

Lions are critically endangered in West Africa

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This shows two lion cubs in West Africa. Credit: ©Philipp Henschel/Panthera

A report published today concludes that the African lion is facing extinction across the entire West African region. The West African lion once ranged continuously from Senegal to Nigeria, but the new paper reveals there are now only an estimated 250 adult lions restricted to four isolated and severely imperiled populations. Only one of those populations contains more than 50 lions.

Led by Panthera's Lion Program Survey Coordinator, Dr. Philipp Henschel, and co-authored by a team from West Africa, the UK, Canada

and the United States, the paper [The lion in West Africa is critically endangered](#) was published yesterday in the scientific journal *PLOS ONE*. The report's sobering results represent a massive survey effort taking six years and covering eleven countries where lions were presumed to exist in the last two decades. The new, very fine resolution information builds on an earlier continent-wide review of [lion](#) status [produced by Duke University](#), to which Dr. Henschel also contributed. Both surveys received funding from National Geographic's Big Cats Initiative (BCI).

Panthera's Dr. Philipp Henschel explained, "When we set out in 2006 to survey all the lions of West Africa, the best reports suggested they still survived in 21 protected areas. We surveyed all of them, representing the best remaining lion habitat in West Africa. Our results came as a complete shock; all but a few of the areas we surveyed were basically paper parks, having neither management budgets nor patrol staff, and had lost all their lions and other iconic large mammals."

The team discovered that West African lions now survive in only 5 countries, Senegal, Nigeria and a single trans-frontier population on the shared borders of Benin, Niger and Burkina Faso. They are genetically distinct from the better-known lions of famous game parks in East and southern Africa. Recent molecular research shows they are closely related to the extinct "Barbary Lions" which once roamed North Africa, as well as to the last Asiatic lions surviving in India.

"West African lions have unique genetic sequences not found in any other lions, including in zoos or captivity," explained Dr. Christine Breitenmoser, the co-chair of the IUCN/SCC Cat Specialist Group, which determines the conservation status of wild cats around the world. "If we lose the lion in West Africa, we will lose a unique, locally adapted population found no-where else. It makes their conservation even more urgent."

Lions have disappeared across Africa as human populations and their livestock herds have grown, competing for land with lions and other wildlife. Wild savannas are converted for agriculture and cattle, the lion's natural prey is hunted out and lions are killed by pastoralists fearing the loss of their herds.

National Geographic Explorer-in-Residence and BCI co-founder Dereck Joubert commented, "Every survey we do is inaccurate because as soon as you complete it, it is already out of date; the declines are so rapid. It is a terribly sad state of affairs when you can very accurately count the lions in an area because there are so few of them. This is critical work that again confirms that we are underestimating the rate of decline of lion populations and that the situation requires a global emergency intervention."

Today, fewer than 35,000 lions remain in Africa in about 25% of the species' original range. In West Africa, the lion now survives in less than 50,000km² - smaller than half the size of New York State - and only 1% of its original historic range in the region.

[Panthera's President, Dr. Luke Hunter](#), co-authored the paper and stated, "Lions have undergone a catastrophic collapse in West Africa. The countries that have managed to retain them are struggling with pervasive poverty and very little funding for conservation. To save the lion - and many other critically endangered mammals including unique populations of cheetahs, African wild dogs and elephants - will require a massive commitment of resources from the international community."

Provided by Panthera

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