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Protecting Locals and Lions in Zimbabwe: Meet the Long Shields Lion Guardians



Photo by Justin Seymour Smith courtesy Wilderness Wildlife Trust

Travel has the power to transform lives and open minds, and many of the staff at Indagare will say a safari forever altered our perspectives on conservation. That's one of the reasons Indagare Impact has partnered with the [Wilderness Wildlife Trust](#), the non-profit, conservation branch of Wilderness Safaris. The Trust's mission is to "make a difference to Africa, her wildlife and her people."

It works with projects that ensure local populations derive lasting economic benefit from protected areas. That can often mean mitigating negative impacts wildlife may have on people, so that communities continue to support conservation.

Indagare's Impact Fund has committed one percent of the company's annual revenue to assist one of these initiatives: the [Long Shields Lion Guardians](#), based in the region surrounding Hwange National Park in Zimbabwe. While lions and other wildlife enjoy free rein within the borders of the park, they face—and cause—major challenges when

they cross into unprotected land. Beyond the protected lands, lions often interact with local farmers and their livestock. The Long Shields Lion Guardians help protect lions and locals through innovative approaches with the goal to empower communities to live in harmony with wildlife.

To learn more about the program, we spoke with Professor Andrew J. Loveridge, the Deputy Director of the Wildlife Conservation Research Unit (WildCRU) at the University of Oxford. As Director of WildCRU's Trans-Kalahari Predator Program, he oversees the Long Shields Lion Guardians project. Below, Dr. Loveridge shares his realistic, yet optimistic thoughts on the future of lion conservation.



Photo by Dr. Andrew Loveridge, courtesy Wilderness Wildlife Trust

What exactly is the Guardian Training program? How has it impacted the protection of lions in Zimbabwe?

The program trains Guardians in livestock protection methods, data collection and monitoring methods (such as recording livestock predation incidents) and methods to track and deter lions (such as by using vuvuzelas—plastic trumpets to create noise disturbance to scare lions into returning to the national park).

What is the greatest risk lions face? And the greatest challenge the Guardians have?

The biggest threat lions, as a species, face is through loss of their natural habitat. Lions need vast areas of land with intact populations of wild prey to survive. This habitat is dwindling as human populations in Africa increase and more habitat is converted to farmland.

Around Hwange, lions face a number of threats, including coming into conflict with local subsistence farmers. When lions kill people's domestic livestock, people often retaliate by killing the lions. This is the problem we are trying to solve through the Long Shields Lion Guardians program.

The Guardians have a very tough job at the interface of conservation and the local community. They need to be great ambassadors and communicators to motivate people to alter their livestock protection behaviors, but also need to be practical hands-on people who can deter trespassing lions, find lost livestock and build and repair livestock corrals (or bomas as they are known locally).



Leo, one of the Long Shields Lion Guards, inside a protective corral, or boma. Photo by Jess Isden, courtesy Wilderness Wildlife Trust

Visitors may not realize that many Zimbabweans make their living from cattle and farming. What has been the most important factor in promoting human-lion cohabitation in Zimbabwe?

There are several critical things we need to do. Firstly, if we want to protect lions, we have to protect people's lives and livelihoods, mostly by better protecting domestic livestock. Educating people about the importance of the environment is also important, as is looking for ways that people can benefit from the presence from coexisting with wild species.

How did COVID-19 restrictions impact the program, and how is 2022 shaping up so far in that regard? Are things able to operate normally again?

Our Guardians in Zimbabwe were considered 'essential workers' by the local authorities because of their role in protecting people's livestock from lions. While taking the necessary precautions, they were allowed to continue working throughout the pandemic. 2022 is looking very positive, we've recruited some new Guardians and the team are reinvigorated and moving ahead with the program.

Lion population numbers have declined precipitously over the last 20 years, shrinking by around 43 percent to approximately 20,000 individuals.

Long Shields Lion Guardian Efforts By the Numbers, January 2020 - June 2021:

Area covered: 4,169 square miles
Resident lions: approximately 135
Lions killed by illegal snare traps: 14
Lions killed as retaliation for livestock attacks: 6
Farmers educated on lion safety: 866
Boma corrals secured to date: 37
Poachers arrested: 303

Can you share how this project is working to change attitudes in the community on the retaliatory killing of lions?

We have found over the last 10 years that people's attitudes towards lions have improved and the number of lions killed by people in retaliation for livestock killing has declined. This is because of the improved livestock husbandry the project has fostered and the actions of Guardians in deterring lions from community land.

How do you see technology playing a role in lowering the risk of communities living among lions, such as the Early Warning System Geo-Fence?

Fitting lions with GPS Satellite collars to provide an early warning system when lions leave protected areas is hugely helpful and allows Guardians to protect both lions and people. It is likely that similar technologies will continue to be used and developed.

Equally, we also try to use low-tech solutions that will work in the local context—for instance, we have modified traditional technologies (such as using mobile protective bomas, formerly made of woven reed panels, now made from PVC canvas screens).

What are some of the benefits and value in protecting lions, besides the obvious? (And how do you think conversations around “value” in protecting lions help or hurt the cause?)

Ultimately, if society does not value lions they will probably be eliminated from all but the largest and best protected national parks. Value can mean many things. African people do value lions for their cultural and spiritual significance, and it is important to foster this ‘existence’ value alongside economic value. Equally, ensuring local African people benefit from wildlife based economies is essential to facilitate livelihoods that will protect habitat and wild species, rather than convert wild habitat to agricultural farmland. Tourism (with lions being a key draw for tourism products) is an obvious way to do this, and ensuring local people get direct benefits from this is critical. There are also other ways to direct benefit streams to local communities, such as through environmental performance payment schemes (including carbon and biodiversity credits) and conservationists are increasingly working towards these goals.

How can tourism impact conversation efforts?

Tourism can be a massive driver of conservation. And by choosing tourism products that are making genuine contributions to biodiversity conservation, through benefit-sharing with local people or conservation action or management, travelers can make a genuine difference to areas they visit.



Tracking lion footprints outside of Hwange National Park. Courtesy Wilderness Wildlife Trust

What is your hope for the future in conserving lion populations?

Habitat loss is the biggest threat to lion populations. We have to protect the remaining protected-area populations... And in areas where people and lions coexist we must firstly ensure people's lives and livelihoods are protected (through conflict-mitigation programs) and that people receive benefits from tolerating wildlife. In areas where we can do those two things lions have a future, in places we are not able to, lions will likely go extinct. However, I'm optimistic we can halt the decline of lions through concerted action on those two fronts.

What's something you wish more people knew about lions and lion conservation?

Protecting lions is expensive and African conservation is generally under-resourced, so supporting conservation is a huge need. However, there are real success stories and many great conservation efforts happening across the lions' range and a great deal of hope for the species.

For information on how you can contribute to the Long Shields Lion Guardians initiative, speak to your Trip Designer at Indagare Travel.

- *Claire Gellich on April 20, 2022*

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