

# Ethiopia's 'Iron Lion Zion' cats fading fast

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Conservationists estimate there are, at most, 1,000 lions left in the wild in Ethiopia, Africa's second most populous nation

Ethiopia's black-maned lions once represented a former emperor, "Lion of Judah" Haile Selassie, and were immortalised in a song by reggae legend Bob Marley. Today, they struggle for survival.

A booming human population, widespread habitat destruction and growing livestock numbers mean the animal that once graced Ethiopia's flag—and is still a potent symbol for Rastafarians through the song 'Iron

Lion Zion'—is on the wane.

They live on in only small pockets of the Horn of Africa nation, and conservationists warn that without action, all that will remain of the powerful creatures are the stone sculptures and statues dotted in the flourishing capital, Addis Ababa.

"There were lions everywhere in Ethiopia, but their habitat is shrinking," said Zelealem Tefera, country head of the Born Free Foundation, a conservation group.

"Human settlements are expanding, prey is disappearing and there is nothing to eat for the lions," he said.

In decline across Africa, lions have been put on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's "red list" of threatened species, but Ethiopia's rare lions—seen as unique though debate continues over their DNA—are even more vulnerable.

In the past few decades they have disappeared from much of Ethiopia. With 96 million people, it is Africa's second most populous nation, and the number is growing by some two million people every year.

Conservationists estimate there are, at most, 1,000 lions left. They are to be found mainly in remote areas bordering the war-torn countries of South Sudan and Somalia, as well as in a handful of national parks in the centre and east.



An Abyssinian lion, rescued from captivity at an early age, pictured in the Ethiopian chapter of the Born Free Foundation, a conservation group

"The black-maned lion is very unique and only found in a few locations in Ethiopia," Zelealem said.

"It makes them very important in our culture. I don't think the lion population will completely disappear from Ethiopia in the coming few years, but if we don't protect their habitat there is no reason why this couldn't happen," he said.

## **Abused and poisoned**

In a forest area some 30 kilometres (20 miles) south of Addis Ababa, the Born Free Foundation has taken in seven of the lions, all captured by villagers or soldiers.

Many have suffered physical abuse—a far cry from how Haile Selassie used to keep them as palace pets—and unlike other wild animals seized from traffickers, such as cheetahs and monkeys, the lions cannot be released back into the wild.

Their remaining habitat is very small and the risk of conflict with humans too great.

One young male, Kebri—a powerful cat with a dark brown mane just beginning to appear—is just such a victim of growing conflict with farmers.



Visitors take pictures of lions at a zoo in Addis Ababa

"His mother killed some livestock here and as a result the local village poisoned her," said Derek Bretts, who looks after the animals at the

centre.

"They fed her meat that had been laced with poison and she ended up dying," he said. "We got a call saying that there was a young cub, so we went and took him."

While Ethiopia has a dozen [national parks](#) where [wild animals](#) can find safe havens, pressures on the lions continue to grow.

"Wildlife preservation is not given priority in Ethiopia. Not all protected areas in Ethiopia are actually well protected," said Fikirte Gebresenbet, an Ethiopian [lion](#) expert from Oklahoma State University in the United States.

"People reside in the park for half the year, or pastoralists come to the park every now and then to graze their cattle. And it results in conflict with the lions," she said.

The future of the lions of Ethiopia may lie in the development of tourism, but it is an industry still in its infancy.

"If we take lessons from Kenya and Tanzania, the future could be brighter," Fikirte said. "We have to convince the government that people would pay to see lions in well-protected areas."

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