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# Pride of Africa: New Lion Conservation Alliance

In [Wildlife](#)

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LIONESS RESTING ON A SAND BAR, NIASA NATIONAL RESERVE, MOZAMBIQUE (PHOTOGRAPH BY DR. COLLEEN BEGG)

It is a little known fact that there are more rhinos remaining in Africa than there are lions. In fact, until the killing of the lion 'Cecil' by a U.S. hunter in Zimbabwe earlier this year, it was also not popularly known that African lion numbers are in free-fall.

The statistics are disturbing. In 1975, estimates given by the IUCN put African wild lion numbers at approximately 200,000. Forty years on, there are thought to be fewer than 20,000 left. Lions have disappeared from more than 80% of their historical range.

And yet, there is still hope for *Panthera leo*. Across Africa, dedicated conservationists are working to ensure that this iconic species does not become extinct. And last month, a visionary new lion conservation alliance, PRIDE, was officially launched at Houston Zoo.

As the moniker suggests, the founders of PRIDE (<http://lions.houstonzoo.org/>) are all women. They are all determined conservation biologists who run individual projects in Kenya, Tanzania and Mozambique and all of whom have had extraordinary successes in lion conservation: Dr. Alayne Cotterill and Shivani Bhalla of Ewaso Lions; Dr. Leela Hazzah and Dr. Stephanie Dolrenry of Lion Guardians; Dr. Colleen Begg of Niassa Carnivore Project (NCP) and Dr. Amy Dickman of Ruaha Carnivore Project (RCP).

The genesis of the alliance lay in a series of conversations between the six women, which unveiled their shared ethos – that of truly collaborative conservation. “We were all working towards similar goals and realised that there must be a way of working that would make our efforts more effective,” says Dr. Alayne Cotterill, a British biologist who has lived and worked in Africa for 19 years. A lack of collaboration between conservation organisations had long given rise to unnecessary and time-consuming problems. Not only did the founders find that they were competing for the same funding, “which made us work less well together”, but there was also a dearth of mechanisms for sharing vital data. “We realised that we – and conservation as a whole – didn’t have time for such repetitive inefficiency,” says Dr. Cotterill. And so, PRIDE was born.

A young male lion rests in the burnt woodland in Niassa Reserve (Photograph by Sue McConnell)

The philosophical aim of PRIDE is the elimination of any competition between the founders, for the sake of the common goal – the conservation of wild African lions. “Our vision is a world where conservation professionals work much more closely together and support each other, to better achieve their conservation

goals,” says Dr. Amy Dickman, another British animal conservationist who holds the Kaplan Senior Research Fellowship in Wild Cat Conservation at Oxford University. Theirs is an ideologically sound concept whose message is clear: now is not the time for egos or professional territoriality. If lions are to survive in the wild, genuine cooperation and the down-tooling of personal agendas is paramount. “Everything we do in each individual project will have a greater impact on saving lions because it will be shared among us,” says Dr. Dickman. With a study published in early November in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America (PNAS) suggesting that half of lion populations will be lost in key regions of Africa within two decades – if sustained conservation efforts are not made – it seems the nascence of PRIDE is timely.

“Given the perilous state of Africa’s rapidly declining lion population, it is imperative that conservationists collaborate as much as possible. It is therefore really encouraging that many of the leading conservationists working to protect lions have come together to form the Pride alliance to share and swap ideas and pool their considerable knowledge,” says Charlie Mayhew, Founder and Chief Executive of Tusk Trust.

On a practical level, the six founders have agreed to share “anything and everything” that they feel is of use: organisational talents, leadership abilities, raw data, sensitive material, educational packages, an understanding of key conservation tools – not to mention the vast banks of knowledge they have each accrued and, of course the experiential benefits of having spent 100 combined years deep in the African bush. Fundamental to this collaborative pledge is the founders’ implicit trust in one another. This bedrock of emotional security means they feel able to disclose any professional failures without the fear of criticism, so learning from each other’s mistakes as well as successes. “The emotional side will be much harder to quantify

than the practical, but it is just as important,” says Dr. Stephanie Dolrenry, a field scientist who has been working and living at remote sites for more than 15 years. Their vision is teamwork par excellence – accepting human differences and frailties while capitalising on assets, all in the name of the ultimate goal.

Today, the major threats to lions across Africa are conflict with people and the loss of habitat and prey. On a more specific level, threats vary between the Founders’ project sites. In Mozambique’s Niassa National Reserve, where South Africans Dr. Colleen Begg and her husband Keith have been working to save lions and other big cats for more than a decade, the greatest threat to lions comes from snares that are set to poach bushmeat. In the process of ensnaring game, poachers kill not only lion prey but, inadvertently, lions as well. “This problem could eventually lead to an empty woodland,” says Dr. Begg. Her work in Niassa has tackled poaching with the use of the high-tech tool, SMART (Spatial Monitoring and Reporting Tool) and also by providing locals with alternative sources of protein, such as rabbits and ducks.

In both Kenya and Tanzania the leading cause of lion deaths is conflict with people over livestock depredation. Over the past 40 years, human population growth in rural Africa has increased exponentially. The conversion of great tracts of land to agriculture or human settlement has led to an unsustainable loss of lion habitat and the poaching of traditional lion prey such as gazelle or zebra. Hungry lions then turn to easy targets – livestock – the loss of which has adverse economic effects on locals. In retaliation, livestock owners shoot, spear or poison the lions that have depleted their livelihood.

The threats to lions are not insubstantial. Yet through their individual organisations, PRIDE’s founders have had positive impacts on lion communities’ tolerance towards lions in their respective areas. Lion Guardians has observed a staggering tripling of the lion population across a massive area (4,000 square kms) of the

Amboseli-Tsavu ecosystem, and over \$3,500,000 of potential livestock loss was avoided in 2014; retaliatory killings in certain villages in Ruaha, one of the most important areas in the world for large carnivores, have dropped by at least 80% since the inception of the RCP's conflict mitigation project six years ago; northern Kenya is one of the country's only other regions where lion populations have increased outside fenced areas over the past five years, thanks to Ewaso Lions' community programmes. And since 2012, no lions have been snared in one area in Niassa, after the NCP's livestock breeding and anti-poaching programmes were introduced – whereas 5-6 lions were being snared every year previously.

It is clear that the founders have accrued extraordinary individual successes in their fields. They also share deeply held convictions. One is that the future of the wild African lion lies in the ability of humans and lions to coexist, and that the key to peaceful co-existence is to change the attitudes of those local people who not only live with lions, but whose livelihoods are threatened by the big cats. "Lion conservation is as much about working with people as it is with lions," says Dr. Leela Hazzah, the first female Egyptian carnivore conservationist, who has been studying the motivations behind lion killings for the past decade. "We need to design innovative and culturally-appropriate interventions, which are aimed at changing human behaviour".

Each of the founders has invested hugely in engaging their local communities in conservation, running programmes with elders, children, women and warriors. These programmes fit as closely as possible with the rôles people have historically held within their communities – hence 'culturally-appropriate'. So as warriors in Kenya and Tanzania would traditionally guard their community livestock from large carnivores and theft, it makes sense that their traditional role is adapted, "instead of killing the lions that threaten the livestock, they



learn where they are and warn herders to keep their livestock away,” says Dr. Hazzah. Warriors also spend time visiting manyattas [homes] and talking to villagers about how better to guard their livestock. Women have typically always been responsible for looking after livestock at home, when men drive herds further afield. So schemes have been devised that encourage women to strengthen their bomas [animal enclosures] with heavy-duty chain-link fencing and learn how to keep carnivores at bay. “It is much easier to slightly tweak cultural values and practices to be more conservation-friendly than it is to completely change them,” says Dr. Hazzah.

Combined, the founders’ programmes have engaged over 30,000 local people in conservation, and have helped to conserve around a quarter of all the lions left in the world. “Involving all demographics is key in the conservation process,” says Shivani Bhalla, a 4th generation Kenyan who grew up watching Kenya’s wildlife. “I believe that conservation should become a way of life and I am excited to see that happening in Samburu.”





A LOCAL BOY FROM NIASSA NATIONAL RESERVE ACTS THE PART OF A LION WITH A COLLAR IN A SCHOOL PLAY (PHOTOGRAPH BY DR. COLLEEN BEGG)

That livestock are kept alive is vital. But it is also essential that local communities are made aware of the direct benefits of living with lions. PRIDE founders have thus equipped schools and healthcare clinics; established community funds; sponsored local football teams; provided pastoralists with veterinary care for their livestock; initiated workshops for local women on conservation and safe herding practices and funded local children through secondary boarding school. “I strongly believe that lion conservation is not only about providing benefits to communities to conserve lions, but also inspiring them to conserve,” says Shivani Bhalla. “Often the communities we work with have had no voice in conservation, and we give them that opportunity.”

Although much of the PRIDE members’ work focuses on human-dominated land, which represents over half of the remaining lion range, the Founders are also convinced that all but the most famous and visited parks and reserves in Africa – such as the Selous National Park or the Serengeti National Park – must also be secured. “Most protected areas in Africa are not receiving anywhere near the funding they need to be effective,” says Dr. Begg. “We need to get realistic about lion conservation and recognise that it is going to cost a lot of money.” PRIDE’s founders have recently been fund-raising in the U.S; a gala event held at Houston Zoo on the night of the launch raised \$872,000 for PRIDE and for lion conservation worldwide.

PRIDE’s ultimate goal, in their own words, is ‘to secure lion populations into the future through effective collaboration’. Their formidable union brings together a unique collaboration of skills and experiences. And it also pools something less tangible but no less powerful – their respective passions. Each of the women is driven by a strong affinity for lions and an intense love of the African wild. “I am stubborn and passionate

about large wilderness areas,” says Dr. Begg. “I personally refuse to contemplate a future for our children without lions, elephants and rhinos.” Dr. Cotterill agrees. “I instinctively feel sure that if the roar of a wild lion can no longer be heard anywhere on this planet, it will be a profound loss to us all.”



## MEET THE AUTHOR

Joanna Eede was an editorial consultant to Survival International with a particular interest in the relationship between man and nature and tribal peoples. She has created and edited three environmental books, including *Portrait of England* (Think Publishing, 2006) and *We are One: A Celebration of Tribal Peoples* (Quadrille, 2009). Joanna writes for newspapers and magazines on subjects

such as the repatriation of wild Przewalski horses to Mongolia, the whales of the Alboran sea, the chimpanzees of the Mahale rainforest, uncontacted tribes of the Amazon rainforest and the Hadza hunter gatherer people of Tanzania. Future ideas include a book about Tibet's nomads.

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I am shocked they are so threatened. I Blame this on Rich people, especially STUPID Americans, trophy hunting. I blame it in the African Government that ALLOWS THIS., they are CORRUPT !

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**Barbara Meire** · 2 years ago



**Barbara Michels** · 2 years ago

I agree wholeheartedly that it would be a tragedy if lions were to go extinct. I praise these women and the conservation groups that are dedicated to saving the African lions.

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**Michael Mbithi** · 2 years ago

Ladies congratulations. I am very happy to here about your Pride and to know the hope it represents for lions and for all our joint passion and work in conserving lions.

I feel lions and we working with them and communities in these areas will benefit from your joint efforts.

All the best.

Michael Mbithi

Founder & Director - Lion Elephant Deterrent Systems (LEDs)

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