

## Cry for the Lions

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By Gareth Paterson

### Prologue

The total population of the lion in Africa is debatable, but some authorities estimate it at perhaps two hundred thousand. A few decades ago this figure was probably double, and by the beginning of the next century perhaps only a few thousand will grace the rapidly changing African continent, and those few thousand will exist only in the national parks and hopefully in game reserves such as Mashatu.

The lions' range is shrinking. The situation facing the lions of the Mashatu Game Reserve is neither a new nor a unique one, but one that is accelerating in its pace throughout Africa today. Human populations are constantly increasing in the last of the wild areas, poverty grows greater and the greed of man flourishes like a parasite on its host. The lions of Asia are virtually no more. The lions which used to symbolize the nobility of some of the greatest of the early empires, the Persian, the Assyrian and the Babylonian, now exist only in a pocket of land in northern India. Today, before our eyes, we have a shocking example of how, within a relatively short time, a population of lions can decline because of the shortage of space. Within the Gir Forest, the remainder of the once widespread Asiatic lions reside, demonstrating what could happen to the lion in their last stronghold, Africa. The Asiatic lion is today represented by about two hundred animals and, within the livestock-devastated forests the lions survive only by killing man's beasts and by organized feeding sessions. As Edward Ricciuti expresses it so well, "Imprisoned in a wasteland, the lion that fought Samson and was hunted by the fierce Assyrian kings is now totally dependent on Man." Today there are probably very few species of animal whose overall range has shrunk over recent times to the degree to that of the lion.

The story of Darcy's pride, and the other prides within the Mashatu Game Reserve, their trials and tribulations, brings home the pressures and stresses that exist in the population of lions even within a protected area. Man badly needs contact with the wilderness, as much as he needs fresh air to breathe. The wilderness is sympathetic to man's spiritual needs and when channeled correctly, can offer much in guidance, changing his outlook on life. Today Nature Conservation is a new and developing science, but a child, even though he is eager to learn, may have been conceived too late. Today the crazy and destructive developments, affecting our seas, the air and the

wild places, were started by man and in the future can only be slowed down by man. In reality we must remember that, as Aldo Leopold stated, "Men are only fellow voyagers with other creatures in the odyssey of evolution," but also man is the damaging, dominant species which has gained control.

I, as a young member of our kind, want to make a plea, a plea for the much needed recognition of the wilderness, a plea to create some awareness and understanding for the future. Today animals exist largely because of sentimental and emotional reasons, or is it in reality because of the mammoth conscience we have, and which we shall carry forever? In many cases, the wild places and their inhabitants exist only because they are economically viable.

The Mashatu Game Reserve is partly an example of this, and example of how today animals have to pay their way. The importance of the lions, because of their major attraction to tourists, plays a large role. Through letting the animals pay for their existence, however, the area is made stable and the protection thereof is made possible. Conservation is now a fashionable word and awareness of the importance of the wilderness is increasing. The wilderness does not recognize the competitive status amongst people but, if anything, belittles one. It awakens the primate within us, awakening what we would normally choose to ignore, but once this awakening is accepted, it can add to our very being. Man began in the wilderness and today is returning to it, through choice, because of a dire need. Man is a needy animal who has lost contact with his animal roots in a blur of rapid and damaging progress.

In this book, I have tried to convey the spirit of the bush, its smells, its sounds and its moods, with the emphasis being on the focal characters--Man and Lion. Through this book I am trying to attest to the importance of the remaining wild places in Africa and to the importance of the protection of their inhabitants.

## Introduction

The sun dropped through the cloudless sky to ignite the horizon once again to a true Kalahari blaze. The three young male lions, sporting manes of silver and bodies of burnished gold, lay upon the ground cleaning themselves meticulously, licking the hardened pads of their paws and then wiping their handsome faces. One male rose to stretch and, while yawning mightily, moved away to defecate. He then crouched next to the chalky white base of a Shepherd's tree, the tree regarded as the biblical burning bush, grasped onto the bark with his paws and pulled, strengthening the tendons and muscles of the foreleg. The largest of the three then moved away into the Mopane country, calling in low grunts to the others as they rose behind him, gamboling and feinting with each other. Their games had hardened them and, coupled with the hunts led by their mothers, had forged these young lions into powerful killers. Their instincts at infancy had been polished in the past two and a half years and, whenever the opportunity arose, they were now hunting and killing large prey, such as kudu and the occasional young wildebeest.

