

# White Lions: Reintroduction to Their Natural and Spiritual Homelands

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**Abstract**—The Global White Lion Protection Trust is committed to establishing the White Lions both as South Africa’s national treasure and as a global heritage. All conservation issues today are global issues. With many species, including many of the big cats, on the brink of extinction, urgent conservation measures need to be implemented to ensure their survival. The White Lions were born in one place only—the Timbavati region—but were artificially removed because of their beauty and rarity. After 13 years of extinction in the wild, the Trust has initiated a world-first reintroduction of the White Lions to their unique endemic range, based on scientific techniques of social bonding the White Lions with resident tawny lions, following successful lion reintroduction methods tried and tested in a number of reserves (Van Dyk 1997). It is our hope that this ground-breaking study will act as a precedent to assist related endeavors such as the challenges facing urgent ‘rewilding programs’ of other endangered cats.

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In 1991, I was rescued from a pride of angry lions by an indigenous wise-woman, known as Maria Khosa, Lion Queen of Timbavati. This powerful lion shaman was the most amazing woman I have ever met. She walked straight through the agitated pride of some 24 lions (at night, without so much as a flashlight), on foot, with a baby on her back, to come to the rescue of our pitiful group who were panicking in the middle of the predators in the African wilderness.

We had been stranded in an open-backed vehicle that had broken down after having ventured into the lions’ territory this moonless night. In those days, the Timbavati prides were not used to vehicles, and there had been several aggressive attacks by the pride males—a coalition of five massive black-maned lions—on trackers sitting in the front seat. Stuck without radio contact or mobile phone coverage, our group began to panic and were desperately calling for help in the vast darkness. We were sweating in fear, behaving like prey, which further incited the agitated pride. Despite the fact that lions are nocturnal predators and members of this pride were approaching the Land Rover in the shadowy night, growling and snarling at us from the nearby bushes, Maria showed no fear. The baby on her back was testimony to her faith that she would not be harmed. Would she have taken her infant grandchild into the jaws of death if she had any doubt that the child was protected? She had heard our desperate calls for help, and walked through the pitch-black

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bushveld to our rescue. Amazingly, the lions seemed to calm down at her arrival.

After this mind-altering experience—which, as you can imagine, put everything else in my life in instant perspective—I gave up my high-powered advertising job in London, and returned to my childhood haunt of Timbavati and to Maria Khosa, who became my teacher. It was this lion-hearted woman who taught me that the key to humankind’s relationship with wilderness is two-fold: LOVE and RESPECT. Through these two profoundly simple principles, all the balance of nature can be maintained, and humankind has nothing to fear from wilderness and our natural environment.

Maria taught me to appreciate that there is an ancient contract with nature, which humankind has broken—to our detriment. Every contract involves a *give* and *take*—yet we humans expect that nature is simply here *for the taking*. We have raped, pillaged, exploited and destroyed virtually all the world’s natural riches—and what have we given back? Where is our side of this contract?

Contrary to that old “if it pays, it stays” argument, I do not accept that nature has to justify its existence. Indigenous people believe that nature deserves our total love and respect—for nature is, after all, our Mother, providing nurturance without which we all would perish.

It was through Maria that I gained access to a great mystery that surrounds the White Lions. She introduced me to other African elders, who gradually entrusted me with ancient knowledge that had been held secret in the indigenous priesthood of Africa for many hundreds of years. Although it took me a long time to accept her words, Maria informed me one day that I myself carried the ancient title, “Keeper of the White Lions”—a mantle which carries grave responsibility, and which has dictated every step I have since taken in my life.

While the story of the White Lions may seem like a myth and legend, I have come to believe that it has urgent conservation value in our day, and in many respects may hold the key to the survival of our species and our critically endangered natural environment.

More elusive than the African leopard, more rare than the legendary snow leopard of the Himalayas and as white as the polar bear of Alaska, rumors of the existence of pure White Lions have existed in the African Oral Tradition for centuries. But there is only one place on earth where they have materialized—the Timbavati region, bordering South Africa’s Kruger National Park.

## First Records

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According to indigenous knowledge, the White Lions’ arrival in this particular location on the globe is no coincidence.

Native people across the globe believe that everything in nature happens for a reason. We live in a meaningful universe, and the White Lions' arrival at this precise location on the globe, in exact geographic alignment with the primary sacred sites along the Nile Meridian, is part of a Divine Plan.

The earliest White Lion sighting by a European witness was in 1938 by Joyce Little, whose family owned large tracts of land in Timbavati, and were friends of President Kruger. The first photographic records of the White Lions date to the 1970s when researcher, Chris McBride, recorded the existence of White Lions in more than one pride in the Timbavati region. However, African oral records indicate that the White Lions survived successfully in this region for over 400 years.

On the scientific front, it was discovered that the White Lions are not albinos (Cruikshank and Robinson 1997) but a genetic rarity of *Panthera leo*, which occurred naturally. They are one of the most rare and endangered animals in Africa. Unique to the greater Timbavati region where they were sighted for over 56 years, the White Lions were artificially removed from the wild into hunting/breeding camps in South Africa, and zoos and circuses around the globe. As a consequence of these forced removals from their endemic homelands, the White Lions have been extinct in the wild since 1993.

Whether one believes them to be sacred animals, or whether one simply views them as a rare genetic occurrence unique to the biodiversity of this region, the White Lions' extinction in the wild is lamentable, and a reflection on humankind's irresponsible mismanagement of our earth's natural resources.

## Scientific Reintroduction of the White Lions to Their Endemic Range

After studying the ancient knowledge of the White Lions with African elders from all cultures for over 10 years, I founded the Global White Lion Protection Trust in 2002, with the objective of returning these magnificent creatures to their rightful endemic birthplace. The mission of the Trust is not only to protect the lions themselves—which are at risk from appalling maltreatment in the trophy hunting and captive breeding industry—but also to protect the indigenous knowledge that holds them sacred.

Used to looking for spiritual signs in nature, the White Lions' arrival in wilderness areas is seen by African elders as the fulfillment of an ancient prophecy that identified these majestic creatures as angelic messengers from God. Their white color is explained in spiritual terms, meaning purity and enlightenment, beyond all racial connotations. White is sunlight, all the colors of the spectrum in one, beyond color, creed, race or gender, and therefore is the perfect icon for South Africa's rainbow nation and a unifying symbol across world culture.

Indeed, African elders believe that the White Lions are the most sacred animals on the African continent. As apex predator, the lion is viewed as the true guardian of the land, while the White Lion, in particular, is believed to be King of Kings, an angelic guardian presiding over the Timbavati wilderness, with a vitally important role in the

sensitive ecology of the region. The land of Timbavati itself was identified as a sacred site by African kings for many centuries, with its name "*Tsimba-vaati*" derived from the ancient Shangaan language and meaning "the place where star-lions came down from the heavens."

It is significant that the prophecies surrounding the White Lions correspond with beliefs of other ancient cultures on other continents. This podium at the 8<sup>th</sup> World Wilderness Congress, I share with the retired High Chief Francois Paulette of the Native Canadian Dene People, who will speak to you today of White Buffalo Prophecies. This Native American prophecy tells of the time when a white bison calf will stand on Mother Earth. It will have black eyes, hooves and nose (in other words, not an albino) and will bring the warning that humanity is at the crossroads. Humankind will be faced by chaos, disease and destruction unless we unite spiritually. Ten white bison have been born in America since 1994. Like the White Lions of Africa, the White Buffalo of America is an icon of love and light, uniting nations at a time when peace urgently needs to be restored on earth.

So, too, another advisor to the Global White Lion Protection Trust, Greenland Eskimo elder, Angaangaq Lyberth, speaks about the Black Polar Bear prophecies. Ancient Eskimo belief has it that the time when the Black Polar Bear walks the ice is a time of ecological crisis on earth, when humankind is urgently required to restore balance on earth.

As testified by the Alaskan Eskimo elders at this Congress, the Black Polar Bear prophecies in the North relate directly to significance of the White Lions in the South. Why should snow lions appear in the sunny continent of Africa?

Could it be that the White Lions are snow animals ahead of their times? Might they be precursors to a possible ice age, to glacial shifts or polar reversals—the consequence of climactic imbalances and global warming? In indigenous belief, Nature always provides signs before changes occur. Like the White Buffalo prophecies which tell of the arrival of these sacred animals at a time of ecological stress and fragility, the message that the White Lions bring is that humankind must unite spiritually, and reinstate love and respect for nature, in order to restore balance on earth. In this way, the White Lions are a symbol of majesty which spans continents and ages, with roots in ancient cultures but urgent meaning for modern ecological issues.

These magnificent creatures represent the pride and the spirit of the African people, and are a luminous icon of majesty, across cultures. They are a symbol of all that is good and magnificent in nature. In African culture, it is believed that harming a White Lion is an ultimate sacrilege, resulting in devastation on earth. Certainly, to me it seems, that if we can't respect and protect the KING of all beasts, what hope is there for the other kingdoms on earth?

Yet farming and trophy hunting of lions is big business in South Africa. Because of their rarity, the White Lions have suffered severe exploitation, removed from the wild into captivity where they are farmed in trophy hunting operations, like commodities, for gross material gain. The malpractice of so-called "canned lion hunting" (hand-rearing lions which learn to trust humans and are then shot in small enclosures for sport) has created an increasing international outcry and condemnation of South Africa's hunting policies.

My view is that "canned lion hunting" shows how modern humans have lost their values and, consequently, all respect

for nature. What legacy are we going to leave our children one day? The hunter might pay the lion-breeder the current going rate for the lion he kills, but we need to ask: what is the real cost—to our earth, our heritage, and our future?

## Endangered Animals

At the other extreme from indigenous people, many people today—and unfortunately that includes some conservationists—regard the White Lions as freaks of nature, without any conservation value. This latter view is generally based on ignorance, since many still assume, mistakenly, that the White Lions are albinos. Furthermore, at the present time, the sub-speciation issue is a contentious one, with one school of thought arguing against sub-speciation of lions, altogether. At present, as a consequence of not being classified as a sub-species, White Lions have not been listed for CITES protection (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora). This leaves a dangerous loophole for their continued exploitation by the captive hunting industry. Whether as members of *Panthera leo*, or as a newly defined variant *Panthera leo Timbavati*, it should be all-too-apparent that the White Lions have significant conservation value, along with any rare product of nature's biodiversity.

Some even assume the White Lions' genetics to be defective, which could not be further from the case. Eyewitness accounts of the White Lions in the wild in the 1970s and 1980s, record that they were the dominant members of their pride. They were generally larger than their tawny counterparts, and their lack of camouflage meant that they became expert hunters—often leading the tawny prides in a hunt or taking down prey on their own without the help of the pride. Far from being unable to survive in the wild, as many people mistakenly argue today, the White Lions are a product of nature which survived magnificently in the wild, until removed by man.

Assisted on the scientific front by lion ecologist Jason Turner, the Global White Lion Protection Trust has embarked

on a long-term scientifically monitored White Lion reintroduction program. After nearly four years of fighting for her freedom, we have rescued a White Lioness called Marah, believed to be a great icon in African culture (fig 1). Marah's three cubs have had no human contact, which ensures their best chances of returning to the wild. After more than a decade of White Lions held in captivity, Marah and her unimprinted cubs will be the first White Lions to return to their endemic range of the Timbavati region (fig. 2).

Having specialized in Timbavati pride dynamics for over six years, Jason Turner is heading up the scientific reintroduction protocol for the White Lions, which is based on social bonding techniques successfully used for lion reintroductions to reserves such as Pilansberg, Phinda, Madikwe, Welgevonden, Makalali and Hluhluwe. The objective is not to captive-breed White Lions. As the White Lions were artificially removed from the wild, this program aims to redress the balance in returning pedigreed specimens to their natural habitat, and restoring the natural genetic evolutionary process. In the wild, White Lions were born to the tawny colored lion prides, which were carrying the rare gene. For this reason, integration with the normal tawny lions from the region is important to promote genetic diversity and to strengthen the bloodline.

While closely consulting with scientific experts in the field, the Trust also takes its guidance from indigenous knowledge systems, which have always upheld the balance of nature. In the words of Selby Gumbi, Zulu elder and African cosmologist: "The White Lions are the First Born of all God's Creatures upon earth. To return them to their sacred homelands signals that order and justice will be restored in the kingdom of earth." Swazi elder and traditional healer, Baba Mataba, who has been writing praise songs to the White Lions in the Great African Tradition, explains: "By holding the White Lion captive, the spirit of Africa is held captive. If we can free the White Lion, the spirit of the people can be free."

Having brought the white rhino back from extinction, Dr Ian Player, Conservation Doyenne of the World Wilderness Congress and advisor to the Global White Lion Protection



**Figure 1**—Marah in captivity (photo by Jason Turner).



**Figure 2**—Marah and her cubs after being returned to their endemic habitat of the greater Timbavati region (photo courtesy of the Global White Lion Protection Trust).

Trust since its inception, has this to say: “The reintroduction of the White Lions back to their endemic natural habitat of Timbavati represents a landmark in conservation history.”

## References

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