

A person stands in a vast, golden savanna landscape, holding a traditional horn instrument. In the background, a large, snow-capped mountain rises against a blue sky with scattered clouds. The scene is bathed in the warm light of a low sun, creating long shadows and a golden glow over the grass.

# GUARDIANS OF THE LIONS

Conflict between humans and lions is a hugely emotive and complex subject. Retaliation for loss of livestock, cultural expectations and a traditional approach to conservation that excluded communities all play a part in the unsustainable killing of the big cats. And nowhere is the problem more intense than in Kenya, where free-roaming lions are coming into increasing contact with a growing human population. But, with some creative thinking and genuine respect for everyone involved, Leela Hazzah and her team of Lion Guardians may have found a way to turn things around – for humans and for lions. **Anthony Ham** reports. ▶

TEXT BY ANTHONY HAM  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY PHILIP J. BRIGGS

**H**ere be lions, or so they say. It may seem like a fanciful idea, the presence of lions in the Maasai lands that surround Amboseli National Park in southern Kenya. For a start, the thorn scrub and sand underfoot are the tawny colour of marginal lands everywhere in Africa. The great herds of livestock stirring up the dust don't help, nor do the Maasai bomas, Maasai herders and Maasai women who are a constant presence.

But if Dr Leela Hazzah, Stephanie Dolrenry and their band of Maasai warriors or *morans* are to be believed, places like this could just hold the secret to saving Africa's lions.

'Look around Kenya,' says Hazzah, a young conservationist working on the communal Maasai ranches between the national parks of Amboseli, Chyulu Hills and Tsavo West. 'It's only in Maasailand that lions survive in any numbers.'

Historically, the pastoralist Maasai were considered to be natural conservationists, sharing the land in relative harmony with lions and other predators. Traditional Maasai respected the big cats as worthy adversaries: killing one was an important rite of passage for young warriors and the ritual killings had minimal impact upon overall lion numbers.

In the 1990s, however, conservationists began to notice a significant change: the Maasai had begun to kill lions in unprecedented (and unsustainable) numbers.

Between 1990 and 1993, local Maasai wiped out the lion population of Amboseli National Park. In the six years to 2004, 87 lions were speared to death in and around Nairobi National Park. And 130 lions were killed in the Amboseli-Tsavo ecosystem between 2001 and 2006, including 42 in 2006 alone.

This escalation of killings was not without historical cause. Throughout the 20th century, the Maasai had been corralled into ever-smaller parcels of land. Their dry-season waterholes were locked away in national parks to which their herders were denied access. And revenues from tourism were spirited away by governments and local councils.

The wildlife that the Maasai had lived alongside for centuries was now the preserve of a much-resented government, with little material benefit accruing to the local communities. At the same time, the Maasai lands were fragmenting into smallholdings, blocking important wildlife corridors as

**SOBERING FACT**  
Scientists estimate that there may be as few as 30,000 wild lions remaining in Africa. Wildlife biologist Laurence Frank believes that Kenya could lose its population within 10 years if nothing is done.

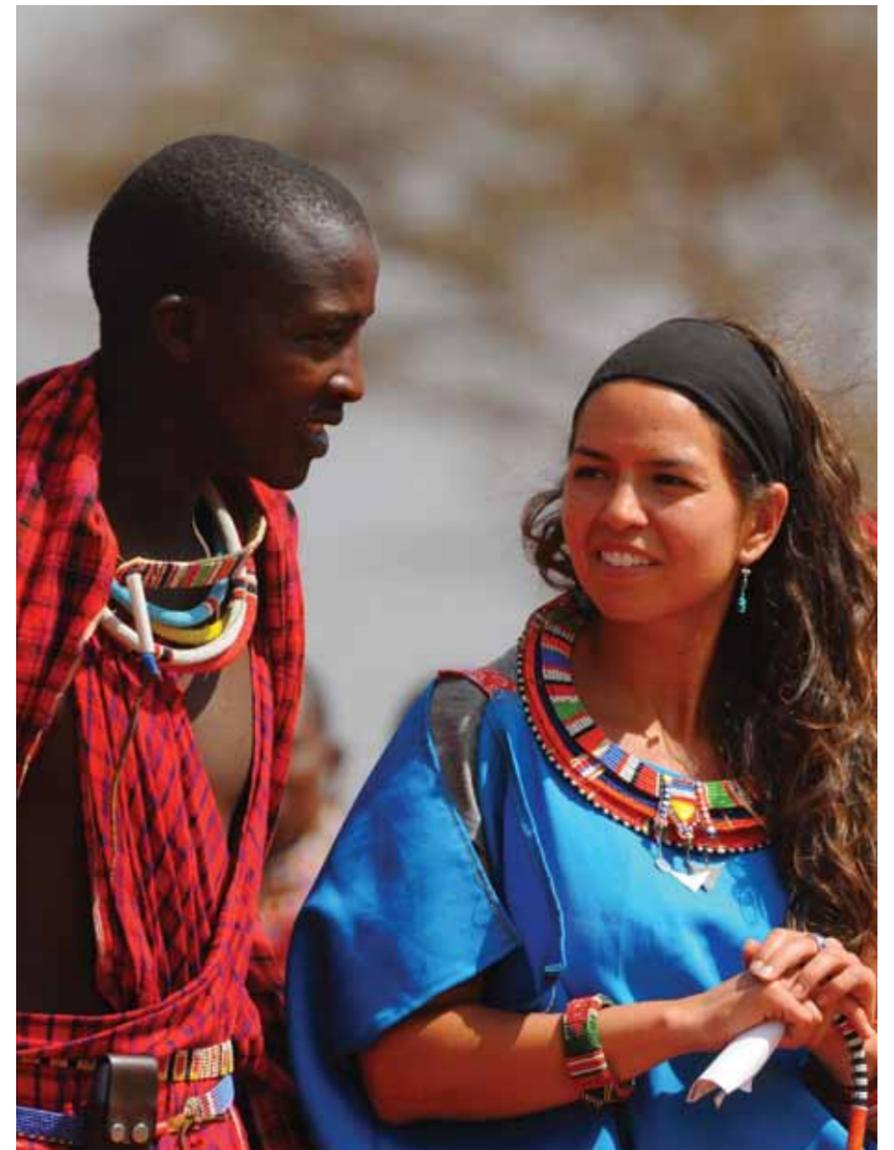
many young people abandoned their traditional ways. Perhaps what is surprising is not that they turned their anger on lions, but that they took so long to do so.

Faced with the prospect of the predators disappearing forever from Kenya, Hazzah spent a year living among the Maasai, immersing herself in their daily lives and learning more about their cultural traditions. When she emerged, it was with an idea as radical as it was simple: she decided to transform lion killers into lion guardians.

**T**he Lion Guardians' camp in the heart of the 748-square-kilometre Eselenkei Group Ranch feels like a cross between a remote military guard post and an out-of-season university summer camp, with spartan army-duty tents strewn with luggage, cardboard boxes and cables; a pit latrine a polite distance away; and a wood-and-canvas treehouse that Hazzah and her team call home for most of the year. In the shade of the treehouse, we drink tea from tin cups as she talks me through the Lion Guardians programme.

'In choosing our Lion Guardians, we give priority to past lion killers, because they have the respect of their communities,' Hazzah says. Our conversation is punctuated by the ringing of mobile phones as Guardians in the field call in news of lion whereabouts and potential points of conflict. 'Most of those we choose have no formal education – we teach them to read and write, and how to use the radio receivers. And we only select those who still live as traditional Maasai.'

Once selected, each Lion Guardian is responsible for tracking the movement of lions through roughly 100 square kilometres of Maasai land, warning herders of areas to avoid, but their most important role is to protect their communities. The Guardians help to rebuild and reinforce bomas where lion attacks have taken place. They track down lost livestock. And with herding increasingly the responsibility of young boys unskilled in the ways of bushcraft, the Guardians also bring home lost herders – 18 in 2011 alone – many of them children. But perhaps the trickiest of their tasks is to stand between the lions and angry young warriors eager to exact revenge for the loss of beloved Maasai cattle – in the past two years, Lion Guardians have helped to stop 77 lion-hunting parties. ▶



BELOW Lion Guardian Olubi Lairumbe locates a pride of 10 lions on a zebra kill.

OPPOSITE, ABOVE Selenkay, a lioness tracked and named by Ole Lairumbe, is sedated while her collar is fitted. As a past killer of three lions, Ole Lairumbe had only ever touched the big cats after they had died, and he makes the most of this rare opportunity to connect with his living lion.

OPPOSITE, BELOW Leela Hazzah stands next to Lion Guardian Melita Sonto at a community meeting.

PREVIOUS SPREAD Lenkina Ngida searches for collared lions on Lemomo Hill in front of Kilimanjaro.





The project's true genius lies in its appropriation of traditional Maasai values, putting them to work to conserve both lions and Maasai culture. The prestige traditionally afforded to warriors for killing lions has also been adapted: the morans gain respect by earning salaries, by getting an education, and by holding positions of responsibility. And then there's the importance of 'naming' in Maasai culture.

'Traditionally when a warrior kills his first lion,' Hazzah explains, 'he is given a lion name that he will have forever. Now they track a lion and it becomes theirs. They give a name to the lion, and sometimes it's that of a respected elder. Naming

has been far more important than we ever imagined. Now we actually see Maasai communities mourning lions, because each one now has a name and a story.'

**T**he importance of the Lion Guardian programme lies in the fact that most protected areas in Kenya are relatively small islands surrounded by vast seas of humanity – and three-quarters of the country's wildlife lives outside protected areas. In Amboseli the national park encloses just 10 per cent of the ecosystem, and around half its lions – more during the rainy season – live beyond the park's boundaries. If lions are to survive here and elsewhere, if the

genetic viability of populations is to be maintained, the cats must be free to roam far and wide. And that means sharing the land with people.

The first five Lion Guardians began work on the Mbirikani Group Ranch in January 2007. Thirty-two Guardians now patrol almost 4 000 square kilometres across four communal Maasai ranches. Since the programme began, just two lions have been killed in Lion Guardian areas, compared with 63 killings in adjacent regions during the same period. On Southern Olgulului ranch, an important wildlife corridor between Amboseli National Park and the Tanzanian border, 16 lions were killed in the first six months

of 2010. Since Lion Guardians began operating in the area in September 2010, not one has been killed.

'Lion Guardians is one of the most important answers to lion conservation that I've seen,' says Dr Luke Hunter, president of Panthera, the cat-conservation NGO whose funding has been critical to the programme's success. 'There's no doubt it has turned the tide for the Amboseli lions, and it has terrific potential to do the same for lions in large parts of savanna Africa.'

**S**uch accolades are impressive, but I'm eager to see for myself what this means on the ground. We leave camp in the project's 4x4 and make slow

progress through the hard-scrabble lands that dominate Eselenkei.

Around 14 kilometres from the camp, we stop, seemingly in the middle of nowhere, and four Lion Guardians deploy the high-tech/low-tech methods that are a hallmark of the project: Leparakuo Ole Shuaka and Lenkai Nkiinti climb onto the vehicle's roof with radio receivers, while Kamunu Saitoti and Mingati de Munke scour the dust for pawprints. It is difficult to say which is the more successful, but we soon find ourselves alongside the programme's star exhibit.

A pride of 11 lions – one adult male, two adult females and eight cubs ranging from four to 21 months

– cluster beneath an acacia tree. Ndelie, the male, growls in anger and retreats into the bush. But the rest of the pride, quickly reconciled to our presence (though watchful in the way of wild lions in human-dominated lands), settles down peacefully to rest in the shade.

In whispers, Philip Briggs, one of the team's biologists, explains the family history of the group, naming each lion with the familiarity of family members. From time to time, one of the females, Elikan, snarls in our direction. Her sister Selenkay watches us, impassive, while one of the younger cubs barely resists the urge to play. ▶



ABOVE More than 65 warriors pause during a hunt for two male lions that had killed cattle the previous evening. A team of Lion Guardians eventually persuades them not to seek revenge on the stock killers.

OPPOSITE A cub, fathered by dominant male Ndelie. The Guardians know the names and lineages of all the lions in their care, much as they would do for family members.

That so many lions have remained together for so long is almost unprecedented outside national parks, an encouraging sign that the lion populations of Amboseli may be on the way to recovery. 'It could just be that these two older cubs will make it,' whispers Briggs. 'But even if only one of the four younger ones survives, that would be a good result.'

With the first dark clouds of the season building to the east, we leave this picture of leonine domestic bliss, eager to reach camp before the rains make return impossible. On the way back, I talk with Ole Saitoti, one of the most respected of the Guardians. Prior to joining the programme, he was a renowned lion killer: five in total, the last in 2006.

Ole Saitoti has a warrior's gravitas and air of detachment, but he expresses something close to grief when talking about his favourite lioness, Nosieki, who was poisoned with her cub just beyond Lion Guardian territory a week before my arrival. 'I named Nosieki and I felt her loss deeply. I looked after her and protected her because she never killed livestock. Whenever she left my area, I waited for her to return. This time she never did.'

He pauses, and when he continues his voice is quieter than before. 'There is a very

deep connection between the Guardians and the lions we name. This connection can only be compared to the bond between best friends, or the feelings you have for your best cows.'

'And what do the younger morans say when you tell them to stop killing lions?'

'They say that it's easy for me to say these things because I had my time killing lions. And of course they still have this ambition to kill, to prove that they are a moran. But they will listen to me because I have killed. I was a traditional moran to the hilt. Now they see me on the other side, and how I will do anything to protect the lions.'

He pauses again, looking off into the distance. 'Killing lions is what I grew up with,' he says quietly. 'There used to be so many lions when I was younger. We almost wiped them out.'

**F**or all the success of the Lion Guardians, everyone involved with the project knows that it will mean little if the work saves only the lions of Amboseli. With that in mind, Hazzah has joined forces with Panthera to launch an ambitious programme of expansion.

RIGHT Sitonik Muli mourns the loss of Nosieki, a favoured lioness. Nosieki and her two cubs had stumbled across seven dead sheep that had been killed by hyaenas. They scavenged the carcasses, laced with poison by the angry livestock owners, and died moments later. Miraculously, one of the cubs escaped unharmed.

BELOW The 2011 complement of Lion Guardians. The programme has been lauded by a number of leading scientists and indications are that it is having a positive impact on the fortunes of the lions who live within the Amboseli ecosystem.



saying for decades – that conservation will only work if it comes from and benefits the communities. Well, that's what we're doing. Whatever you call it, whether it's Lion Guardians or something else, we simply have to find a way for carnivores to live alongside people. There is no other choice.' **AG**

To find out more about Leela Hazzah, the Lion Guardians and Living with Lions, please visit [www.livingwithlions.org](http://www.livingwithlions.org) or e-mail [info@livingwithlions.org](mailto:info@livingwithlions.org). To enquire about making a donation to the project, e-mail [donations@livingwithlions.org](mailto:donations@livingwithlions.org)

## LAIKIPIA - ANOTHER SUCCESSFUL MODEL

Lion Guardians is one model for dealing with lions outside protected areas. Laikipia is another. The general consensus among lion conservation experts is that Kenya is home to just three viable lion populations: Tsavo, Maasailand and Laikipia. And, according to Dr Laurence Frank, director of the Laikipia-based Living with Lions and one of Kenya's leading lion experts, 'At this point only the central Tsavo and Laikipia populations can be regarded as relatively safe.' Laikipia's appearance on the list is remarkable: a stable lion population estimated at around 230 is thriving despite there not being a single national park or reserve anywhere on the Laikipia Plateau. Frank explains, 'Sixty per cent of Laikipia is owned by large commercial ranches, nearly all of which are run by people who have a very strong interest in conservation. All recognised long ago that there is no money in livestock, and so they have turned to very small-scale, but upmarket tourism. Laikipia is a huge conservation success, probably the only one of its kind in East Africa, entirely due to the landowners' commitment and efforts.'

The potential is obvious. 'If communities like these can tolerate livestock losses to carnivores,' Stephanie Dolrenry, one of the project's founders, will later write to me, 'and if we can continue to nurture community engagement so they feel more and more that these lions are "their" lions and they will benefit from having them, then the cats have a future in Kenya.'

Lion Guardians will soon begin patrolling in northern Tanzania and Kenya's Masai Mara National Reserve. Conservationists from the Hwange Lion Project are planning to begin a similar programme in Zimbabwe. But the most significant expansion centres on the lands of the Barrabaig who surround Ruaha National Park in central Tanzania.

'Half of Africa's lion population is in Tanzania, and one of the most important populations is in Ruaha,' Hazzah says. 'The lands around the park – that will be the test for us. It's a new cultural context, a different government. During the first week of our recent visit to Ruaha with the Ruaha Carnivore Project, the Barrabaig killed seven lions.'

Soon Barrabaig representatives selected by Hazzah will visit the Lion Guardians' camp in southern Kenya, where they will spend time with Ole Saitoti and the other warriors. In learning their ways, Hazzah hopes, they will return home sufficiently inspired to invite the Lion Guardians team to Ruaha.

'We don't go anywhere until we're asked by the community,' she explains as we arrive back in camp. 'That's what people have been

