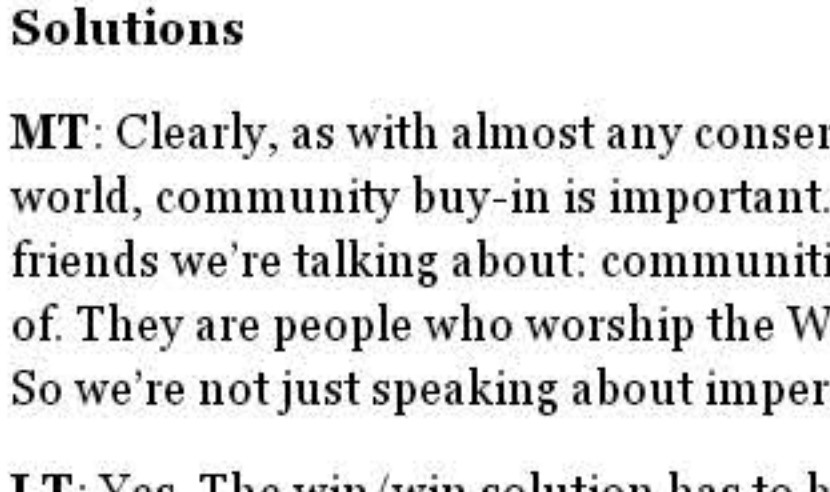
MT: What attrition rates have you identified for the big cats?

LT: According to a recent census, in the last 30 years, Africa has seen a decline in lion numbers of over 50%, with over half the lion trophies coming out of the continent attributed to American trophy hunters. In South Africa today, there are more lions in cages than in the wild.

MT: And in reality, we're talking about a very small number of people who are hunting these animals to potential extinction, correct?

LT: Yes. Which means, in terms of seeking a solution to this crisis, we have to remember that the short-term material gain of a few exploitative individuals does not justify the longer-term economic and ecological catastrophe of destroying a living heritage for future generations.

MT: Not to mention destruction both cruel and insane.



White Lion Local Celebration © WLT

LT: And let's also remember that in ecological terms this same Lion is the apex predator, key to the survival of the entire ecosystem. In economic terms: the Lion is equated by indigenous cultures with Gold, the "Lion of Metals." In cultural terms, the Lion is the King of

Animals, equated with leadership and good governance of the earth's resources. And in spiritual terms, the White Lion is believed by indigenous leaders to be "King of Kings"; a salutary reminder that God still exists in creation, and we humans are accountable for the sustainability and stewardship of our earth.

Solutions

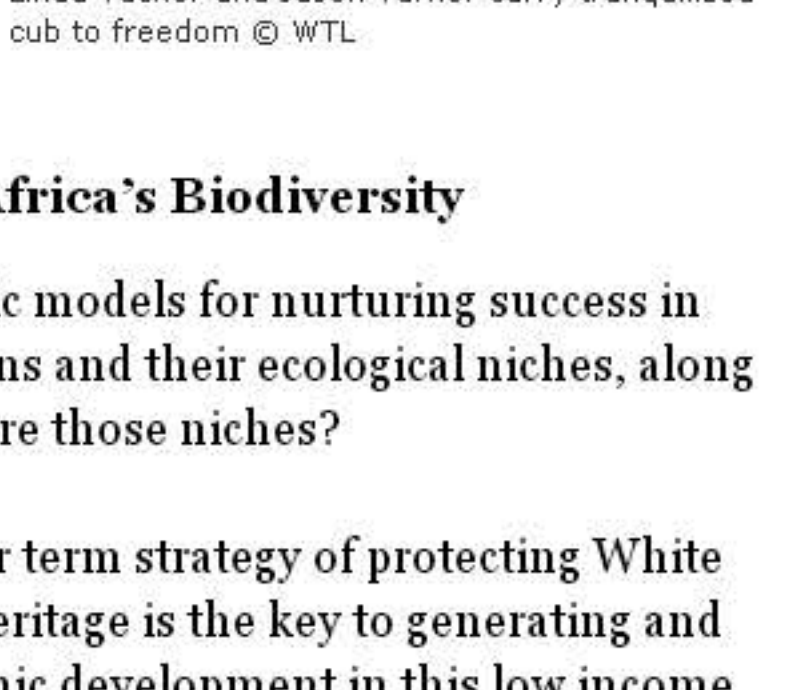
MT: Clearly, as with almost any conservationist challenge anywhere in the world, community buy-in is important. In your case, these are your dear friends we're talking about: communities you have come to love and be a part of. They are people who worship the White Lion, who identify with its being. So we're not just speaking about impersonal "constituencies".

LT: Yes. The win/win solution has to be community-based conservation – with a long-term strategy that is instilling grass-roots stewardship in communities neighboring sensitive wildlife areas.

MT: So, in promulgating the key mission statements that can serve to accelerate both the legislative protections for the White Lion and engender a love affair with Africa's biological poster-child, what are some key lessons to be gleaned here?

LT: Our aim is to ensure that governments and trading partners respect the White Lions' conservation importance and help us protect this apex predator as the "*capstone species*" in the epicenter of the Kruger-to-Canyons Biosphere, and the key to preserving this seminal eco-system, and its globally unique biodiversity.

MT: And culturally, in terms of the communities living with the lions?



Linda Tucker and Jason Turner carry tranquilized cub to freedom © WLT

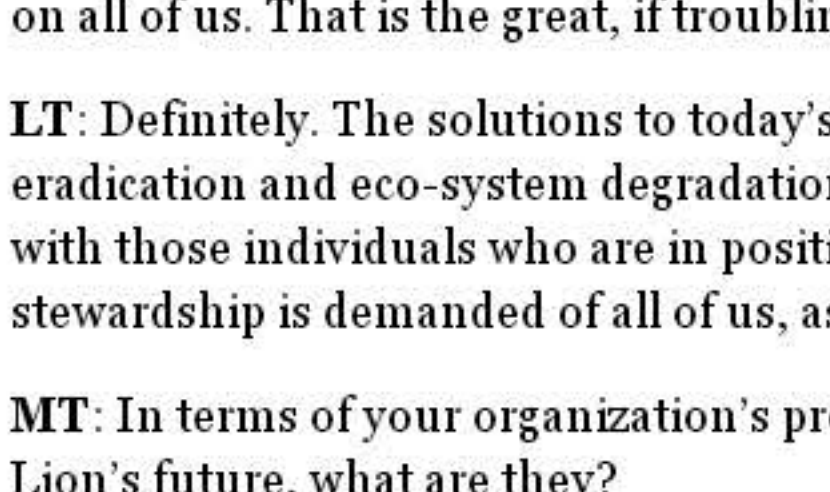
LT: Protecting the White Lions as an **iconic cultural symbol** is also the key to preserving and reviving the culture of neighboring indigenous communities – and thereby providing them with previously denied opportunities of cultural tourism, social upliftment, and poverty relief.

Wall Street's Role In Protecting Africa's Biodiversity

MT: What about the exacting economic models for nurturing success in protecting the White (and Golden) Lions and their ecological niches, along with the human communities who share those niches?

LT: Michael, the immediate and longer term strategy of protecting White Lions as a conservation *and* cultural heritage is the key to generating and supporting the emerging socio-economic development in this low income region, which will continue to celebrate this rare animal as a proud living heritage for future generations. Our "Eco-Cubs" educational programs instill pride and purpose in a critical poverty node region, where more than half the children are orphans in the schools with which we work, and our White Lion Leadership Academy has been established for school leaders, to provide a goal-driven model for sustainable living in wildlife areas.

MT: What can those on Wall Street, and across the banking capitals of Europe, Asia and Africa do to help, along with the major NGOs?



Linda with Maria Khosa with divination bones © WLT

LT: Look, NGO's such as the WLT are very clear regarding all of the key steps in our strategic action plans for transformation, both in the short and longer terms. But, it is also the shared, global responsibility of those with financial means and in positions of influence to help govern the earth and her natural resources as a legacy for future generations.

MT: The burden, in other words, is on all of us. That is the great, if troubling revelation of the 21st century.

LT: Definitely. The solutions to today's unprecedented crises of species eradication and eco-system degradation lies with all of us, but particularly with those individuals who are in positions of leadership. Inspired stewardship is demanded of all of us, as you say.

MT: In terms of your organization's programmatic steps to secure the White Lion's future, what are they?

LT: In the case of our community-based conservation program, two joint strategies need support in order to ensure the survival of the White Lion and its associated eco-system:

Firstly, acquisition of more ancestral pridelands, thereby extending the protected area along the arterial watercourse that supports the biodiversity of the entire biosphere.

Secondly, we are seeking funding for a Cultural Renaissance Program, based on an intimate partnership with the region's two tribal authorities, which includes the establishment of a White Lion Heritage Centre; the opening up of a cultural visitor route; a White Lion craft development program with skills transfer to highly talented but previously marginalized groups (particularly single mothers); a training center in sustainable living principles; and the building up of an already successful "Eco-Cubs" educational program and world-class theatre in the wild, which is attracting high-end eco- and cultural-tourism previously denied to these low income rural communities.



White Lion puppet © WLT

Therefore, in addressing the inevitable challenges and opportunities provided by a community-based natural heritage, the WLT identifies that wildlife conservation goes hand-in-hand with enriching community participation.

Support for the "Eco-cubs" educational program, and sponsorship of key individuals identified in partnership with the community as eco-leaders, so they can attend the White Lion Leadership Academy, will assist the socio-economic revival that is already emerging in celebration of the White Lions as a living heritage in this region.



Mandla © Karen-Jane Dudley

MT: Linda, I was amazed when you told me about a tribal shaman who indicated that the White Lion was something like a veritable icon of climate change: white. And, that your conversations with an Inuit Elder suggested that a black polar bear – also as a psychic or spiritual harbinger of climate change, had been identified in the biological landscape.

LT: Yes. There is so much science fails to recognize. But these peoples of the land know it. They feel it. They have lived it for tens-of-thousands of years.

MT: Thank you so much, Linda. This is amazing work that the Tsonga and Sepedi communities, you and your other colleagues and donors to WLT everywhere are accomplishing.

LT: Thank you, Michael.

A Mother's Love: Zirha with Matsieng © Karen-Jane Dudley

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