

Representing Local Communities in Lion Conservation: The Development of Small-Scale, Participatory Projects

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Dr. Laly Lichtenfeld

African People & Wildlife Fund, Box 11306, Arusha, Tanzania
School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, Yale University, 205 Prospect Street, New
Haven, CT 06511 USA

Addressing the human dimension of lion conservation should be a priority for conservationists, wildlife managers, scientists and wildlife-dependent industries interested in the long-term persistence of lion populations outside of large, protected areas in Africa. In many cases, the conservation of African lions will require the involvement of private or community-owned lands. In this article, I argue for the incorporation within lion conservation strategies of small-scale, participatory projects that are inclusive of peoples' perceptions and attitudes of lions, local environmental and cultural dynamics and existing institutions for lion conservation and management.

Conflicts between people and lions beyond the boundaries of national parks and game reserves are increasing as human and livestock populations grow and local land-use patterns, practices and policies change. In addition, the introduction of regional conservation strategies, for example "community-based conservation" initiatives, can increase human-lion conflicts as wildlife populations begin to recover in human-inhabited landscapes not previously managed for wildlife or that were heavily poached (*see* Songorwa 1999). The anthropogenic killing of lions in response to human-lion conflicts was recently highlighted at the Eastern and Southern African Lion Conservation Strategy Workshop as one of the greatest threats to maintaining viable lion populations (Nowell and Bauer 2006). Therefore, reducing human-lion conflicts and particularly the local killing of lions is obviously a foremost concern of lion conservationists.

The effective mitigation of human-lion conflicts will certainly depend on the enhancement and/or development of preventative and reactive strategies to alleviate direct, negative interactions between people, livestock and lions. This includes a necessary reduction in rates of livestock predation and the loss of human life. However, local aggression against lions is also motivated by diverse attitudes toward the big cats based on complicated arrangements of ecological, political, socio-cultural, economic and psychological factors influencing human-lion relationships (Lichtenfeld 2005). For example, the sheer psychological risk of living alongside a large, dangerous carnivore (irrespective of whether conflicts actually occur) can motivate the desire to eliminate lions. Or, the prominence of the lion as a symbol of political conflict over rights to land and wildlife can inspire negative actions, as recently demonstrated by a massive killing of lions outside of Nairobi National Park (a phenomenon noted as early as the 1970's; *see* Rudnai 1979).

It is unlikely that the composition and relative influences of biological and sociological factors will be the same among diverse communities given the complex nature of local environmental, cultural and political dynamics. Local, participatory conservation programs

can make progress where broader regional or national strategies may fail, however, because they deal with fewer political groups, and they encourage communication and the integration of diverse values among multiple stakeholders (Primm and Wilson 2004; Meyer 2001). In addition, programs that seek to address preventative measures for avoiding human-lion conflicts (rather than only responding once a problem has occurred, akin to putting a “band aid” on the problem) will in many cases depend on the interest in and voluntary efforts of local citizens to alter their behaviors to adopt conflict avoidance strategies (e.g., increased vigilance while herding, improved corral construction, altered livelihood strategies). Naturally, citizens are more likely to participate in such activities if they are actively involved in the development of conservation and education programs from the outset (Meyer 2001).

Engaging local participation and cooperation in the creation and management of lion conservation, education and conflict reduction programs is a difficult and long-term process. It requires a detailed understanding of local community values and interests as well as a trusting relationship between lion conservationists, community members, government officials and other important stakeholders. From the outset, it is essential to acknowledge and accept that program participants will have diverse perspectives and varying priorities when identifying the problem at hand (Clark and Rutherford 2005). For example, to some people, lions should be exterminated. This view was recently expressed to me by villagers in southern Tanzania who are fed-up with living in proximity of man-eating lions. In northern Tanzania, the Maasai exhibit a greater tolerance of lions as long as they are not attacking livestock. On the other hand, lion conservationists, professional sport hunters and photographic tourists often view lions as symbols of “wildness” and a “healthy environment” that should be conserved (Lichtenfeld 2005). Given these diverse perspectives, conflict could be at the center of any discussion regarding how people might coexist with these animals.

However, through small-scale, participatory programs, a forum for discussing these differences can be created in a respectful and constructive manner that recognizes the needs and desires of the different groups involved. It is important that these forums are inclusive of existing institutions (e.g. natural resource committees, livestock development officers, wildlife departments, etc.), so at best to include the widest range of skills and leadership available, while at worst not creating active opponents who are resentful of being excluded (Primm and Wilson 2004; Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000). Through open discussions, the local context of lion conservation and management can emerge in a way that helps people to balance their demands with others, without generalizing or stereotyping a group’s identity. It is also likely that shared values, beliefs and attitudes will emerge. For example, while the Maasai express a dislike for stock-raiding lions, they also convey a deep respect for lions as adversaries and symbols of bravery, similar to views held by professional hunters and photographic tourists (Lichtenfeld 2005). Over time, these discussions will help participants to develop common goals with which to direct cooperative lion conservation and/or management strategies.

Of course, participatory programs should also incorporate programs that actively engage multiple stakeholders, developing a sense of partnership and accomplishment. In their work with grizzly bears, Primm and Wilson (2004) argue for tangible and participatory conservation outcomes that contribute to reducing human-carnivore conflicts and lowering tension surrounding conservation efforts, while fostering partnerships among groups that might not typically work together. Small-scale, participatory programs for the development of conflict mitigation strategies are beneficial because they allow for the testing of culturally appropriate methodologies that make sense to local people.

In 2003, the People & Predators Fund initiated a participatory livestock predation program in one of its focal villages with the goal of understanding the local dynamics leading to livestock predation. With the interest and cooperation of a local network of informants, a comprehensive database of livestock losses was developed, including photographic records of the carcasses and tracks of carnivores. It was found that the majority of livestock predation episodes occurred at pasture, when herd animals wandered off and were lost. Importantly, we expect this result to be in contrast to other villages within the same ecosystem because local environmental dynamics often differ over small spatial scales. For example, the thick bush environment of the focal village means that local people have plenty of natural resources with which to fortify their corrals or “bomas.” In other nearby villages, however, the prevalence of more open grassland suggests that people may struggle to protect their livestock at night and therefore experience more attacks at the household.

The People & Predators Fund is now working with its focal village to begin the process of identifying methods for improving livestock herding strategies that are community-driven and therefore culturally and contextually relevant. Importantly, while a simple solution might be to increase the number of herders during periods of high conflict, we have also learned through our discussions that changing social dynamics, particularly the greater numbers of Maasai children going to school, mean that fewer individuals are presently available to watch over their livestock. In an effort to counteract this effect, some individuals hire people to watch their herds with obvious financial implications. As lion conservationists work collaboratively to address human-lion conflicts, it is extremely important to keep social dynamics (e.g. cultural, political and economic factors) at the forefront when developing real-world, effective and lasting solutions.

The integration of small-scale, participatory programs within lion conservation strategies holds great promise. With small steps and positive, local conservation outcomes for people and lions, models for other lion conservation efforts may be developed. These models may also be useful in informing decision-making processes at larger scales (i.e. regional, national and international), where detailed understandings of the complex environmental and social dynamics affecting lion conservation are more difficult to produce.

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