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CHRONICLE



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White lions and the protection of K2C

Extract taken from *Africa Conservation Telegraph*:
Newsletter of the Society for Conservation Biology

Article by Jason Turner, photos by Ziggi Hugo

In light of the proposed down-listing of the conservation status of lions in South Africa by the Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA) from “Vulnerable” to “Least Concern” on the list of Threatened or Protected Species (TOPS), the Global White Lion Protection Trust (WLT) has asserted that the survival of lions in the Kruger to Canyons (K2C) Biosphere is likely to come under threat.

As the proposed policy stands for the management of lions in South Africa, the down-listing will increase the hunting of wild lion trophies and the demand for lion bones from eastern markets, also increasing poaching and illegal hunting, thereby threatening the future of wild lion populations in South Africa. In the K2C Biosphere, the white lion is the ideal capstone animal to prevent this serious threat.

Along with scientific research, a primary aim of the WLT is to harness the cultural importance of white lions to local indigenous communities, in order to help protect the K2C Biosphere and greater lion population in this region. This approach is based on the international precedent of

the Kermode bear *Ursus americanus kermodei* in Canada, whereby this rare white variant of the black bear *Ursus americanus* has been declared as critically endangered due to its conservation and cultural value, such that the Kermode bear is a flagship animal for protecting a 4 million ha wilderness area. As with the Kermode bear, by protecting the white lions the entire lion population within the greater region would be protected.

What are white lions?

The white lion is a rare colour variant of the African lion *Panthera leo* that has a white coat colour with either yellow, blue or green eyes, and has only ever been recorded in the wild in the Kruger to Canyons (K2C) Biosphere, specifically the Timbavati, Klaserie and Umbabat Private Nature Reserves, and southern Kruger National Park (KNP). The white coat colour is not due to albinism, but rather leucism resulting from a double recessive allele or gene. The presence of white lions was documented for the first time by Europeans in the southern KNP in 1959, and in the TPNR in 1975, although African oral records long pre-date this.



From the 1970s onwards, prized for their rarity, white lions and many 'normal' coloured (tawny) lions carrying the white lion gene were removed from the wild, put into captive breeding and hunting programmes and sent to zoos and circuses around the globe. No adult white lion had been seen in their natural habitat since 1994. The Timbavati made two attempts to reintroduce white lions in 1989 and 1993, but these attempts failed in the absence of the successful lion reintroduction techniques that were only perfected in 1997. In 2001, using these successful reintroduction techniques, CEO and founder of the WLT, Linda Tucker initiated an ambitious and challenging project to return white lions to the wild, and asked for my assistance.

Reintroduction

Linda and I met while I was doing research for my MSc in the Klaserie, Timbavati and Umbabat Private Nature Reserves, focusing on the impact of lion predation on the prey populations in these reserves. She had spent 20 years researching and investigating the cultural history and beliefs, paleoanthropology, scientific perceptions, as well as the disastrous "canned hunting" of white lions, and published a book on the subject. In 2001, we formed the WLT, purchased 1,700 ha of land bordering on to Timbavati, Thornybush and Kapama, and subsequently initiated a world first re-establishment of white lions within their natural habitat in 2004.

The wild born offspring of rehabilitated white lions were integrated with resident wild tawny lions, and released to free-roaming conditions on the WLT's conservancy. We successfully established three lion groups of high genetic integrity that hunted self-sufficiently in their natural habitat at a predation rate comparable to the wild tawny lions in the same habitat. This finding was published in a peer reviewed scientific journal, and is consistent with observations of wild white lions in the Timbavati Private Nature Reserve. The genetic marker determining the white colouration was identified in October 2013 in a collaborative study between the WLT and geneticists from five other countries, and is being used to ensure genetic integrity and ultimately to determine the frequency of the occurrence of the gene in the wild population.

Subsequently, despite the continued artificial removals of white lions and gene-bearing tawny lions from their natural habitat, white cubs were born in the Timbavati, Klaserie and Umbabat Private Nature Reserves in 2006, 2008, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2015, and in the Nwanetsi Area of Kruger National Park in 2014 and 2015, confirming white lions' conservation value as a natural occurrence in the biodiversity of this region. ■

