HEAR THEM ROAR

Namibia's desert lions are kings of the beach. Long may they reign.

By Anthony Ham



PAUL FUNSTON

A family of Namibian lions gathers to feast after successfully hunting down a gemsbok.

ERNEST HEMINGWAY SAW them first, or so we thought. The way he wrote about them in "The Old Man and the Sea" did give them a certain magic, these remote African lions. "He only dreamed of places now and of the lions on the beach. They played like young cats in the dusk and he loved them."

For decades after Hemingway wrote about them, the lions disappeared. If not from the earth, then at least from view. They stalked the memories of those who had seen them, mythical beasts in a forgotten corner of Africa. The land, too, haunted all who remembered it — the Skeleton Coast of Namibia, where sand dunes push hard up against Africa's Atlantic shore and seasonal river valleys empty from rugged mountain ranges to the sea. It seemed like a story of paradise lost.

But as with many African stories from colonial times, there is always far more to it than we know.

It turns out that locals — those who remain long after we leave — knew the lions all too well. Lions can be very difficult to live alongside. They pose a threat to women fetching water from the river, or to children walking through the bush to school. Even so, lions killing people in Namibia is vanishingly rare. Far more often, lions kill the livestock that belong to people living one poor season from starvation. When that happens, they retaliate by spearing, shooting or poisoning lions. In the end, people kill lions far more often than the other way around.

So much so that it is remarkable there are any lions left at all.

This is the story of how Hemingway's lions and locals have, despite everything, learned to live together.

THE HOANIB VALLEY, in northwestern Namibia, funnels all the epic landscapes of the Namib, the oldest desert on earth, into a single valley. From the terrace of my safari tent at glorious Hoanib Valley Camp, I can see great, jagged peaks fringed by waterholes and rivers of sand. Personally, I could stay and enjoy the view all day. But the sun has yet to clear the surrounding mountains and Ramon Coetzee, my guide, knows that I am here to see lions. He says we must leave.

Our prospects are not great. It has been months since lions were seen in the Hoanib. Wildlife sightings are never guaranteed, but with just 60 lions spread across 40,000 square kilometres, the chances here are even smaller. Even the Hoanib's elephants have moved down onto distant floodplains where we cannot follow.

I am disappointed, naturally enough, but that there are lions here at all — not to mention elephants and rhinos nearby — in this most parched corner of southern Africa carries its own magic. That I *might* see them, that they belong to an unbroken line of lions dating back to before Hemingway … well, that might have to be enough.

We follow the meandering path of the Hoanib. Now dry, it can become a raging torrent, metres deep, when the rains fall on upriver mountains. We encounter small herds of springbok and a handful of gemsbok, the painted oryx of southern Africa's desert regions. A rare lone Angolan giraffe, restless, watches us pass. Running down the centre of the riverbed are Ana trees



Clockwise from right: a safari tent at Hoanib Valley Camp; lions are not the only deeply impressive sight in the Namib Desert; a graceful giraffe can quickly become hapless prey.





NATURAL SELECTION TRAVEL

(Faidherbia albida), some of which are 180 years old.

At the Modurib waterhole, with the hostility of a large tribe of Chacma baboons ringing in our ears, we ponder the mystery of two giraffe trails — a male and a female, footprints heading west; we suspect the lone female has lost her mate.

Close to where we plan to turn around and return to camp, enveloped in the scent of wild sage, Coetzee suddenly veers right. On a flat, sandy area above the riverbank, he literally leaps out of the vehicle alongside the footprints of a male lion, heading east. They are recent, too: the lion passed this way in the past few hours.

Coetzee is beside himself: "I am so excited! I am so excited!"

A male lion's pawprint is a thing to behold. It is the size of a dinner plate and Coetzee knows the male has not long passed this way, because not even an insect has left its mark atop the pad.

We follow the footprints north until, at the junction of two desert valleys, giraffe footprints enter the valley and turn west. Intent, Coetzee follows, piecing together what has happened. The two footprint tracks run parallel for a time. Both footprints are of walking animals, suggesting the giraffe was blissfully unaware that it was being followed. At one point, the lion's paw print sat atop the giraffe's, as if claiming ownership or marking destiny.

Not 50 metres further on, the giraffe — suddenly aware, too late! — had veered sharply to the left and right. The lion had leapt onto the giraffe's back; for perhaps five metres, there are only giraffe prints flailing in the sand. Like in a rodeo, the lion was thrown off — his prints reappear in the sand — and the struggle continues for another 150 metres. Then the gaps between the struggle become shorter — for the last 50 metres the giraffe was still upright, but the lion rode her, tail dragged along the sand.

It is rare for a single lion to bring down an adult giraffe. Giraffes have a kick that can kill a lion or break its jaw or leg. Usually, it takes a whole pride to bring one down. I am impressed, but also unsettled. This is part of the circle of life, but there is something about a giraffe — its grace, its long eyelashes, its big, Bambi-esque eyes. Nothing better highlights the innate savagery of nature than the untimely death of a giraffe.

We round the corner and 50 metres down the hill, the male lion lies exhausted alongside the dead giraffe. My sentimental moment has passed: the lion is magnificent; the giraffe is merely food. For almost the first time, I look around at my surroundings. Everywhere is sand. There are no trees. The late morning sun is already fierce. How on earth do lions survive out here?

ASIDE FROM ERNEST Hemingway, and, of course, the local people in northwestern Namibia, very few outsiders knew there were lions in this arid corner of Namibia. In the final decades of the 20th century, the legendary conservationist Dr Philip "Flip" Stander heard persistent rumours of lions in the desert and along the coast. He left Namibia's famous Etosha National Park and began looking for them.

Over the years that followed, estimates of northwestern Namibia's lion population ebbed and flowed with the droughts and seasons of plenty that swept through the area. At its lowest point, barely 20 lions survived. After a series of good years, the



Clockwise from left: human-lion interaction is increasingly common, to the lions' detriment; telltale signs of a lion's pursuit of its giraffe quarry; taking a watchful rest amid the sparse scrub.





MAIN IMAGE: PAUL FUNSTON; TOP AND RIGHT: ANTHONY HAM

population peaked, and Dr Stander estimated between 150 and 180 lions.

Flip Stander is still around, living in an isolated hut on a remote stretch of the coast. He still studies the handful of lions that live along the beach — he



recently recorded lions hunting offshore in the ocean, a world first. But he has since passed the baton to a young American scientist, Dr John Heydinger, and a team of Lion Rangers.

Not long after seeing the male lion and his giraffe kill in the Hoanib Valley, I meet Dr Heydinger and Lion Ranger Benjamin Kordom at Mowe Bay, an isolated settlement backed by relentless Atlantic swells hundreds of kilometres from the nearest town. When I ask Heydinger if he knows of Stander's whereabouts, he laughs: "I saw him a few weeks back, but it's easier to find a lion than it is to find Flip Stander."

In 2022, Heydinger, the rangers and Namibia's Ministry of Environment and Tourism set out to conduct an accurate census of northwestern Namibia's lions. In just two months, using their unrivalled local knowledge, the team managed to track down (and later collar) every single adult lion in the ecosystem. It was a remarkable achievement. Northwestern Namibia had around 60 adult lions, with a further 20 cubs.

These are no ordinary lions. Apart from living at the lowest density of any lion population in Africa (as low as 0.11 lions per 100 square kilometres, compared with 18 in Tanzania's Ngorongoro Crater), each lion also ranges across far larger areas than other African lions: female territories cover up to 1500 square kilometres, compared to just 200 square kilometres in the Serengeti.

Namibia's lions also survive despite inhabiting one of the driest regions of Africa: part of the lions' territory receives as little as five millimetres of rain a year. Drought has stalked northwestern Namibia since 2011 and the lions' wild prey has declined by up to 90 per cent over the same period, while the human population has swelled to nearly 20,000 people in the area where the lions live.

"So much of the research on, and so much of what we know about, lions comes from places like the Serengeti," Dr Heydinger says. "Lions in places like that are bodybuilders. Our lions are marathon runners: they're long, they're lean, and they can cover territory. Evolutionarily, they're probably more similar to what lions across Africa used to be like."

One reason these lions are so important is that if lions can survive here, then populations elsewhere in Africa — where an estimated 60 per cent of lions live outside protected areas — might just have a chance.

Even so, since 2022, one in eight lions here in northwestern Namibia has died as a direct result of human-to-lion conflict. Or, put another way, 90 per cent of the lions that die, do so as a result of human-lion conflict.

Which is where the Lion Rangers, who are employed by the local community conservancies, really come into their own. Many credit them with ensuring the survival of this most difficult lion population.

"The guys who are really making the difference on the ground now are the Lion Rangers," Paul Funston, one of the world's leading lion experts, tells me. "They are the ones who are trying to solve and to mitigate the challenges of lions coexisting with people. They're doing a remarkable job."

All locals and including a handful of women, these rangers play a critical role in preventing the kind of conflict that can devastate local herders — who already live on the edge — and lead to the retaliatory killing of lions. On one occasion, a lion broke into a kraal (a fenced enclosure where livestock is kept overnight) and killed 90 goats and sheep. Another time the figure was 87. More often, lions will kill a goat here, a cow there. These are smaller numbers, perhaps, but such losses can be equally devastating to small-scale farmers.





CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: ANTHONY HAM; PAUL FUNSTON; ANTHONY HAM

Clockwise from above: Namibia's lions must range widely to find food; an inhospitable enviroment; Benjamin Kordom is part of a team of local Lion Rangers.

And yet, when Dr Heydinger speaks at length with locals about living with lions, their replies are remarkable: "Most people want to have elephants, they want to have lions," Dr Heydinger says. And for those who want lions to live in the area, the overwhelming answer is, "we want our children to see lions".

To help everyone live together, Dr Heydinger and his team of, at last count, 49 Lion Rangers, have brought in predator-proof kraals, as well as early warning systems that use data from the lions' collars to notify the team when lions are close to villages and livestock.

Benjamin Kordom has been a ranger since 2020; the program began in 2018. As well as helping to collar lions, the rangers bring lost livestock back to their owners and help communities to repair their kraals. Kordom and his teams also patrol regularly on foot; the rangers have walked more than 80,000 kilometres on patrol since the start of 2023. But, says Kordom, "the most important thing we do is go into the villages and give them information, including about the whereabouts of lions. If the lion is there, immediately we let the farmers know, so they know where not to move their livestock."

I ask whether they know my lion, the one in the Hoanib Valley. It turns out they know him rather well. Known as OPL-24, his life history is a microcosm of the story of Namibia's lions.

After killing livestock in his home territory, OPL-24 was translocated, only to return home and resume his livestock-killing ways. He was given one last chance and taken further away, this time to the Hoanib. So far, two months later, he is finding the Hoanib very much to his liking. "That's the second giraffe he's taken down since he moved," Dr Heydinger says.

As always in such a landscape, it is a balancing act. But now, months later, word reaches me that OPL-24 is still in the Hoanib, happy and thriving on a diet of giraffe and gemsbok.

Hemingway was right: I can't drive from my mind the image of a lion, golden in sunset light, stalking the sand dunes, still surviving — and not just in the dreams of those lucky enough to have seen them.