

Living with lions

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There are many historical stories of shepherds and travellers encountering lions, for example the Old Testament contains dozens of tales about attacks on flocks and people by these fierce predators.

Lions have now disappeared from most of their former range, but for livestock owners around the Waza National Park, Cameroon, living with lions is a daily reality. Although loss of human life is rarely reported, lion predation can cost the herders close to 1000 US\$ per family each year.

Scientists from the Resource Ecology Group, Wageningen University and the Institute of Environmental Sciences, Leiden University, investigated the factors that contributed to these losses and why pastoralists continued to graze their herds close to the lion's hunting grounds, which has recently been published in the *African Journal of Ecology*.

The team found that people living closer to the Waza National Park enjoy better access to pastures and water points, but bear the heaviest losses. These herdsmen said that the benefits of improved grazing and water outweigh the cost of lion kills.

Further from the park, depredation decreases, but during the wet season, when water is abundant and lush vegetation offers hiding places, lions wander off and take livestock at larger distances. The research also showed that having cattle increases the risk of losing goats or sheep to lions, probably because sheep and goats graze with the cows further

away from the villages and in larger numbers, which makes it easier for lions to approach livestock unnoticed. Herdsmen even claimed that lions follow nomadic herds during the wet season far outside the park, and during this period these lions also raid sedentary livestock of villages they pass.

Surprisingly, herdsmen who try to chase the lions away when attacked reported larger losses, probably because the confusion created scatters the herds, and lions benefit from this.

One day around noon, while interviewing some villagers, two researchers were called by some excited herdsmen, who reported an attack by lions. The group headed to the scene just outside of the village, only about a kilometre from where the interview was taking place, and found three dead sheep and a calf, with clear bite marks in their necks. One of the herdsmen explained:

“We tried to chase away the lions, but they weren’t impressed and only moved a bit further away from us, where they grabbed another sheep. That’s how they do it, they just kill. They’ve taken one sheep with them, but the calf and the other three sheep were killed for nothing. We can’t eat the meat, as Muslim traditions require animals to be killed by a Muslim”

The research team recommended that herding methods could be changed in order to decrease the livestock losses, such as by having protective thorn enclosures, called bomas, or more herdsmen, as dogs for guarding livestock are not a suitable alternative in this Islamic part of Cameroon. Lion predation is a common phenomenon in the area, and people have accommodated these violent encounters in their day-to-day life, and apparently make a trade-off between the extra benefits of living closer to the national park, and the increased risk of losing animals to lions.

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