

No longer king of the jungle: New fund to aid Africa's lions

August 11 2017, by Krista Larson



This photo taken on Sunday, April 3, 2011 and released by Panthera shows an adult male lion during a joint Panthera/DPN (Direction des Parcs Nationaux) lion survey in Niokolo-Koba National Park in south eastern Senegal. Senegal's Niokolo-Koba National Park is home to fewer than 50 lions after years of poaching decimated not only them but also their prey. Conservationists are launching a new fund they hope will save lions from going extinct, particularly in West Africa. Only about 400 lions remain in the region out of the total 20,000 worldwide. The Lion Recovery Fund is getting startup contributions from the Leonardo DiCaprio Foundation. (Philipp Henschel/Panthera via AP)

Senegal's Niokolo-Koba National Park is home to fewer than 50 lions after years of poaching decimated not only them but also their prey. Small patches of lion skin are sold at local fetish markets for \$10, and their bones have a thriving market in Asia.

Sightings have become so rare that it once took researchers conducting a lion survey in the area two months before they spotted one of the big cats. Conservationists, however, believe the park could one day rebound.

"This landscape is still in fantastic shape," said Philipp Henschel, West and Central Africa regional director for the lion program at Panthera, a global wild cat conservation organization. "This area could potentially, if well protected, harbor between 400 and 500 lions."

A \$150,000 grant from a fund launched this week by the Wildlife Conservation Network and The Leonardo DiCaprio Foundation is aimed at better equipping Niokolo-Koba's park rangers for those efforts.

The Lion Recovery Fund is initially providing \$800,000 toward bolstering lions' habitat across the continent, from Senegal in the west to Tanzania in the east as well as Zambia and Malawi in southern Africa.

"Lions in Africa are facing a whole range of human threats that are increasing in scope as the human and livestock populations grow," said Peter Lindsey, conservation initiatives director for the Wildlife Conservation Network.



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Many wildlife areas "are really suffering from a lack of funding and resources," he said.

The situation is particularly dire in West Africa, where the lion subspecies has been classified as "critically endangered."

Only about 400 lions remain there out of the total 20,000 worldwide, Henschel said. About 90 percent of those in West Africa are in a protected area that spans parts of Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger.

Startup support for the Lion Recovery Fund came from The Leonardo DiCaprio Foundation, which previously has partnered on elephant conservation issues, Lindsey said. They are pledging that 100 percent of donations to the fund will go directly toward work on the ground, without overhead costs.



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