

Here: Dr Luke Hunter.  
Below: in the field  
with a tagged cougar



# Claws *for* thought

Dr Luke Hunter has dedicated his life to wild cat conservation and, despite the fear of terminal habitat loss and indiscriminate killing, he remains optimistic that lions, tigers, cheetahs and jaguars, among our many other feline species, will survive the present crisis threatening their numbers

WORDS BY ANTHONY HAM

**T**here are 38 species of wild cats currently roaming the earth. What would have been the 39th, the Smilodon or Californian sabre-tooth, breathed its last around 10,000 years ago, and never since then has a feline species become extinct. Dr Luke Hunter would very much like to keep it that way.

Dr Hunter, 45, is the president of Panthera, a New York-based NGO that was established as a breakaway from the Great Cats Program of the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS). Tasked with studying the world's cats and developing programmes to save them, Panthera's list of founding members reads like a roll-call of august cat biologists, among them Dr George Schaller and Dr Alan Rabinowitz.

Hunter's journey to the pinnacle of the cat conservation world started in 1992 when he was researching for his PhD on the subject of reintroducing lions and cheetahs into South Africa's Phinda Game Reserve.

When he began, apartheid was in its dying days, South Africa was on the cusp of a massive tourism boom and interest in the country's wildlife heritage was growing. His aim was no small task: to find a way to successfully bring lions back into areas from where they had disappeared.

Phinda now has a full complement of lions and is an exporter of lions for translocation to other areas. What began in Phinda has spread throughout South Africa where there are now 45 lion populations restored that weren't there in the early 1990s. ➤



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In South Africa, Panthera has developed faux-leopard-skin capes to replace the real ones worn by the male members of the Zulu Shembe Church



Interview  
DR LUKE HUNTER



Clockwise from left: creative ways are being found to preserve leopards in Africa; the lives of tiger cubs are uncertain; detailed records of remaining populations are vital; Tiger Programme Director, Dr Joe Smith, with colleagues in Indonesia



More than two decades have passed since, but he still carries with him the excitement of those early days in Phinda. It was there that he first saw lions in the wild and it remains one of his most cherished memories.

“We came around the corner and there they were, two adult lionesses stretched out in the evening sun,” he recalls. “They weren’t doing anything special, but they had been translocated into the reserve and they were the first lions to be seen in this area in a very long time.”

Hunter remains at his happiest when talking about cats or, better still, watching them in the wild: “I’m at my best when I’m out in the wilderness on field trips. To be in the presence of cats – I never tire of it. Just when you think you know everything, a cat will do something you’ve never seen before.”

Hunter’s experience at Phinda, one of South Africa’s most popular reserves, taught him the close connection between tourism and conservation. He also learned the dangers when that connection is mishandled.

In recent years, for example, Hunter has taken aim at the ‘lion encounter’ phenomenon, whereby travellers pay a

premium to spend time in the presence of lions, sometimes even walking alongside them. Often they do so on a promise that these captive-born lions will one day be released into the wild as part of some ill-defined conservation initiative.

“Apart from the dangers inherent in walking alongside a fully grown lion, it’s simply not true that these programmes help save lions,” he says. “Captive-origin lions have no role in restoring the species to its historic range.

“My advice is to spend your money where it really helps conservation. Most travellers who spend money in this way really do want to make a difference. But there’s a big difference between a theme park and conservation.”

He also knows that, as was the case in Phinda, when conservation succeeds the benefits are immense, both for the planet and for those who would explore it.

“Cats are most ecosystems’ top predators. Protect these cats and you end up protecting entire ecosystems. You can see the effect that it has when you restore predators. Just look at Yellowstone after the wolves went back in. We’ve seen a cascade of natural ecological restoration as a result. Carnivores

are umbrellas for a whole lot of other species. Some of the places where cats prosper – watersheds, forests – are some of the earth’s most important wilderness areas. By protecting cats, we are also protecting some of the world’s most important ecosystems.”

Having spent most of his adult life studying the world’s cats at close quarters, Hunter is also keen to emphasise tourism’s positive role in conservation, especially if travellers take a few tips into account.

“Go to the national parks,” he advises. “These parks and other protected areas are sustained by tourism, and if people use them, governments and the private sector will understand their worth. Once there, you have to be patient. Sit and wait. You never know what’s about to happen. Too many people try to see too much. Get to know a few places really well and you’ll be rewarded.”

Hunter recognises that numbers are an important part of the debate in saving endangered species and a critical element of Panthera’s work involves conducting accurate surveys of endangered cat populations.

Panthera scientists, for example, led the discovery that the West African lion was in far worse state than had been feared – just four small populations where previously 21 had been thought to survive.

Panthera also undertook a lion census in Kenya’s Tsavo National Park in 2013. What they discover will shape conservation initiatives for years to come, not least because the lions of Tsavo are thought to represent one-third of Kenya’s entire lion population.

And yet, he is also critical of those who become obsessed with numbers: “It’s the wrong question to ask ‘How many?’,” he says. “It is far better to ask about the trajectory, about the state of the ecosystems. Take lions for example. There are perhaps at most an estimated 32,000 lions left in Africa. But many of these live in small and isolated populations that simply aren’t viable. Instead, we need to ask how much habitat has been lost and how much these cats can afford to lose. By these measurements, very few cat species are on a positive trajectory. In the case of the lion, they inhabit less than 20 per cent of their historical range. For tigers it’s even



## Best places to see...

The pick of places to see the world's big cats, in terms of visibility and their conservation

### LIONS

1. Etosha National Park, Namibia
2. Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, Botswana and South Africa
3. Parc National du W, Benin
4. Hwange National Park, Zimbabwe
5. Niassa National Park, Mozambique
6. Ruaha National Park, Tanzania
7. Gir Forest National Park and Wildlife Sanctuary, India



### LEOPARDS

1. The private conservancies west of Kruger National Park, South Africa
2. Luangwa North and South national parks, Zambia
3. Etosha National Park in the dry season (Namibia)
4. The Western Ghats, including Bandipur National Park, India
5. Ruhunu National Park, Sri Lanka

### JAGUARS

1. The Cuiaba River Basin in the Pantanal, Brazil
2. The Rewa River and Rupununi savannas, Guyana
3. Tortuguero National Park, Costa Rica (where jaguars patrol the beaches looking for nesting turtles)
4. Cockscomb Wildlife Sanctuary and Jaguar Preserve, Belize

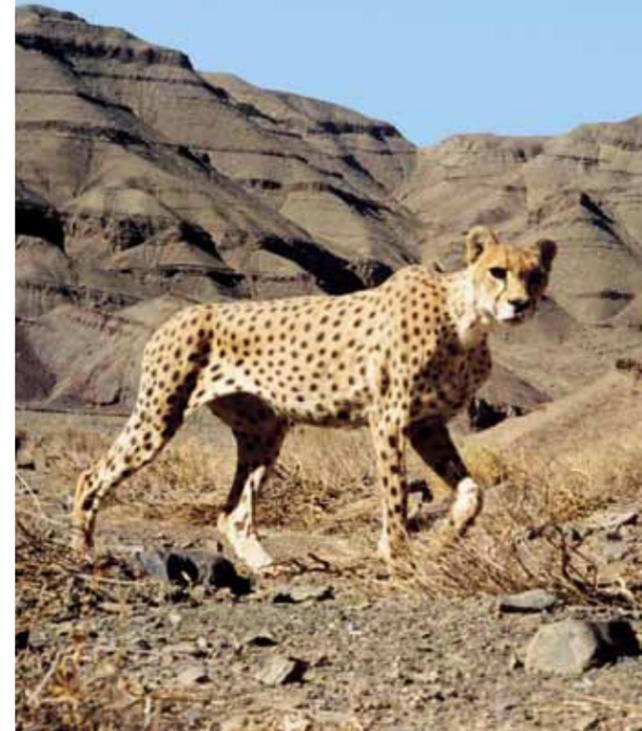
### CHEETAHS

1. Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park in the dry season, South Africa and Botswana
2. Liuwa Plains National Park, Zambia
3. Phinda Game Reserve, South Africa
4. Linyanti & Savuti, Okavango Delta, Botswana
5. Masai Mara & Serengeti, Kenya and Tanzania
6. Parc National du W, Benin

### TIGERS

1. Ranthambore, Corbett and Kanha National Parks, India
2. Kaziranga National Park, Assam, India
3. Chitwan National Park, Nepal

An Asiatic cheetah in the hills of Iran



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traditional warriors to protect both their communities and local lion populations are so important," Hunter explains. "They began in Kenya but now they're spreading across Africa, allowing lions and people to coexist."

Leopards required a different approach. In South Africa, for example, Panthera has developed faux-leopard-skin capes to replace the real ones worn by the male members of the five-million-strong Zulu Shembe Church; the demand for skins for ceremonies was driving South Africa's leopard population towards extinction.

And while long-term prevention is the aim, much of Panthera's work ends up being what Hunter calls 'triage'. The Asiatic cheetah population in Iran, for example is down to less than 100 and, even worse than that, only 30 to 50 of these are adults. And so it is for tigers.

"Tiger conservation now is all about enforcement," says Hunter. "It's about keeping the species' head above water. We have to build tiger strongholds and fortresses until human economies shift, the pressure on tigers relaxes and dispersal becomes possible."

If saving the world's big cats seems like a massive task, Hunter gives no impression of being daunted.

"A lot of this is not rocket science. We know many of the answers. One of the reassuring things about what we do is that if you give them space and food, cats will do the rest. Cats quickly disappear from ecosystems under certain conditions, but they recover quickly, too. We can win this."

Above: a snow leopard in Ladakh, India. Right: Mustapha Nsubuga, Joel Ziwa, and Luke Hunter fit a radio collar on a lioness called Masika in the Kigezi Wildlife Reserve, Uganda



worse – they survive in seven per cent of their historical range, and the breeding population lives in just one per cent of that."

Although optimistic about the future, Hunter is nevertheless a pragmatist: "Pristine forests and other habitats are simply unrealistic in many places, much as we'd like it to be otherwise. We need to know more about these cats to know what level of modification is acceptable. Once we know that, we can work with governments within the habitats that remain. We can't afford to assume that human activities are always incompatible with conservation.

"For example, one of Panthera's biggest priorities is building jaguar corridors that connect jaguar habitats and populations in Central and South America. In doing so, we've been hugely successful in getting the relevant statutory authorities to sign off on protections they wouldn't otherwise consider. There's a dam in Costa Rica that we would prefer wasn't going to be there, but the government is going to build it whatever we say. Instead, we've been talking with the government and we

believe that we've managed to reduce the dam's impact."

Panthera is well placed to respond to these and the other challenges faced by each species and it was this imperative that drove Hunter and his fellow cat conservationists to leave the fold of the Wildlife Conservation Society back in 2006.

"Panthera was Tom Kaplan's idea," Hunter says of Panthera's billionaire benefactor. "We wanted to be lean enough to have the flexibility to be able to do whatever needed to be done. Thanks to Tom's generosity, and now that of other Panthera board members, every cent that we receive from donors goes directly to the field, to the work of saving the world's cats."

For the cats about which scientists know relatively little, such as the snow leopard, that means devoting more resources to research. When it comes to lions, about which so much is already known, Panthera focuses on programmes that put that research to practical use.

"That's why the programmes we have developed of using



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